

On the Supremacy of Confucianism and the Periodization of Confucian Classics Learning in the Han Dynasty

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Abstract

Wang Baoxuan's 王葆琰 argument that Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty respected the Five Confucian Classics and tolerated non-Confucian schools because the "supremacy of Confucianism" (獨尊儒術) was not implemented until the reign of Emperor Cheng can be disputed. Additionally, Wang's premise that masters learning (子學) in the Warring States period was the source of classics learning (經學) in the Western Han dynasty, and the extinction of masters learning during the supremacy of Confucianism led to the decline of classics learning, can also be debated. This paper proposes that with regard to the supremacy of Confucianism, the focus was on the second founding of the Han dynasty, not on the relationship between classics learning and masters learning. Both the Qin dynasty and the Western Han dynasty had masters learning as their guiding ideology, but Emperor Wu found that solely relying on masters learning, which was a collection of ideas by important thinkers, was not sustainable. Instead, the Han dynasty needed to be based on classics learning, which represented the traditional Chinese civilization that was inherited from the three ancient and sacred Chinese dynasties of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou. The supremacy of Confucianism was thus a means of ensuring the continuity and stability of the Han dynasty that was applied by Dong Zhongshu and Emperor Wu.

Keywords: classics learning, masters learning, the supremacy of Confucianism, the Five Confucian Classics

O prevladi konfucijanstva in periodizaciji konfucijanskih klasičnih študij v dinastiji Han

Izvleček

Argument Wang Baoxuana (王葆琰), da je cesar Wu iz dinastije Han spoštoval pet konfucijanskih klasikov in dopuščal nekonfucijanske šole, ker se je prevlada konfucijanstva (獨尊儒術) uveljavila šele v času vladavine cesarja Chenga, je sporen. Poleg tega je vprašljiva Wangova predpostavka, da je bil Zi Xue (子學) v obdobju vojskujočih se držav vir za Jing Xue (經學) v zahodni dinastiji Han in da

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je izumrtje študij Zi Xueja v času prevlade konfucijanstva povzročilo tudi zaton študij Jing Xueja. Ta članek predlaga, da je bila prevlada konfucianizma usmerjena v drugo ustanovitev dinastije Han, in ne v razmerje med Jing Xuejem in Zi Xuejem. Tako dinastija Qin kot zgodnja dinastija Han sta sledili ideologiji Zi Xueja kot vodilni ideologiji, vendar je cesar Wu ugotovil, da zgolj zanašanje na Zi Xue, ki je zbirka idej velikih mislecev, ni vzdržno. Namesto tega je morala dinastija Han temeljiti na Jing Xueju, ki je predstavljal tradicionalno kitajsko civilizacijo, pododovano od treh svetih in starodavnih kitajskih dinastij Hsia, Shang in Chou. Tako je bila prevlada konfucianizma sredstvo za zagotavljanje kontinuitete in stabilnosti dinastije Han, ki sta ga uporabljala Dong Zhongshu in cesar Wu.

Ključne besede: Jing Xue, Zi Xue, prevlada konfucijanstva, pet konfucijanskih klasikov

Over the past two decades, there has been a resurgence of classics learning (經學) scholarship in Chinese academia. This trend reflects a re-examination of how Chinese civilization ought to confront the challenges posed by globalization, as well as a deeper understanding of the distinctive characteristics of this civilization. While Wang Baoxuan's 王葆琰 work *The Source and Stream of Classics Learning in the Western Han Dynasty* (西漢經學源流) was initially overlooked during the 1990s, when Neo-Confucianism dominated academic discourse, it is now considered a masterpiece by many scholars. Originally published in 1994, the book was recently reissued in 2021.

Classics learning has long been underestimated, as Wang mentions in his introduction: "In the past, people had a bad impression of the classics learning of the Han dynasty" (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 1). After the revolution of 1919, traditional classics learning was overshadowed by criticism of and reflection on Confucianism. Gu Jiegang's 顧頡剛 Historical Text Research School (古史辨派) and Zhou Yutong's 周予同 historical research on classics learning both announced the end of such learning in different ways. In contrast to trends in modern Western thought, such as democracy and republicanism, the backward nature of classics learning was scorned by generations of scholars.

Even in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Yu Yingshi 余英時 still believed that Confucianism during the Han dynasty was "inferior and not very high-minded" (Yu Yingshi 1987, 127), indicating little room for the development of classics learning in modern academia. However, this view has changed over time. Today, classics learning has gained recognition for its distinctive contributions to Chinese culture. This resurgence has helped scholars appreciate the significance of classics learning in the Han dynasty. Moreover, further study of

this field can provide valuable insights into ancient Chinese thought processes and cultural practices.

Wang Baoxuan suggests that the extroverted cultural atmosphere of the Western Han and the introverted philosophy of the Song and Ming dynasties complement each other, and that it was not until the prevalence of the research style known as “chapter and verse” (章句) in the late Western Han and Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 exegesis in the Eastern Han dynasty that the independent, inclusive and open-minded characteristics of the classics learning of the Western Han became corrupted, thus hindering the communication between classics learning and Neo-Confucianism (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 45). While classics learning of the Eastern Han may leave a negative impression on modern readers, Wang asserts that the classics learning of the Western Han could effectively offset the weaknesses of Neo-Confucianism, which is commonly criticized for its emphasis on inner sagehood at the expense of outer kingliness. As such, it is important to recognize the contributions of the Western Han dynasty (*ibid.*, 7).

Furthermore, Wang contends that the classics learning of the Western Han was notable because it carried on the spirit of the masters learning (子學) of the Warring States period. Notably, the classics learning of the Western Han was mainly comprised of the Qi School (齊學) and the Lu School (魯學) (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 51). The former was passed down from Zigong 子貢 and Mencius 孟子, while the latter was passed down from Xunzi 荀子 and other Confucian scholars. These schools coexisted with numerous non-Confucian schools during the early Western Han dynasty.

As we all know, the thought of the Modern Enlightenment reshaped the spirit of masters learning through the values of freedom, openness and progress. This allowed masters learning to escape the dark historical period of the Warring States and become the quintessential academic ideal of that era. Wang delayed the implementation of “the supremacy of Confucianism” (獨尊儒術) policy until the reign of Emperor Cheng 成, which took place at the end of the Western Han dynasty. This ensured that the Western Han as a whole maintained an atmosphere of tolerance and academic freedom. However, Emperor Cheng’s implementation of “the supremacy of Confucianism” policy was responsible for the decline of classics learning during the golden age of the Western Han. Wang’s idea goes against the general consensus that Emperor Wu’s 武 implementation of “the supremacy of Confucianism” policy contributed to the development of classics learning in the Han dynasty (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 8).

