THE FIVE "CONFUCIAN" CLASSICS

MICHAEL NYLAN

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS/NEW HAVEN & LONDON

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Designed by Mary Valencia
Set in Bembo type by Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong.
Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Chelsea, Michigan.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nylan, Michael.
The five "confucian" classics / Michael Nylan.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-300-08185-5 (alk. paper)
1. Wu jing. I. Title.
PL2462.Z6 N95 2001
299′.51282—dc21
00-054998

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For friends

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIVE CLASSICS

FOR MOST OF THE TIME FROM 136 BC TO 1905, the study of the Five Classics of the "Confucian" canon—the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, the *Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*—formed at least part of the curriculum tested by the government examinations required of nearly all candidates for the Chinese imperial bureaucracy. Thus the more cultured members of society in premodern China, even those who had failed the examinations or had passed but never held office, enjoyed a familiarity with the Classics that afforded them a common store of knowledge. As successive governments throughout East Asia came under the cultural sway of the Chinese system, the Classics came to influence thought and politics in Korea, Japan, and

Vietnam, so that the collection as a whole once occupied in East Asia a position roughly analogous to that of the Bible in the West, its compelling arguments couched in elegant formulations, "subtle phrasing with profound implications" (*weiyan dayi* 微言大義). These texts associated with the Supreme Sage, Confucius, were thought to set the pattern of what it was to become a fully developed human being, and also the principles that allowed for the complex and interrelated processes of political, social, and cultural reproduction. Thus, generation after generation tied the maintenance of the state and of personal identity to the propagation of this textual tradition. In assuming the world to be both moral and intelligible, the views articulated there to a degree challenge the dominant modern and postmodern conceptions. But insofar as the real science of men has less to do with analyzing the world than with promoting justice, the Five Classics are well worth revisiting. To ignore, disdain, or misinterpret those same Classics is to squander their riches.

The modern rubric "Five Confucian Classics," however, has tended to skew understanding of these texts, as it implies both a direct connection with the historical Confucius (551–479 BC) and a closer relationship among them than is warranted by their early histories. Most of the texts were evolving in oral as well as written forms for centuries before they acquired the designation "classic" or "Confucian";* hence vastly differing approaches to social, political, and cosmic issues are discernible among and even within the texts. Beginning in Han (206 BC–AD 220), state-sponsored classical learning—often dubbed "Confucian" when "orthodox" or "official" would be more appropriate—drew freely on the teachings of many non-Confucian thinkers, the better to cope with the complexities (many unforeseen by Confucius) of ruling an empire. This pattern of borrowing, usually unacknowledged, continued throughout imperial history. Meanwhile the teachings, texts, and activities attributed to Confucius and his chief disciples affected many aspects of Chinese life and thought, but they most certainly did

*I restrict the use of "Confucian" to the self-identified followers of Confucius's ethical teachings and their cultural products. No premodern scholar ever referred to the Five Classics as the Confucian Classics. Ru, conventionally translated as "Confucian," means "classicist," though dedicated Ru were said to regard Confucius as their "ancestral teacher" because of his monumental efforts to preserve ancient traditions. While the Cheng-Zhu moralists (see Key Terms) in late imperial China sought to reserve the term "Ru" for their adherents only, popular usage continued to use Ru in more complex ways, often as a loose synonym for the broad social category *shi*, which referred to cultured men prominent in their local communities, even when they did not hold government office. Until the twentieth century, Ru always referred to people; it was never thought to refer to a set of ideas juxtaposed to that of the Buddhists or Daoists. See below for an analysis of the term *jia* 家, often (mis)translated as "schools."

not affect them all in the same way, to the same degree, or at the same time. In addition to "official learning" in China, there lay a host of conflicting interpretive lines and practices favored by various groups, not to mention the quite separate histories of orthodox learning in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

To tell the story of the Five Confucian Classics in its entirety would in theory require a lengthy overview of four complex civilizations over the course of some two millennia, recording the shifting issues and fashions in classical scholarship that both reflected and altered the realities of life in imperial China, mapping the changing significance of each Classic as successive commentators and readers invested it with their own diverse interpretations and emphases. And even such a monumental tale would still patently be false. False because the stable entity that later scholars have called Confucianism has never really existed. "Confucianism" is an abstraction and a generalization—apparently useful but always obfuscating—a product of ongoing intellectual engagement as much as a subject of it (fig. 1).