Wang Baoxuan’s book seemingly provides an objective intellectual history of the Western Han period under the rubric of its “source and stream”, but actually highlights the growth and decline of the classics learning of that era in particular, with

its source being characterized by growth, while its stream was one of decline. Wang intentionally and primarily focuses on the essence of classics learning that manifested during the early and middle Western Han period, while the supremacy of Confucianism was delayed until the end of the dynasty. He also pushes back the eventual collapse of classics learning to the end of the Western Han. Wang's fresh arguments have restarted the discussion about the intersection of classics learning and politics in the Western Han dynasty.

Reflection on the Legitimacy of the Qi and Lu Schools

The distinction between the Qi and Lu Schools in the classics learning of the New Text School (今文經學) has a long history. According to the scholar Meng Wentong 蒙文通, classics learning has its historical origins in three regions: Qi, Lu and Jin 晉, making it the most representative field of learning in early China (Meng 2006, 21–30). Further developing this notion, Wang Baoxuan proposes that there is a primary thread running through classics learning during the Western Han period. The cultural conflict between the Qi and Lu Schools in the pre-Qin era persisted into the early Western Han dynasty, eventually becoming a confrontation between the two. By the middle of the Western Han the Qi and Lu Schools encountered a crisis about ritual, causing scholars like Hou Cang 后蒼 to integrate both schools into the realm of ritual (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 101). This integration should have brought classics learning to its peak, but instead it declined. Wang Baoxuan identifies two primary reasons for this, the first being that Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty respected the Five Confucian Classics (五經) while tolerating other schools of thought as well. The second, more fundamental reason was that Emperor Cheng of the Han dynasty revered only the Five Confucian Classics and rejected all non-Confucian schools. This led to a decline in the unified political coordination and integration of Hou Cang's ritual system, ultimately contributing to the downfall of the culture (ibid., 111).

Wang's motivation for establishing the Qi and Lu Schools is now evident. During the Warring States period the Qi and Lu Schools emerged as two prominent streams of thought, which eventually became vital components of the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty. However, similar to how we cannot enforce a universal political system for all schools of thought, we cannot impose a single heart to govern the two arteries of the Qi and Lu Schools under Hou Cang's ritual system. Such an artificial imposition cannot sustain vital scholarship.

Wang firmly believes that the schools of thought during Emperor Wu's reign could not be replaced by Hou Cang's ritual system, no matter how intricate the

latter's generalized system may have been (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 53). Letting it drown out the Qi and Lu Schools, which were the pinnacles of classics learning during the Western Han dynasty, just to satisfy the supremacy of Confucianism, would be a grave mistake. Instead, Wang praises the classics learning of the Old Text School (古文經學), which emerged during the late Western Han dynasty. However, both Hou Cang's ritual system and the classics learning of the Old Text School were hampered by the supremacy of Confucianism, making it difficult for them to compete with the exceptional Qi and Lu Schools. Overall, Wang contends that the value and significance of the Qi and Lu Schools cannot be undermined by either Hou Cang's ritual system or the classics learning of the Old Text School. These two arteries of classics learning both played a crucial role in shaping the intellectual development of the Western Han dynasty. In conclusion, Wang stresses the importance of recognizing the diversity of scholarly traditions and emphasizes the need to allow each school of thought to thrive in its own unique way, without imposing a rigid overarching system (*ibid.*, 55).

We have to point out that there are many theories about the relationship between masters learning and classics learning, but the most widely supported viewpoint comes from Liu Xin 劉歆, who believed that classics learning was originally the form of learning appropriate for the sovereign and those serving in government (王官學). When the government lost authority, official scholars flowed into the various schools of thought of the Warring States period, and Confucius collected and edited these official classics, which is why they were called the Five Confucian Classics (Ban 1962, 1728–45), and which suggests that masters learning was to some extent derived from these texts. In Liu Xin's opinion, the reason why the thought of the masters is called masters learning is that these ideas were influenced by the Five Confucian Classics, after which the masters had created their own schools, rather than teaching the original ideas of classics learning. For example, Mozi 墨子 first learned Confucianism before he became a critic of it. Meng Wentong (2006, 23), influenced by Liu Xin, holds the view that “masters learning transmitted classics learning” (諸子傳經), and argues that many ideas in masters learning contain elements from classics learning.

This paper argues that although the masters learning of the Warring States period came prior to the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty, in terms of scholarly lineages classics learning was the primary source of guidance for masters learning. It is worth noting that classics learning incorporated some of the achievements of Warring States scholars, but served as the leading source from which many schools emerged, while masters learning was more like a small stream feeding into it. The scholar Meng Wentong asserted that without the instruction of the classics learning of the New Text School, the schools of thought in the Warring States period would

lack direction (Meng 1987, 239). Thus, our understanding should acknowledge the significance of classics learning as the main source, instead of seeing masters learning as the origin. In essence, classics learning provided the foundation for many schools, whereas masters learning served as an offshoot of it.

Classics learning is crucial for returning to Confucius's original teachings, being the most important path towards true understanding. However, Wang Baoxuan does not share this idea, choosing instead to remain focused on the era of masters learning. Wang argues that classics learning in the Western Han dynasty is based upon the study of masters learning, and in fact goes even further to claim that "classics learning transmitted the masters" (經傳諸子) (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 84), which puts him in opposition to many other scholars such as Liu Xin and Meng Wentong. This paper contends that the idea that the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty was primarily influenced by masters learning only serves to blur the true purpose of classics learning—to return to Confucius's teachings. In fact, Wang Baoxuan's true view of classics learning can be portrayed as being in line with masters learning. Ultimately, while classics and masters learning might share similarities, classics learning is an entirely separate entity and should not be subsumed by another field of learning. The true value of such learning lies in its ability to guide us closer to the principles in the teachings of Confucius.

We claim that while the reconstruction of the Qi and Lu Schools is useful for understanding the genealogy of scholarly transmission, it tends to narrow the universal scope of classics learning down to a regional dispute between these two schools. Admittedly, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty established the court academicians of the Five Classics (五經博士), with the *Classic of Poetry* (詩經) having court academicians for all three of the Qi, Lu and Han 韓 Schools of that classic, while the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋) had only one court academician for it in the Gongyang tradition (公羊傳), which demonstrates that there was no dispute between the Qi and Lu Schools with regard to the *Annals*. In fact, the division between the Qi and Lu Schools in terms of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* originated during the reign of Emperor Xuan 宣 of the Western Han dynasty, when his prime minister Wei Xian 韋賢 and other Lu scholars advocated for the establishment of a court academician for the Guliang tradition (穀梁傳) of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, declaring that the Guliang tradition originally came from Lu, while the Gongyang tradition came from Qi (Ban 1962, 3618).

The division between the Qi and Lu Schools of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* cannot be attributed solely to the power struggles among scholars, mentioned above. While scholars from the Guliang School may have identified with the Lu School, those from the Gongyang School who adhered to the ideal of "great

unification” (大一統) did not necessarily consider themselves part of the Qi School. For instance, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, the most prominent court academician of the Gongyang School during the early Western Han dynasty, was born in the region of the former state of Zhao 趙, but studied with Hu Wusheng 胡毋生 from the Qi region. Despite his association with Qi, Dong Zhongshu would not have identified solely with the Qi School. It is true that there were some differences in the scholarly characteristics of the Qi and Lu Schools during the age of masters learning, but these differences were not significant enough to create a clear distinction between schools of classics learning.