Significantly, the premodern Chinese, to whom this sort of learning mattered most, had no single term corresponding directly to the neat English term "Confucianism." It was, in fact, well-meaning interpreters of China, motivated by their search for an exact counterpart within the Orient to the monumental presence of Christianity in European history, who coined the terms "Confucian" and "Confucianism" to translate the Chinese *Rujia* 儒家. The original term *Rujia* (classicists) indicated not a precise moral orientation or body of doctrines, but a professional training with the general goal of state service. Not all Ru, in short, were devotees of the Confucian Way identified with the Ancients. Even today, the multiple confusions engendered by these seemingly innocuous neologisms continue to complicate discourses on morality, politics, and gender in China (see Key Terms). Modern proponents of a Confucian Revival—following the lead of some of the most famous advocates of Confucian values (for example, Mencius and Han Yu), who deliberately sought to prove the ultimate validity

Figure 1. Confucius as a grave, bearded Augustan, majestically taking his place in an Imperial Academy (that looks more like a European library of calf-bound books), from Philippe Couplet et al., *Confucius sinarum Philosophus* [*Confucius, philosopher of the Chinese*] (Paris, 1687, now in the Niedersâchsische Landesbibliothek Hannover), p. cxvi, illus. from David Mungello (1985), 274. A translation of three of the Four Books, this text depicted Confucius as the "Preeminent Teacher" holding, quite inexplicably, in his hands his own spirit tablet in a building that is both temple and library. The eighteen spirit tablets that appear along the bottom of the eastern and western walls commemorate Confucius's most famous disciples, including Zengzi, putative author of the "Great Learning"; Zisi, putative author of the "Doctrine of the Mean"; Yan Hui, Confucius's favorite disciple; and Mencius. Inscribed in both Chinese and romanized forms across the bookshelves flanking Confucius are the names of the Five Classics, the Four Books, and the "Great Commentary" [or "Xici"] to the *Changes*.

學 國
Gymnasium
Imperij
Xu kim
chun cieu
ta hio
chum yum
Lun yu
尼
仲
先師

of Confucius's Way by tying it to the preservation of a distinctive Chinese identity—have muddied the terminology further by speaking of a Confucian classicism that constitutes a worldview, a social ethic, a political ideology, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life in a China bound by tradition to its neighbors. As early Confucian learning was inextricably intertwined first with pre-Confucian ideas about the central importance of family obligation and ancestor worship (which it reflected and through which it was interpreted) and later with other non-Confucian theories, it is no more possible to cleanly distinguish a Confucian history from the rest of history and civilization in China* or East Asia than to neatly disentangle the history of Christianity from the European enterprises sponsored by state and church.

This book therefore aims to introduce a few of the major issues in the early history of the Five Classics, in the hope that readers will be inspired to consult more specialized studies on the subject. The introduction sketches the main events leading to the adoption of the Five Classics as state-sponsored learning in 136 BC under the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 8) and the refinement during Eastern Han (AD 25–220) of the basic patterns of use of the Five Classics. The book's concern with Han and pre-Han studies responds, I hope, to academic concerns as well as to personal predilections. Early classicism has received surprisingly little intellectual attention, and Han studies—the Chinese counterpart to Roman history—continue to languish in relative obscurity. Recent works on Confucian learning continue to emphasize one particular branch of ethical thought, the Daoxue, or True Way Learning movement, which by a lengthy process begun in AD 1241 came to be enshrined as the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. This book intends to redress the current imbalance in the standard tale, thereby providing a more nuanced portrait of the Ru traditions. At the same time, a greater familiarity with the early history of the Five Classics might keep modern scholars of late imperial China from attributing to the thinkers who constitute the chief subjects of their study a host of "new ideas" that already had a well-established history in early classical thought. Finally, many aspects of early classical learning seem more apposite to the modern age than some later state-sponsored traditions attached to the Five Classics, which tend to be more authoritarian, more solipsistic, and consequently less congenial. In light of the recent clamor for a New Confucian Revival, one should remem-

* Chapter 3 discusses Chinese identity as it is perceived in relation to "Zhongguo," a term that originally referred to the Central States on or near the Yellow River valley but now refers to either Chinese people or the Chinese nation. National identities were relatively late and loose inventions, fleshed out in response to successive major "barbarian incursions," including those of the Western powers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

ber that there are manifold classical traditions to draw upon in any attempts to reconfigure and enrich the present. Still, as the final chapter of this book demonstrates, this once-rich complex of classical traditions is in danger of being reduced to mere slogans, and that will make it more difficult for future generations to reconstruct the genuine insights of early classical masters.

Because much of the earliest history of this standard collection of Five Classics remains a mystery, this introduction perforce begins at the middle of the story. Although later texts claim a remarkable antiquity for the canon, no extant work dating before the late third century BC discusses this group of texts as either canon or collection. It is not clear even now how many or how much of the texts had been written down by that date. Equally astonishing, no recorded tradition prior to 100 BC identifies Confucius as author, editor, or compiler of this collection.* But just about that time, in mid–Western Han, there occurred a virtual explosion of interest in the Five Classics, prompted in part by imperial patronage, which eventually standardized the form the canonical texts would take and privileged a few readings associated with each, while tracing every teaching ultimately back to the figure of Confucius, either directly or through the construction of scholastic lineages. All efforts to establish a single authoritative interpretation for each of the Five Classics, let alone reach a consensus on the overarching meaning of the corpus, were doomed to failure, however. Not only did the Five Classics vary greatly in origin, style, and content, so that any endeavor to harmonize them only prompted controversy, but also every literate person in the empire was to some degree a student of the Classics, able if not determined to come to a personal understanding of the corpus.†

*Unconfirmed reports from the Shanghai Museum, however, speak of (as yet unpublished) bamboo slips from ca. 300 BC that include an unknown commentary on the *Odes* attributed to Confucius. The commentary appears to be written in the special characters of the Chu state. It is not certain when Confucius came to be regarded as the author of the "Great Commentary" to the *Changes*.

†Since the publication of Evelyn Rawski's *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), an increasing number of scholars (Cynthia Brokaw, Benjamin Elman, David Johnson, and Angela Ki Che Leung, among others) have sought to distinguish levels of literacy more precisely in order to arrive at more meaningful figures for functional and full literacy rates. Functional literacy, defined as the possession of the most basic reading and writing skills, was probably high in late imperial China (roughly 50 percent among male city dwellers), but full classical literacy (attained by 5–10 percent of the adult male population during the eighteenth century) presupposed a thorough knowledge of the Five Classics, Four Books, chief commentarial traditions, dynastic histories, and great literature that empowered members of the elite in the political and cultural arenas.

Concerted attempts to reach consensus nonetheless established the dominant patterns for official learning in imperial China, patterns that inextricably linked moral concerns with the art of governance.

The introduction reviews what little information is known about the origins of the Five Classics and their coming together as a single corpus. Theories about their compilation prior to being elevated to the canon are presented in sections 2–6. Current debates over the canon in China and in America, recounted in the second half of section 3, call attention to the cultural and political significance of forming and keeping a canon. The introduction ends in sections 7–9 with observations on the dominant pattern of classical exegesis. Section 7 reviews the political motives underlying Emperor Wu's (r. 140–87 BC) decision to canonize these five texts as a set and to omit others, a case which nicely illustrates the point that the composing, designating, and interpreting of sacred texts are always highly political acts, as is the establishment of critical editions and state-sponsored readings. Section 8, which touches upon the compromises and contradictions that marked Han classical scholarship, is meant to remind readers of the kinds of problems that commonly arise when idealized prescriptions must be adapted to state needs. The final section of the introduction, devoted to post-Han exegetical developments, does not attempt a detailed narrative for three reasons. First, the history of the post-Han schools of interpretation presents a continual reworking of this Han linkage between hermeneutics and politics. Second, significant shifts in interpretation tended to hinge on turns of phrasing within the ongoing commentarial traditions, of a subtlety and allusiveness comprehensible only to advanced students of the culture and language. Given the lengthy exegetical disputes depending on highly technical discussions or semantic extensions of key words, no amount of explication could keep readers unfamiliar with the grammar and vocabulary of premodern literary language (*wenyan* 文言) from the erroneous impression that classicists in China were obsessed with the arcane or precious. Third, to borrow a Chinese metaphor, the sheer abundance of the timbers used to construct the magnificent edifice of Confucian classicism makes the task of reassembly daunting, especially when that original building was designed in a style and with a purpose quite alien to modern academic activity. To suggest the wide range of Ru models available in the empire to ardent students of the past, the penultimate section of this introduction discusses three leading figures who were both celebrated and excoriated by fellow classicists. The final section offers only the briefest overview of the later history of the Five Classics, explicating their eventual displacement in the standard curriculum by the so-called Four Books collection, comprised of the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the "Great Learning," and the "Doctrine of the Mean."