This paper rejects the division of the Qi and Lu Schools in classics learning, as primarily determined by a scholar’s place of origin or residence. For instance, Wang Baoxuan believes that Zigong was the originator of the Qi School due to him having died there, despite being originally from Wei 衛. Wang argues that Zigong must have taught some members of the ruling Tian 田 clan to improve his status in Qi, as he probably would have ran into difficulties with them otherwise (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 71–72). However, Wang’s views lack support from historical sources and classical literature. Another example is Dong Zhongshu, a native of Zhao and proficient in all Five Confucian Classics, but who is disregarded by Wang in favour of Xiahou Shichang 夏侯始昌, a scholar from the Lu region who was active during the later part of Emperor Wu’s reign, and who transmitted both the *Classic of Poetry* and the *Classic of Documents* (書經) of the Qi School and mastered all Five Confucian Classics, bridging the gap between Qi and Lu (ibid., 104–105).

It is important to note that the integration of the Qi and Lu Schools was not simply a change in the study of the Confucian classics, but rather representative of the natural progression from a feudal system to a prefectural one during the Han dynasty. Classics learning, which focuses on nation building rather than philology, is intertwined with politics and history. Without a grasp of this historical consciousness, scholars may fail to comprehend why the Han dynasty considered Zixia, who taught in Wei, to be the original scholar of the Gongyang tradition. Wang’s view that the Gongyang and Guliang traditions, both of which interpreted the *Spring and Autumn Annals* independently on the basis of the Qi and Lu Schools, had nothing to do with Zixia, shows a regional bias that is detached from its historical context. This leads Wang Baoxuan to deny that Zixia was the original scholar of the Gongyang tradition, arguing instead that Zou Yan 鄒衍 and Zou Shi 鄒奭, two Yin-Yang scholars (陰陽家) from the Qi School, were the true progenitors of Gongyang learning (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 179). However, Wang’s perspective is a static interpretation of the dynamic character of classics learning. It is crucial to recognize the comprehensive historical, political and cultural factors that shaped the evolution of classics learning over time.

This paper argues that while there are differences in customs between Qi and Lu, and classics learning was influenced by the political machinations at the time, a regional division of schools can only apply to masters learning. In classics learning noting the differences between scholars from the regions of Qi and Lu is not conducive to considering the bigger picture. It is important to note that classics learning differs from the personalized expressions of ideas found in masters learning. The former is a tradition inherited from the three ancient Chinese dynasties of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, and thus requires a greater emphasis on transmission rather than innovation. Conversely, masters learning emphasizes innovation over transmission. During the Warring States period a multitude of intellectuals vied for the favour of rulers, often overshadowing those Confucian scholars who emphasized the Five Classics. Therefore, it is essential for scholars to understand the respective traditions of classics and masters learning, as well as the context in which they were developed, in order to fully comprehend and appreciate their ideas.

For example, Confucius entrusted to Zixia the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, so Zixia's teaching of the Gongyang tradition was widely recognized as the most important tradition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* from the Warring States period to the early Han dynasty. The genealogy of the Gongyang tradition is as follows: Zixia – Gongyang Gao 公羊高 – Gongyang Ping 公羊平 – Gongyang Di 公羊地. It was not until the reign of Emperor Jing 景 of the Western Han dynasty that Gongyang Shou 公羊壽 and his disciple Hu Wusheng wrote their Gongyang commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* down on bamboo slips. Wang argues that this genealogy of classics learning is a false history except for Gongyang Shou and Hu Wusheng (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 178), and that the doctrines of the Gongyang tradition were almost directly derived from the Yin-Yang School at the Jixia Academy (稷下學宮) in Qi (ibid., 175). Wang shows that the influence of masters learning on classics learning during the Western Han was greater than that of classics learning from the Warring States period. We must admit that scholars of the Warring States period had a certain degree of influence on classics learning, but these influences did not affect its intrinsic quality. As a submerged stream that ran beneath the surface of chaotic history, classics learning scholars of the Warring States period, who devoted their lives to Confucius's classics, were the real source of the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty.

In his construction of the Qi and Lu Schools, Wang Baoxuan aimed to challenge the idea that Confucianism reigned supreme throughout the Han dynasty. By viewing the Qi and Lu Schools as branches of classics learning that shared similarities with masters learning, he was able to argue that they existed much longer than previously thought. This also highlights the difference in the scholarly atmosphere between the Western and Eastern Han dynasties. Wang contends

that classics learning underwent a significant transformation after the supremacy of Confucianism was established under Emperor Cheng. Essentially, he suggests that schools of thought continued to flourish throughout the long period of Emperors Wu, Zhao 昭, Xuan, and Yuan 元 (*ibid.*, 123). However, Wang is unable to explain the relationship between classics and masters learning. While the Qi and Lu Schools of classics learning are based on the principles of masters learning, it is unclear why they are considered to be a component of classics learning. The arguments of Meng Wentong and Wang Baoxuan, which suggest that either masters learning or classics learning inherited the other, only partially explain their historical situation. As classics and masters learning are distinct disciplines, they must each have their own independent meanings.

Classics learning is not just a branch of Chinese philosophy, but a subject that is closely intertwined with politics and history (Hong 2012, 205). Recognizing this, classics learning is the underlying and unchanging bedrock of traditional Chinese culture, which sets it apart from philosophy or literature. While philosophy tends to focus on the ideas of renowned thinkers, classics learning is a repository of accumulated wisdom that is central to Chinese civilization and its traditions. Although masters learning is often seen as representative of Chinese philosophy, classics learning cannot be defined solely within philosophical parameters. As a result, classics learning has not been able to stake out a suitable niche within modern academic fields such as literature, history, or philosophy. It is important to distinguish between these two domains and only then merge philosophy's adaptability with classics learning's conservatism, if we are to revive Chinese culture and bring it up to date.

The Policy Implementation of “the Supremacy of Confucianism” Policy

The connection between Confucianism and classics learning is intricate, with some instances where they can be considered synonymous, while others require differentiation. Confucianism was initially established by Confucius and his followers before spreading out into various schools of thought. Consequently, it was a branch of masters learning during the Warring States period. On the other hand, the Five Confucian Classics were the source of the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty. Over time, these Classics were passed down by specialized Confucian scholars during the Warring States period. Emperor Wu established the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics and deposed the court academicians of the transmitted records (傳記博士), such as those of Mencius 孟子, effectively ending the era of masters learning and ushering in the new era of classics learning. This marked a

change in the direction of the Han dynasty, driven by the emperor's vision. The complex relationship between Confucianism and classics learning makes it necessary to trace their origin and development to fully understand their essential nature.