Having offered, in the Introduction, a broad sense of established paradigms and problems, I devote each of the following five chapters to the history, meaning, and interpretation of one of the Five Classics. I have chosen here not to assess the corpus as literature, as historical narrative, or as a literary source for early views on ritual, cosmology, music, and divination, as these topics demand far more specialized treatments. Readers interested in such topics may consult the bibliographical essays in the Suggested Readings.

1. THE FIVE CLASSICS' RELATION TO CONFUCIUS

As listed above, the Five "Confucian" Classics are the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites* (originally one text to which two others were eventually added), the *Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. (Tradition speaks of a *Music* classic, but if it ever existed it has been lost or incorporated into one of three *Rites* classics.) The classics can properly be called Confucian in only two senses: Confucius and his followers may have used some—but not all—of them as templates for moral instruction, much as the Greek pedagogues once used Homer. And early traditions ascribe to Confucius the tasks of compiling, editing, and in some few cases composing the separate parts in this repository of wisdom texts, although modern scholarship generally disputes those pious legends.

Because the corpus of the Five Classics contains materials that vary widely in date, style, subject matter, and point of view, its interpretation was hardly less problematic to its early readers than it is to modern scholars. The *Odes* is a collection of songs reflecting everyday life in court and countryside during the Eastern Zhou period; the same collection includes a series of hymns, composed specifically for state rituals, which relate much of the mythological lore transmitted from the early Zhou dynasty. The *Documents* purports to be a collection of archaic archival materials that preserves important edicts and memorials outlining the responsibilities of the ruling elite toward Heaven and the common people. Usually treated as a single canon, the three Rites classics, the *Ceremonials* (*Yili*), *Rites Records* (*Liji*), and *Zhou Rites* (*Zhouli*), include as many as three thousand discrete rules of conduct, in addition to fabulous descriptions of an ideal government structure and anecdotes about paragons of Confucian virtue. A divination manual eventually expanded for use as a philosophical text, the *Changes* attempts to recreate through its graphic symbols and attached texts the full range of shifting phenomena that proceed from the unitary prime mover, the Dao. Finally, the *Annals* takes the form of a court diary detailing the activities of the rulers of the small state of Lu during the years 722–481 BC. Notwithstanding this variety of materials, Confucian masters postulated a single, coherent message underlying all Five Classics.

As far as we can reconstruct, self-identified followers of Confucius prior to 136 BC emphasized a set of practices (now recognized as distinctly archaizing), including ritualized chanting, dancing, and dressing. They also upheld a number of basic notions, the most important of which was the perfectibility of human relations through *shu* 恕 (profound empathy) leading to *ren* 仁 (human kindness). According to Confucius, such developed humanity was typically realized by a two-step process: unremitting study of the Way of the Ancients, which ensured a gradual habituation to goodness through immersion in the ancient models preserved in ritual, to be crowned by a profound awareness of one's place within the community of civilized human beings. In theory, this sort of cultivation dramatically increased the charisma of the adherents, thereby inducing the transformation of less fully realized human beings who came in contact with such moral exemplars. Civilization, for Confucius, was both embodied in and enhanced through the distinctive ritual acts that inevitably govern most aspects of human interaction; if those in power would only take the trouble to express their human feelings through time-honored rituals, there would be no need for repressive penal codes and punishments to control the bestial impulses. Life in society, no longer solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, would be harmonious, comfortable, peaceful, cultivated, and stable. Social realities would finally correspond to the language of prescribed social roles, for fathers would act as fathers should, rulers as rulers, and so on.

According to Confucius, a speedy restoration of the Golden Age that purportedly prevailed during the early days of the Western Zhou dynasty (tradit. 1122–770 BC; revised ca. 1050–770 BC) might be better led by men of noble character than by men of noble birth.* Good men needed only to become so adept in the ritual usages, the verbal and gestural language for dignified human interaction, that cultivation became virtually second nature, at once spontaneous and graceful. Obeying the dictates of Heaven, such men would then naturally espouse the Good. Lesser men, of course, would still require the loving support of a strong family system and the suasive model of a just ruler to arrive at a corresponding nobility of character. But given the right social conditions, all people, regardless of family status and background and despite vast differences in innate intellect and talents, might reach a true nobility of spirit. As one Confucian master put it, "All men are capable of becoming [the legendary sage-kings] Yao and Shun," insofar as they learn to weigh the relative claims of incommensurate goods in order to find the single most humane solution to problems arising from

* The same binome, *junzi* 君子, was used for both groups. An excellent summary of the term is to be found in the introduction to Arthur Waley's translation of *The Confucian Analects*.

social interaction. Such solutions would then confirm the perfection of the Middle Way.

Today, a student seeking to understand the basic tenets of Confucius and Confucianism would most likely turn to the *Analects*, which takes the form of notes on conversations that Confucius purportedly held with his disciples. Not so in early China. Until relatively late in the history of Confucian classicism, during the Sui-Tang period (581–907), the *Analects* was considered far less important as a source of Confucius's ideas than the Five Classics, especially the *Chunqiu*, or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a text widely believed to have been written by Confucius. Contemporary documents state that the more important texts were written on longer strips. During the Han period, for example, the Five Classics were written on bound bamboo strips two feet four inches in length (measured in Han-time units), twice the length of those used for a minor classic entitled the *Classic of Filial Piety* and three times the length of those used for the *Analects*.

Certainly until late in the Song period (960–1279), the Five Classics were generally considered more essential to Confucian learning than the now more famous collection of Four Books, which are the subject of the vast majority of current Chinese and Western studies on early thought in China. Understanding the early prominence of the Five Classics is a prerequisite to a more precise understanding of the first millennium and a half of classical learning, from 136 BC to the fifteenth century, when all literati intending to sit the exams had to master the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy. That reconsideration of early classical learning, in turn, should help us better appraise the dramatic turn that Chinese thought took during the Song dynasty, which represented a virtual reassessment and reinvention of the Confucian message, as sweeping in its own way as the Protestant Reformation of Catholicism. Aside from its intrinsic interest, a rediscovery of early classicism must serve to dispel lingering stereotypes about an eternal and unchanging China. I begin, then, at the conceptual beginning, since the chronological beginnings of the Five Classics corpus cannot be traced.

2. CANONICAL SIGNIFICANCE: THEN AND NOW, "EAST" AND "WEST"

What was a classic, a *jing*, in China, and where did the term come from? Apparently, early Confucians were not the first scholars to call an authoritative text a classic. Priority goes to the Mohists, vociferous critics of the Confucians in the preimperial period, who sometime in the fourth century BC christened the ten basic doctrines of their founder, Mo Di (d. 390 BC?), the Mohist Classic; by implication, these ten points represented an authoritative summary of the founder's teachings. It seems to have taken the Confucians nearly a century to

borrow the term "classic" and apply it to their authoritative sources of learning. Xunzi (d. 238 BC) is the first known Confucian master to write of "classics" in connection with a corpus of four texts (the Five Classics minus the *Changes*) utilized as sourcebooks by committed Ru.[*] Xunzi treated these four texts—conceived as oral or written traditions—as a single system wherein each delivered a distinct but complementary body of knowledge to the student of antiquity. According to Xunzi,

> As to program, learning begins with chanting the Classics out loud [to memorize and internalize them] and ends with the reading of ritual. . . . The *Documents* is a record of government affairs; the *Odes*, a repository of appropriate sounds; the *Rites* are the great source for models and the complete outline for categorizing. Thus, learning reaches its completion with the *Rites*, for they may be said to represent the highest excellence of the Way and its charismatic power. The reverent patterns of the *Rites*, the fit harmonies of music [the *Music Classic*?], the breadth of the *Odes* and *Documents*, the subtlety of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*—these encompass all that lies between Heaven and Earth.[†]

Only as a group, then, could the Classics reveal the entire workings of the divine Way and its operation within human society.

Happily, Xunzi also tells us what he means by his use of the term "classic" (*jing*), and he does so by a typical Chinese rhetorical device: a pun. The character *jing* 經 was a near homophone for *jing* 徑, meaning a straight path or direct route. These texts were seen as the best route to the original teachings of the ancient sage-kings, as transmitted by Confucius. And because the word *jing* by extension also conveys the verbal sense of "passing through," it served equally well to describe whatever has stood the test of time because of its excellence. Xunzi then plays with the root meaning of *jing* 經 (literally, the lead thread or warp). Because the warp serves as fixed framework for the entire length of a weaving, "classic" is an apt metaphor for whatever imparts definition, order, and utility over the long course of history. Thus the earliest Chinese dictionary, the *Shuowen* (composed ca. AD 100), defines *jing* as "weaving," a definition which

[*] Xunzi's reasons for excluding the *Changes* will be discussed below.