Dong Zhongshu's theory and Emperor Wu's implementation of "the supremacy of Confucianism" policy played a crucial role in the political unification of ancient China. By uniting the concept of the "great unification" from the *Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 公羊傳 with the policy of the supremacy of Confucianism, Emperor Wu reset the Han dynasty. However, making the concept of "the supremacy of Confucianism" part of that of the "great unification" would be criticized by scholars like Yan Fu 嚴復 and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 during the late Qing dynasty, as they argued that the policy represented a monarchical dictatorship and has hindered China's modernization. Consequently, the concept of "the supremacy of Confucianism" was rejected, and Confucianism was unfairly labelled an obstacle to progress. This reinterpretation made the concept difficult to accept in modern Chinese society.

Liang Qichao and other modern scholars believed that the idea of monarchical dictatorship and the concept of "the supremacy of Confucianism" were interconnected, and together formed the political practice of the "great unification". While this concept has upheld the identity of Chinese civilization for over two thousand years and ensured the political identity of the Chinese state during the Qing dynasty, according to modernist scholars it had to be dismantled (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 123). The issue of monarchical dictatorship and the supremacy of Confucianism was the focus of many scholars in the late Qing. A consensus was formed among political groups and scholars that the detrimental aspect of the supremacy of Confucianism needed to be removed from the framework of the great unification of Chinese civilization. This would eliminate the outdated component of the Chinese identity while preserving the essential cultural foundations that had contributed to the nation's enduring legacy.

In his discussion of the supremacy of Confucianism, Wang Baoxuan claims that the reason why cultural expression after the Western Han dynasty failed to reach the same level of accomplishment as seen in Emperor Wu's reign was because the latter did not aim to depose all non-Confucian schools of thought. Instead, Emperor Wu had respected the Five Confucian Classics while incorporating the branches of masters learning into a system of transmitted records that supported the dominant Confucian ideology. This resulted in Confucianism becoming the primary school of thought, while remaining compatible with all non-Confucian schools (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 55). Wang thus argues that Confucianism's supremacy can lead to despotism and ignorance. In contrast, a golden age might

emerge if all schools of thought are allowed to flourish, instead of Confucianism's dominance. Wang believes that it is essential to preserve a diversity of ideas and maintain a balance of power among opposing schools.

In Wang's writings, "the supremacy of Confucianism" refers to the recognition of Confucianism as a branch of masters learning rather than classics learning. The original flaw of this idea lies in its ignorance of classics learning as a force in constructing the political and cultural order of the Chinese nation. It is important to note that the supremacy of Confucianism does not entail exclusive reverence for Mencius or Xunzi. These two scholars may represent Confucianism, but if their ideas were to replace those of the Taoist, Legalist and Mohist schools of thought, it would indeed lead to a dictatorship of ideas. Ban Gu 班固 succinctly summarized this as follows: "Dong Zhongshu promoted the merits of Confucius and suppressed the hundred schools" (Ban 1962, 2525). Therefore, "the supremacy of Confucianism" pertains specifically to Confucius and the Five Confucian Classics, rather than Confucianism as a whole, and this paper argues that we must understand this distinction to properly apply the concept of "the supremacy of Confucianism".

In Ban Gu's biography of Emperor Wu it is stated that "upon his ascension to power, Emperor Wu abolished non-Confucian schools and elevated the Five Confucian Classics" (Ban 1962, 212). Sima Guang 司馬光 later revised this statement to "the supremacy of Confucianism". Both expressions underscore the belief that studying the Classics entails a direct transmission from Confucius. It is important to note that Emperor Wu and Dong Zhongshu shared the same commitment to establishing Confucianism and the Five Confucian Classics as the guiding ideology of the Han dynasty, replacing the Legalism of the Qin dynasty and Huang-Lao 黃老 thought of the Emperors Wen 文 and Jing. However, detached from its historical context or evaluated from a modern viewpoint, the emphasis on the supremacy of Confucianism is not helpful in understanding its significance to the Western Han dynasty, or for reflecting on the practical meaning of Confucianism's role in history.

Before his exclusive endorsement of Confucianism, Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty faced a dilemma with regard to the endorsement of Legalism during the Qin dynasty and of Huang-Lao during the early Western Han. Therefore, this paper argues that the main objective of the supremacy of Confucianism was to instigate a second founding of the Han dynasty through re-evaluating the value of Confucius and the Five Confucian Classics. Ban Gu has made it evident that the idea of "the supremacy of Confucianism" rose to prominence during the reign of Emperor Wu, and this was also the time when Dong Zhongshu answered the

emperor's inquiries. According to Ban Gu, Dong's response was given during the early years of Emperor Wu's reign. This stance is also shared by modern historians like Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎, who has written about the subject in his book *The Great Unification and Confucian Thought* 大一統與儒家思想 (Yang 2011, 74).

However, Wang Baoxuan has attempted to prove that Emperor Wu did not suppress other schools of thought when he established the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics. His argument revolves around Dong Zhongshu's proposal of the supremacy of Confucianism, which, according to most scholars, occurred in the first year of the Yuanguang 元光 reign period (134 BC) or earlier. But Wang suggests that an error may have occurred in the records of Dong Zhongshu's reply to Emperor Wu, as he referred to the government being over "seventy" years old, and the character for "seven" (七) may have been written instead of the grammatical particle "也". Based on this, Wang argues that Dong Zhongshu's reply to Emperor Wu took place in the fifth year of the Yuanshuo 元朔 reign period (124 BC). Therefore, Emperor Wu had already established the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics for over ten years before Dong Zhongshu's advice to him to remove the court academicians of non-Confucian schools (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 158). In conclusion, Wang's argument aims to prove that Emperor Wu did not suppress other schools of thought and that Dong Zhongshu's proposal to exclusively honour Confucianism was suggested more than ten years after Emperor Wu's establishment of the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics.

However, relying on written evidence that only serves a predetermined perspective or selectively presents information to support a particular argument, without taking into account the wider intellectual historical context, often leads to misunderstandings. Wang's perspective contradicts the historical account of Ban Gu, and he even suggests that Ban Gu's self-interest in writing *The History of the Han Dynasty* 漢書 and its illogical conclusions have resulted in misunderstandings. But how does Wang prove his claim that the supremacy of Confucianism occurred during the reign of Emperor Cheng, rather than during the reign of Emperor Wu, without there being any historical written record of this? According to Wang Baoxuan, Wang Feng's 王鳳 family was the true force behind the supremacy of Confucianism. Wang Mang 王莽, a relative of Wang Feng, ended the Western Han dynasty by usurping the throne, and his reign left a negative impression on the people of the subsequent Eastern Han dynasty. The implementation of "the supremacy of Confucianism" policy was regarded as a significant achievement by the Confucians of the Eastern Han period. However, Wang Baoxuan contends that Ban Biao 班彪 and his son Ban Gu skewed historical accounts and deliberately suppressed and obscured Wang Feng's reputation for dismissing

non-Confucian schools (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 172). However, it is crucial to recognize that Wang's viewpoint is highly contested and requires further factual and corroborative evidence.

While Ban Gu and other scholars during the Eastern Han dynasty may have been biased against Wang Mang, it would be a baseless accusation to claim that Ban Gu deliberately distorted history for his own selfish reasons. During the Han dynasty, Emperor Wu deposed the Legalists and disregarded their political and educational opinions upon ascending to the throne. Later, he planned to depose Huang-Lao scholars as well, but faced opposition from the Empress Dowager Dou 竇. It was not until the establishment of the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics in the fifth year of the Jianyuan 建元 reign period (136 BC) that a series of political decisions led to the actual implementation of “the supremacy of Confucianism” policy. This historical narrative is unlikely to be altered or rewritten.

The political practice and historical process of the supremacy of Confucianism were not the result of the personal will of individuals such as Ban Gu, Dong Zhongshu, or even Emperor Wu. Unlike the Five Confucian Classics, which carry the entire historical tradition in them, the schools of thought of the Warring States period were personalized and innovative interpretations of ideas. Among them, classics learning needed to be transmitted from generation to generation, while the ideological characteristics of masters learning meant that it did not require this. As a result, once masters learning left the historical environment of the Warring States period it declined, due to a lack of teachers to pass on its ideas. The decline of Legalism was not solely related to the fall of the Qin dynasty, as Legalism is only suitable for chaotic times, and a unified state cannot rely on Legalism alone to obtain long-lasting peace. Huang-Lao, as an updated version of Legalism, gained momentum for a short time due to special historical conditions that necessitated its rapid rehabilitation. However, when it comes to the long-term stability and maintenance of the political system, scholars who started with individual ideas were unable to undertake this historical task. Even if the Qin dynasty relied on masters learning rather than Legalism, it would not have been able to maintain a long reign.

Tracing the origin of the classics learning of the Western Han back to the masters learning of the Warring States, as Wang Baoxuan did, is a misinterpretation. When referencing “the supremacy of Confucianism”, this does not mean strictly the Confucianism represented by Mencius or Xunzi, but rather refers to the Five Confucian Classics of Confucius. The Han dynasty emperors elevated and respected Confucianism, along with the Five Classics. To reject all non-Confucian

schools of thought is to ignore the historical context of the Han dynasty emperors seeking legitimacy as rulers and aiming to establish an ideal government following the Warring States period. This paper argues that it is crucial to step out of the chaos and consider how the Han dynasty inherited and emulated the governance of the Sage Kings Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, Tang 湯, Wen 文 and Wu 武, while still progressing toward a new era.

Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty was concerned with restoring the glory of the era of the three legendary Sage Kings, Yao, Shun and Yu, and sought advice from various schools of thought to achieve this goal. However, he realized that the prevailing schools of the previous dynasties, such as the Legalism of the Qin dynasty and the Huang-Lao of the early Western Han, were limited by the chaotic times of the Warring States and shortly after, and could not provide an answer to the problem of how to continue Chinese civilization in a different context.

Emperor Wu thus sought the guidance of Dong Zhongshu. The latter proposed breaking with the Han dynasty's political and educational guidelines that were influenced by Warring States thought and to focus instead on Confucius's principles, which summarized the three sagely reigns of high antiquity. This allowed the Han dynasty to achieve parity with the sage kings of the past and create a new path to success. Overall, Emperor Wu understood the need to move beyond the schools of thought that were rooted in the Warring States era. He recognized that Confucius's teachings offered a vital guide for the continuation of civilization. By following this path, he was able to restore the Han dynasty's glory to its initial heights.

The flourishing of classics learning during the Han dynasty can be traced back to Emperor Wu's respect for Confucianism, rather than the assertion made by Wang Baoxuan that the decline of classics learning began only after the abolition of non-Confucian schools. According to Wang, the dismissal of non-Confucian schools was merely symbolic, relegating masters learning to the court academicians of the transmitted records who served as auxiliaries to the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics. He further argues that promoting the Five Confucian Classics did not amount to elevating Confucianism above other schools of thought, but rather established it as a major source of knowledge (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 123–124).

This paper disagrees with Wang's view and argues that classics learning and masters learning should not be equated. Classics learning derived its political and educational traditions from the interpretations of the three Sage Kings, which requires an in-depth understanding and interpretation of the Classics, rather than of individual ideas. Therefore, it is essential to supplement classics learning with masters learning, to facilitate the exchange of views and knowledge. But the

advancement of classics learning requires the interpretation of the Classics rather than the addition of individual ideas from masters learning.

Wang provides an analysis of the dominance of Confucianism in two dimensions: intellectually with the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics, and politically with the Han dynasty inheriting the Qin system of government (漢承秦制). We have to mention that, first of all, the establishment of the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics in the fifth year of the Jianyuan reign period (136 BC) was a major initiative of Emperor Wu. As Zhao Qi 趙岐 of the Eastern Han dynasty mentions, Emperor Wu abolished the court academicians of the transmitted records and established the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics independently (Zhao Qi 1987, 17). Moreover, scholars widely agree that these court academicians were established solely for Confucian teachings.

Wang Baoxuan has a different perspective regarding the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics in the court academician system than Wang Guowei 王國維. While Wang Guowei argues that Emperor Wu established the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics solely for the Five Classics (Wang Guowei 2004, 84), Wang Baoxuan believes that the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics were only one part of a larger group. The emperor added them alongside the court academicians of the transmitted records, which means that the post of court academician was not exclusively for Confucians (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 124). Wang Baoxuan attempts to provide evidence for the significance of the court academicians of the transmitted records in the court academician system and to refute the notion that Emperor Wu only honoured Confucianism. Nevertheless, his arguments have failed to overturn the commonly accepted consensus in scholarship.

Wang's analysis of the supremacy of Confucianism centres around the elimination of the court academicians of the transmitted records. However, this assumption lacks supporting evidence as the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics were established during Emperor Wu's reign, along with the abolition of the court academicians of the transmitted records. To reinforce his argument, Wang cites a passage from *The History of the Han Dynasty* that mentions that over seventy magicians (方士), envoys (使者) and assistants (副佐) returned home awaiting the imperial edict. Wang asserts that "awaiting the imperial edict" (待詔) refers to Emperor Cheng's dismissal of non-Confucian schools (罷黜百家) (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 153–55). Nevertheless, the argument remains speculative, as other interpretations of this passage in the historical context cannot be ruled out, and the current paper presents a contrasting viewpoint.