[†] The decision to italicize *Rites* (*li*) and *Music* (*yue*) here reflects the dominant tradition that these terms indicated the titles of two classics that had been set down in writing in the classical period. However, in all probability the terms *li* and *yue* referred to performance traditions, some parts of which were written down only in Han and some parts of which were never transcribed.

recalls the Han view that the Five Classics are not only tightly woven (that is, integrally connected) texts but also texts that weave together the constant principles underlying the sociocosmic fabric.*

By a further twist on the weaving analogy, certain texts regarded as important supplements to the canon were called *wei* 緯 (woof or weft); like the weft threads that the weaver passes over and under the long, fixed warp threads to create the fabric, the *wei* were apocryphal writings that filled in the warp of the Five Classics with political predictions, cosmological speculations, and punning sound glosses. Reflecting also contemporary interest in the technical arts associated with astronomy, medicine, and geography, the apocrypha helped to bridge the gap between ancient phrasing and contemporary theory. In the minds of many pre-Song readers of the Classics, the weftlike apocrypha were so closely tied to the warplike Classics that authors sometimes made no distinction between the two when citing authorities. But the underlying political motivations of some of the apocrypha, which predicted specific dynastic changes, left all the apocrypha liable to periodic suppression by strong rulers, who feared such pronouncements would incite rebellion. In consequence, only fragments of the apocrypha exist today.

The apocrypha had failed the test that Han classical masters devised to determine whether a work qualifies as a true Classic: (1) the classic or set of classics must constitute a complete and perfect order of sufficient breadth to answer every moral question put to it; (2) the classic must be "easy to know" and "easy to follow" in the sense that it contains no "treachery or trickery," that is, no internal contradictions; (3) the classic must be eternally relevant in the ever-changing present, so that its traditions remain alive in every generation; (4) the classic must function as a kind of access route to the ethical makeup of its sage-author(s), providing models of inner strength and integrity, if not conventional power; and (5) on both the literary and ethical levels, reading of the classics must yield such reliably exquisite pleasures as to forge in the most knowledgeable adherents—the connoisseurs of morality—the strong desire to emulate the ethical exemplars of the past. Dong Zhongshu (176–104 BC), Yang Xiong

*If "warp" is the original etymology of the Chinese word for "classic," early Chinese usage parallels the evolution of the word "sutra" in Indian tradition, from "connecting thread." (The English word "text," of course, derives from the Latin *textus*, meaning "woven.") The characters for both *jing* (warp) and *wei* (apocrypha, woof or weft) share the silk 糸 signific. That led Zhang Binglin (1869–1935) to surmise that the character *jing* originally referred to the thread that bound inscribed bamboo strips in bundles to form early texts. Also, prior to the invention of paper in Han, deluxe editions were likely to be transcribed on rolls of woven silk, rather than on bundled wood and bamboo slats.

(53 BC–AD 18), and Ouyang Xiu (AD 1007–72), three Confucian masters spanning more than a millennium, commented as follows on the Classics:

> Each and every one of the six branches of learning 六學 is great, but each has that in which it excels. The *Odes* tells of the aspirations of the heart and mind; therefore, it excels in substance. The *Rites* mandates moderation; therefore, it excels in refinement. The *Music* intones virtue; therefore, it excels in influence. The *Documents* illustrates merit; therefore, it excels in human affairs. The *Changes* bases itself in Heaven and Earth; therefore, it excels in regularities (*shu* 數). The *Spring and Autumn* rectifies notions of right and wrong; therefore, it excels in governance.
>
> —Dong Zhongshu

> Asking about divinity, an interlocutor gets the response: "What is divine is the heart/mind (*xin* 心) [the single seat of the intellect and emotions]." "May I ask more about it?" "Divinity is to immerse oneself in Heaven and become Heaven; to immerse oneself in Earth and become Earth. Heaven and Earth are divine patterns of unfathomable greatness. Yet when the heart/mind immerses itself in them, it can nearly fathom them. . . ." The interlocutor then asks, "How is one to enter [such a state of extraordinary understanding]?" Reply: "Through Confucius. Confucius is the door, the one and only door. How can any of us . . . refuse to go by that door? . . . And just as no one can ever cross a river without a boat, so no one can attain the Way without the Five Classics."
>
> —Yang Xiong

> In the *Odes* we can see the mind of the Master Confucius. From the *Documents* we can know his judgments. With the *Rites* we can shed light on his models. With the *Music* we can grasp his virtue. With the *Changes* we can examine his character. And with the *Spring and Autumn* we can preserve his purpose.
>
> —Ouyang Xiu