Firstly, the term “awaiting the imperial edict” is not solely limited to court academicians. Secondly, the original text states that those who returned to their homes were magicians and other functionaries, so why does Wang claim that Emperor Cheng deposed the court academicians of the transmitted records? If masters learning still had court academicians associated with it, why is there no record of any court academician of the transmitted records of Mozi 墨子 or Han Feizi 韓非子 during the Western Han dynasty? Since the preference for Confucianism was dominant, why are there no court academicians of the transmitted records of Mencius or Xunzi in the history of the Western Han dynasty? It must be acknowledged that the distinction between the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics and the court academicians of the transmitted records becomes unjustifiable after Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, as the former were themselves court academicians of the transmitted records of the Five Confucian Classics. For example, the Gongyang tradition consisted of the court academicians of the transmitted records of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Wang includes masters learning in the scope of transmitted records, and cites Wang Chong’s 王充 *Lunheng* (論衡) as proof: “Confucius’s *Spring and Autumn Annals* was the King’s work; the transmitted records of books by masters were the minister’s business.” Wang argues that this is “direct evidence that in the Han dynasty transmitted records included the works of masters learning” (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 134). As we all know, “master” (子) is an honorific title, and one that does not refer exclusively to scholars of the Warring States period, but also includes scholars of the Han dynasty. For example, Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* says: “The words of scholars and masters are mostly intended to create a strange and different theory, and to shock the people of the world” (Wang Chong 1990, 167). Then Wang Chong cites two stories from the *Han Shi waizhuan* (韓詩外傳) as examples from masters texts, but its author Han Ying 韓嬰 was also a court academician of the *Classic of Poetry* in the Western Han dynasty.

Furthermore, Emperor Xuan said that Emperor Wu’s virtue was capable of “broadening the path of truth and art”, and Wang Baoxuan believes that this is obviously not in line with the supremacy of Confucianism (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 149). However, this paper argues that the establishment of the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics does not imply the burning of non-Confucian books, like Emperor Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 burning Confucian texts. What we need to clarify is that without needing to establish a system of court academicians of masters learning, it was still possible to collect anonymous books and seek advice from magicians who had realized the techniques of the Way (道術). For example, even after Emperor Cheng’s complete reverence for Confucianism, Liu Xiang 劉向 and his son Liu Xin took orders from the emperor to organize and compile old

books, and many works of masters learning that have been passed down to us were edited and finalized by the two Lius, so the extinction of the schools of thought at the end of the Western Han dynasty was not simply a political decision.

As we all know, the Five Confucian Classics continued to be transmitted and inherited even after the burning of books by Emperor Qin Shihuang. But Emperor Wu not only refrained from burning books, he also “expanded the path to the techniques of the Way” (廣道術之路) (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 149). However, it is worth considering why masters learning went extinct during the mid-Han period, and the belief that the Warring States period was the golden era of learning or the Axial Age of Chinese civilization may be an anachronistic analogy that misses the point.

Chinese philosophy has undergone significant developments since the time of Hu Shi 胡適, who held that the schools of thought in the Warring States marked the pinnacle of free thought. This view owes its genesis to Karl Jaspers’s theory of the Axial Age, which has been a cornerstone of the study of Chinese philosophy for over a century. Nonetheless, Tang Wenming 唐文明 argues that the age of masters learning cannot be considered the Axial Age of Chinese civilization, since the latter signifies a break from tradition. However, it remains unclear what kind of discontinuity was constructive enough to make the age of masters learning truly transformative. Failure to answer this question means that placing China’s Axial Age in the Warring States period loses significance when it comes to outlining the trajectory of Chinese civilization (Tang Wenming 2019, 239–40).

Moreover, it is crucial to understand the constructive power of masters learning to regulate its impact on history and order. Wang Baoxuan suggests that China’s Golden Age occurred when many schools of thought coexisted, and classics learning was developed as a manifestation of masters learning. However, we should avoid the temptation of viewing Chinese civilization purely through the lens of masters learning. The Han emperors valued Confucianism because they understood that classics learning, not masters learning, had the necessary depth to capture the complexity of China’s past, present and future.

From a political perspective, Wang Baoxuan contends that the supremacy of Confucianism signalled an end to the legacy of the Qin system. Confucianism inherently opposes the ideology of the Qin dynasty, and it was only during Emperor Cheng’s reign that the state system was restructured in accordance with the requirements of classics learning. Many of the proposals of classics learning were subsequently implemented in concrete policies, such as the examination system, the bureaucracy, the court ritual system, and the system of the imperial sacrifices – a complete reversal of the legacy of the Qin system.

This paper presents a contrasting perspective to Wang's argument. Although the Western and Eastern Han dynasties pursued the prefectural system with the feudal system as its background, Emperor Cheng only partially referenced the institutional model of classics learning during his reforms. Furthermore, it is important to note that neither the Western nor Eastern Han dynasty were able to fully implement the ideal system of the Five Confucian Classics, despite their reverence for Confucianism. Therefore, if we define "the supremacy of Confucianism" as strict conformity to classics learning at all institutional levels, then it is clear that even both Han dynasties could not achieve this. However, this does not negate the significance of the Five Confucian Classics, as it is important to remember that the ritual system is only one aspect of classics learning. While it is tempting to measure the realization of the supremacy of Confucianism by the implementation of rituals, this approach neglects the broader principles and values of classics learning. Ultimately, this paper argues that we should not let our focus on the implementation of rituals distract us from the higher ideals of classics learning.

Moreover, Wang argues that one of the most important signs of the Western Han dynasty freeing itself from the influence of the Qin dynasty was the recognition of Confucius as the "Uncrowned King" (素王) for the first time during Emperor Cheng's reign, when he conferred the title of "Duke Who Continues and Honours the Shang dynasty" (殷紹嘉公) to Confucius (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 126). Wang's discovery is crucial for understanding the change in Confucius's status during the Han dynasty, but it is important to know that being considered a descendant of the Shang dynasty does not mean being considered an "Uncrowned King". To regard Confucius as a descendant of the Shang dynasty means that he was regarded as belonging to one of the old Three Dominions (三統), namely that of the Shang. If we take the view of the Gongyang School, however, Confucius wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to establish a new dominion beyond the rule of the Xia, Shang or Zhou, which is why they call him the Uncrowned King. Confucius being considered a descendent of the Shang dynasty was a revolutionary way of diluting his attributes as the Uncrowned King, which is contrary to Wang's recognition of Confucius's status. Therefore, we cannot use Confucius's new title of "Duke Who Continues and Honours the Shang dynasty" to prove that "the supremacy of Confucianism" was not achieved until the reign of Emperor Cheng.

In sum, this paper argues that during the second stage of the development of the Western Han dynasty, Emperor Wu accurately recognized the importance of relying on classics learning, as the civilizational tradition, instead of on the individual ideas of masters learning. The learning of the Five Confucian Classics is a crucial aspect of Chinese civilization, allowing for the connection of the Han dynasty with the ideals of the three Sage Kings. Whereas reliance on masters

learning would have only connected the Han dynasty with the ideological patterns of the chaotic Warring States period, Emperor Wu's respect for the Five Confucian Classics, as well as Dong Zhongshu's promotion of Confucianism, enabled the preservation of Chinese civilization for hundreds of generations. When it comes to constructive political and educational policies, the Qin Emperor Shihuang failed to survive under the guidance of masters learning, while the Han emperors flourished under the instruction of classics learning. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding and maintaining the traditional roots of a civilization. Through the conscientious study of the Five Confucian Classics, the Han dynasty was able to build upon the successes of its predecessors and establish a strong and lasting political and educational system.

The Validity of Dividing the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties

Pi Xirui's 皮錫瑞 view that the golden age of classics learning was during the period from the Emperors Yuan and Cheng of the Western Han dynasty to the Eastern Han dynasty, followed by a decline during the Wei and Jin dynasties (Pi 2015, 47), is widely accepted in current scholarship. However, Wang Baoxuan challenges this commonly held belief and instead argues that the peak of classics learning was from the early years of the Western Han dynasty to the reign of Emperor Cheng, while its decline was during the remainder of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties after the reign of the Emperors Yuan and Cheng.

Wang believes that the cause of this turning point was the overemphasis on Confucianism, resulting in the neglect of other schools of thought during the Western Han. He further asserts that the intermingling of Confucianism with prophecy and prognostication (讖緯) further exacerbated this decline. Even the revival of classics learning during the Qing dynasty was mainly a continuation of the Eastern Han dynasty's style of annotation and exegesis. In light of the long history of classics learning, Wang suggests that only the Western Han dynasty deserves serious study, as it represents the height of classics learning's influence. While Pi Xirui's perspective is widely accepted, Wang's challenge to the common interpretation of the historical periodization of classics learning offers an alternative approach to understanding this important legacy of traditional Chinese thought.

At the beginning of his book, Wang Baoxuan writes: "In the past, people had a very bad impression of the classics learning of the Han dynasty" (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 1). At the conclusion of his book Wang further clarifies this by stating that: "In the past, people had a very bad impression of the classics learning of the Han dynasty, because they focused on the Eastern Han dynasty" (ibid., 433). Wang contends

that Emperor Cheng's admiration for Confucianism at the end of the Western Han serves as the defining intellectual historical stage of the dynasty. As a result, a clear divide is created between the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, with the prominence of Confucianism shaping the different cultural environments of each.

Wang posits that the source of the classics learning of the Western Han can be traced back to the masters learning of the Warring States period. The evolution of the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty occurred through four distinct schools: the Qi School, the Lu School, Hou Cang's ritual system, and the classics learning of the Old Text School. However, Wang's argument emphasizes the continuity of scholarship from the Warring States period to the Qin and early Western Han, thanks to the tolerant political environment that provided freedom of thought. In Wang's view, there is a close correlation between the Western Han dynasty and the era of masters learning, which necessitates a clear break between the hitherto perceived as continuous Western and Eastern Han.

In the realm of classics learning, the disagreement between the Western and Eastern Han dynasties primarily revolves around the classical learning of the New and Old Text Schools, with the former dominating the Western Han and the latter dominating the Eastern. It is important to note that Wang's alignment with the Western Han is not solely based on his support for the classics learning of the New Text School, but rather due to his affinity for the intellectual atmosphere that existed prior to the supremacy of Confucianism. According to Wang's perspective, the flourishing of classics learning during the Western Han dynasty was due to the flourishing of schools such as those from Qi and Lu, the ritual system of Hou Cang, and the classics learning of the Old Text School. Conversely, with the rise and dominance of Confucianism and the abandonment of other schools, the decline of classics learning was inevitable. It is fair to say that Wang's stance is anti-classics learning, as he believes that the conflict between the Western and Eastern Han dynasties is not a dispute between the Old and New Text Schools, but rather one of masters learning versus classics learning.

As we know, the dispute between the New Text School and Old Text School is still ongoing within classics learning, so the continuity between the Western and Eastern Han is greater than the discontinuity. However, if we take the argument between Western and Eastern Han scholars as a dispute between masters learning and classics learning, then the discontinuity between the two is greater than the continuity. Wang makes several anti-classics learning statements under the assumption that the classics learning of the New Text School in the Western Han dynasty was the fruit of masters learning. For example, Wang praises the independence of traditions (傳), persuasions (說), and records (記) in the classics

learning of the Western Han, and argues that masters learning was also regarded as transmitted records, which implies that the classics learning of the Western Han was written entirely in masters learning's mode. Only under this premise does Wang think that the learning of transmitted records (傳記之學) and the learning of chapter and verse (章句之學) of the Western Han dynasty stand in opposition, and does he criticize Zheng Xuan's style of learning as restrictive, archaic and conservative (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 43–46).

We admit that the development of the classics learning of the Han dynasty underwent changes in form, from orally transmitted records to the learning of chapter and verse, and then to the exegesis of commentaries. For example, the *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals Fanlu* (春秋繁露) by Dong Zhongshu, who was a court academician of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in the Western Han dynasty, was indeed an independent work, often containing statements that go beyond the original Classic of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, while He Xiu's 何休 *Gongyang Exegesis* (公羊解詁) from the Eastern Han dynasty is a word-by-word interpretation of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

However, this paper argues that while Dong Zhongshu of the Western Han and He Xiu of the Eastern Han dynasty may have had a differing understanding of classics learning, they still maintained the fundamental spirit of the Gongyang tradition. Although the approach to classics learning shifted between the two dynasties, we cannot assume that the changes in content were due solely to differences in form. Therefore, it is critical to recognize that even with these differences, classics learning continued to be rooted in the principle of the Gongyang tradition throughout both periods.

According to Wang's strict distinction between the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, the classical learning of the New and Old Text Schools can be classified into two categories. The classics learning of the New Text School can be divided into a Western Han model and an Eastern Han model, while the classics learning of the Old Text School can also be divided into Western and Eastern Han models. It has been noted that the classics learning of the New Text School in the Eastern Han dynasty, as represented by the *Baihutong* (白虎通), was considerably different to the classics learning of the New Text School in the Western Han dynasty (Wang Baoxuan 2021, 425). Such a divergence, according to Wang, could be attributed to two factors: the prominence of Confucianism and the emergence of prophecy and prognostication.

Wang believes that the rise of the classics learning of the Old Text School during the Eastern Han dynasty can be regarded as a response to an excessive focus on Confucianism during the Western Han. The emergence of the classics learning

of the Old Text School was a compensation for the dismissal of various schools of thought. However, this is the same as arguing that the classics learning of the Old Text School is not part of orthodox Confucianism. Regardless, the classics learning of both the New and Old Text Schools offered highly recognizable interpretations of to the Five Confucian Classics, which form the basis of their disagreement.