Over the course of imperial history in China, prominent thinkers affirmed the supreme importance of the Five Classics, but for many in the early twenty-first century, ancient Chinese testimonials carry less weight than debates since the early 1980s on the Western canon, conducted by philosophers intent upon devising a theory of value, literary critics hoping to reform the old curriculum, and anthropologists preoccupied with the mechanisms of cultural selection. Such controversies seem to have established at least five important, if contested,

notions concerning canon formation, each suggesting that the survival of the Five Classics under state sponsorship is not attributable solely either to an orchestrated conspiracy by establishment institutions or to their continuous appreciation by succeeding generations over the course of two millennia: (1) a person arrives at decisions about value on the basis of information received from members of the community. Within a particular community, tastes tend to converge, except in the case of the unacculturated (the young, the untutored, and the barbarian), so that appreciation of the canon will be adjudged simply as "good taste" and "rational choice"; (2) the inclusion of a work in the canon depends as much upon the successive subjective judgments of influential tastemakers who find the work in fundamental ways to be timeless (that is, applicable to their own situation) as upon the original authorial design, labor, and skill; (3) texts are plural and ambiguous from the beginning; given that methods employed to address such indeterminacy vary over time, new meaning can in theory be generated endlessly from the same classic; (4) once a work has been in the canon for a sufficient length of time, it begins to perform key cultural functions, for example, as an unquestioned authority, as a witness to persistent community interests, as a testament to cultural superiority, as a selective compendium of ideals and traditions; it then no longer merely reflects but also shapes and creates the culture that transmits its values, as often by setting limits to the parameters of cultural discourse as by the direct promotion of a set of values; (5) certain purportedly objective truths embodied in the canon can sometimes serve as enabling alibis or cultural cover for the relentless pursuit of special economic and political interests by those who have or wish to attain power. At the very least, members of the elite tend to disregard the judgments of less privileged groups in the complex processes of canon formation and canon interpretation. But that is not all. The establishment of the canon invariably brings movement to culture because the improvisation, exchange, and revision required to maintain the canon end in a blurring of cultural boundaries. The continual borrowing from and imitation of the canon do not necessarily signify, then, "imaginative parsimony, still less . . . creative exhaustion" or pernicious social engineering. Appropriating well is the very basis of the creative act, and an ardent desire to restore or reinvigorate tradition frequently opens new avenues of expression.

In any case, official transmission of the Classics often continued in tandem with unreflective cultural selection and reproduction because a defined canon performed a variety of functions that appealed to divergent sectors within society. It allowed some degree of state control over the interpretations of texts that the culture took seriously, through official exegesis and exclusion. It also helped to locate cultural authority, historical knowledge, and ethical wisdom in the throne, thereby associating imperial patronage with infallibility, perfect com-

prehensiveness, and divine inspiration. Insofar as it represented a conservative product of an imagined past, the canon could reflect and promote widely shared ideals; to many, it symbolized the triumph of—or at least the persistence of—tradition, the metropolitan culture, or the universal order over and against the modern, the regional, the chaotic. For this reason, empire and the classical canon remained mutually reinforcing imaginative constructions. Those curatorial and normative functions of the canon whereby the Five Classics preserved and transmitted culture and ideology made the canon as a whole appear essentially "timeless," even when individual writings in the canon and attached commentaries clearly reflected the contemporary preoccupations of their separate authors. This very timeless quality made learning of the canon especially valuable as an appropriate class marker and index of civility. It lent a sturdy framework within which to construct aesthetic experience and cultural ideals. It could even allow the delicious escape to worlds beyond humdrum everyday existence.

In China, the political elite's desire for self-representation could not but be highly gratified by the content of the Five Classics; as the Classics are almost uniformly devoted to stories of rulers (good and bad) and their advisers (forthright and fawning), the canon depicted members of the political elite as the sole legitimate subjects of history. And although elites in China were hardly the single self-perpetuating entity portrayed by certain Marxist historians, at any one time they tried to reserve for themselves a monopoly over correct interpretations of the Five Classics, the better to enhance their status and reduce access to power by the members of other groups. For these reasons, although Confucian learning in the strict sense—the faithful reproduction of specific ethical patterns of social interaction associated with Confucius—remained only one of several options open to thinking individuals throughout the course of imperial history, classicism in its broader sense permeated much of society and culture so profoundly that it is hard to distinguish it from "things Chinese." This form of classicism was reflected in a reverence for learning and an aesthetic cultivation of the past; in an "epistemological optimism," a belief that there is sufficient moral knowledge to reform the self and others; in the consequent demand that ideal government foster rectitude; in the meticulous performance of key rituals reinforced by law; and in the very maintenance of certain institutional structures. When even armed guards stationed in the imperial palaces were assigned the Five Classics to master, it was inevitable that "within the four seas" interpretive lines explicating the Classics would "grow as numerous as trees in the forest."