Wang's historical periodization of classics learning is reasonable, but may be misleading. From a scholarly perspective, it is appropriate to divide the Western and Eastern Han dynasties into two camps due to their different methodologies, although the Eastern Han and Wei-Jin dynasties have more in common. In terms of scholarly achievements, the *Commentaries and Explanations on the Thirteen Classics* (十三經注疏) were completed from the Eastern Han dynasty to the Wei-Jin period, with no complete classics learning commentary from the Western Han dynasty remaining extant. Therefore, Pi Xirui's assertion that the period from the middle and late Western Han dynasty to the Eastern Han dynasty was the Golden Age of classics learning, while the Wei-Jin period represents its decline, warrants scrutiny. Furthermore, Pi Xirui's arguments suggest that the Western Han may not have been as significant a period for classics learning as previously thought. We can review his arguments as follows:

The transition from Emperors Yuan and Cheng of the Western Han dynasty to the Eastern Han dynasty is known as the time of the greatest prosperity. At the dawn of the Han dynasty, Confucianism was not yet prominent. However, Emperor Wu initiated the appointment of Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 as prime minister, along with his enfeoffment as Marquis. This move encouraged the nation's scholars, and from that point forward, Emperor Yuan became a strong advocate for Confucianism. Wei 韋, Kuang 匡, Gong 貢 and Xue 薛 were appointed as assistant ministers, ushering in an era of scholarly excellence. The civil service embraced classics learning, and prioritized the teaching of these classics to future generations. The Huan 桓 family became renowned for its court academicians, while the Yang 楊 family produced generations of ministers during the Eastern Han dynasty. Prime ministers were chosen from among the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics, with Emperor Wu setting the precedent and subsequent emperors such as Yuan, Cheng, Guangwu 光武, Ming 明, and Zhang 章 continuing to follow this pattern. These developments accounted for the enduring popularity of classics learning. (Pi 2015, 35)

Both Pi Xirui and Wang Baoxuan argue that the politics of the Han dynasty had a profound impact on the development of classics learning. Wang identifies the supremacy of Confucianism as the critical moment of classics learning, while Pi considers the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty as the major turning point. According to Pi, the success of classics learning was not determined by its implementation on the ground, but by the extent to which its scholars were involved in national governance and policy formulation. Pi claims that the appointment of Gongsun Hong as the prime minister by Emperor Wu marked the beginning of classics learning's flourishing. After Emperor Yuan, classics learning scholars filled many prominent public positions. Consequently, a large number of classics learning scholars deeply influenced the history of the Han dynasty. These scholars were not only devoted to the ritual system of classics learning, but they also infused philosophy and values of classics learning into every aspect of political life. Overall, the sweeping ideas of classics learning have reverberated through China's ancient history, with an indelible impact on the nation's culture, society, politics, and governance.

Pi Xirui emphasizes the influence of classics learning on politics, while Wang Baoxuan emphasizes the influence of political actions on classics learning. This paper aligns with Pi Xirui's view that the flourishing of classics learning was not solely due to the adoption of its books and institutions, but rather to the scholars themselves. Chen Bisheng 陳壁生 concurs with this, noting that classics learning scholars possessed a spirit that not only valued books, but also considered the real world in which they lived. Additionally, the transmission of classics learning by scholars was not a mere repetition of the past, but instead conferred the ability to confront contemporary realities (Chen 2018, 8).

Pi Xirui's historical periodization of classics learning may seem incorrect from a single academic perspective. However, if we consider the common driving force that affected the cultural and intellectual development of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties, we can identify a set of values that was shared among its scholars. Even though the mode of learning changed during the four centuries of the Han dynasty, there was a universality in it stemming from Emperor Wu's recognition of the Five Confucian Classics and Dong Zhongshu's promotion of Confucianism. According to Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, the Western Han dynasty was founded on a pattern of thinking inherited from the pre-Qin era, until Dong Zhongshu redefined its thought (Xu 2013, 269). The Han dynasty can be seen as a whole because the thought pattern running from the Warring States period to the early Western Han dynasty was abruptly cut off by the exclusive focus on Confucian values and the Five Confucian Classics, which reshaped the character of thought of the new dynasty.

This paper posits that classics learning relied heavily on the expertise of scholars rather than written texts. Wang Baoxuan cites Wang Chong to describe classics learning as a profession where one “revises books day by day and dies by candle-light” (Wang Chong 1990, 583), implying that the influence of Confucianism in politics led to its gradual decline. However, the supremacy of Confucianism prompted classics learning scholars to revive seemingly outdated classics, enhancing both political and daily life. Whereas Pi Xirui detects a dynamism in the classics learning of the Eastern Han dynasty, Wang Baoxuan’s portrayal of its lethargy during the same period is a hasty generalization. Pi Xirui’s assessment of the vitality of the classics learning of the Eastern Han dynasty is perceptive, while Wang Baoxuan’s categorization of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties is a careless oversimplification.

Conclusion

The Western Han dynasty marked the beginning of the integration of Confucianism and Chinese politics, with the establishment of the court academicians of the Five Confucian Classics under Emperor Wu as its core facet. This alliance paved the way for the unification of culture and governance, and set the stage for the development of traditional Chinese political philosophy. Meng Wentong emphasizes that the classics learning of the Western Han dynasty lies at the centre of Chinese philosophy and history, and thereby forms the centre of Chinese culture (Meng 1987, 241), which is bold statement but also a historical fact.

Wang Baoxuan has suggested that masters learning was the source of classics learning in the Western Han dynasty. However, this paper argues that the actual origin of classics learning predates the Warring States period. Although there were similar schools of thought to masters learning, such as the Qi and Lu Schools during the early years of the Western Han, the true foundation of classics learning goes back to Confucius. Therefore, the assertion that the masters learning of the Warring States period was the source of the classics learning of the Han dynasty should be reevaluated.

Emperor Wu faced a dilemma regarding the exclusive adoption of Huang-Lao at the time of the Emperors Wen and Jing, and of Legalism during the Qin dynasty. This paper argues that Emperor Wu’s primary objective was to establish the supremacy of Confucianism as the foundation for a second founding of the Han dynasty. This was achieved by reassessing the value of Confucius and the teachings of the Five Confucian Classics. It is important to emphasize that the supremacy of Confucianism does not refer to Confucianism as represented by the works of

Mencius or Xunzi, but rather that of the Five Confucian Classics which represent the teachings of Confucius himself. That is to say, the supremacy of Confucianism also rejected the Confucianism of Mencius and Xunzi in the Warring States period.

To overcome the turbulent historical period and embrace the legacy of the Sage Kings Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu, it was necessary to reject those schools of thought that had stepped away from Confucius's original Five Classics. This rejection enabled the establishment of the Han dynasty's legitimate authority, capable of guiding the country towards an ideal government beyond the Warring States period. Therefore, the division of the Western and Eastern Han dynasties into two parts for the purpose of understanding the historical periodization of classics learning is invalid, as the essence of classics learning was upheld by a group of people who shared the same ideal of the supremacy of classics learning, a concept that was upheld throughout the entirety of the Han dynasty after Emperor Wu.

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