The very pervasiveness of classicism in imperial China made it, of course, the scapegoat of every modern reformer intent upon rapid Westernization in late imperial China. More recently, political conservatives have muddied the waters by pushing a "suitably revised" Confucian ideology as the chief antidote

to the spiritual pollution that supposedly derives from contact with the West. As a result, China, Taiwan, the Chinese diaspora, and Euro-America can expect no cessation of the highly politicized debates over the original value of the classical canon as it bears upon modern life, debates conducted among elites who have all been trained in Western-style curricula. Readers would do well to keep these debates in mind as they come to consider the general history and specific content of the original Five Classics, when compared with the Four Books favored by later Confucian masters.

3. WHO WROTE THE FIVE CLASSICS?

Over the course of Chinese history the question of the authorship of the Five Classics has received differing responses. By and large, however, scholars in imperial China tended to attribute the composition of the Classics either to the ancient sage-kings of the legendary Three Dynasties of Xia, Shang, and early Zhou or to Confucius himself. Because Confucius taught his disciples that the sage-kings of hoary antiquity had discovered and then elucidated important ethical patterns weaving through past and present, his early followers reserved the title of *jing* 經 for works on politics, ritual, and cosmology popularly ascribed to those sage-kings. The Classics, then, by definition, contained the ancients' blueprints for civilization, which were assumed to be of enduring value.[*] It was precisely because the Classics were said to be ancient texts, contemporaneous with or at least closer in time to the Golden Age projected onto an idealized past, when perfect justice reportedly prevailed among men, that texts like the *Odes*, *Documents*, and *Rites* were held to be classics. Even the *Spring and Autumn Annals* was presumably included in Xunzi's early list of Classics not because of its popular attribution to Confucius, but because the *Annals* captured the flavor of antiquity in preserving genuinely old archival material.

By the first century BC, however, during the Han dynasty, the figure of Confucius had been so elevated in the minds of the faithful that he was in effect apotheosized or deified.[†] To his most fervent adherents, at least, Confucius had

[*] Modern readers need not, of course, uncritically adopt this view of the Classics as the ancients' blueprints for civilization. Early Western Han and pre-Han works frequently expressed doubts about claims to great antiquity made on behalf of some of the Classics. The "antiquity-doubters" of the early twentieth century, building upon observations registered by earlier scholars in imperial China, demonstrated just how late many of the so-called antique traditions actually were (some being Han in origin), though the Classics do preserve ancient material.

[†] Confucius in history and in legend is discussed in some detail in chapter 6. The increased stress in Han on Confucius's editorial role may represent scholars' attempts to recast the august figure of Confucius in their own image.

become not merely the last in a long line of antique sages, but the Supreme Sage-Master of all, the *suwang* 素王 (uncrowned king), whose extraordinary wisdom so far surpassed that of all others before or since that he would in effect reign, without benefit of the throne, over the rest of Chinese history. Proponents of Confucius, never anticipating that future exigencies might one day render past experience wholly useless, were apt to portray him in one of three roles in which his teachings might arguably apply to all situations in all ages: as a divinely inspired prophet, a fabulous magician the repetition of whose verbal formulae (written and spoken) could dramatically alter current conditions, or an incalculably wise man who had cloaked his esoteric teachings in "subtle words with profound implications," words whose real meaning could be unlocked by specialists trained in the use of allegory. For such avid followers of Confucius, in other words, a Classic was created at the point when its text was assumed to say ineffably more than it appeared to say.

Many Han thinkers came to believe that Confucius had not only predicted the triumph of the Han ruling house, but also laid the groundwork for the new Han political order by his careful editing of the Five Classics. According to the theory, Confucius as the special patron of the Han ruling house had carefully culled from the ancient records those teachings that would lead Han dynasts to effect a grand universal and eternal peace. Ideas elaborated in the Classics must therefore legitimate the Han's social and political institutions, aligning them with both archaic institutions and cosmic patterns; if necessary, new institutions should be devised on the model of prescriptions found in the Five Classics. Inevitably, this thoroughgoing reassessment of the figure of Confucius, converting him from cultural transmitter to political activist, affected the way in which the Classics themselves were viewed. For the next three centuries, until the collapse of the Han dynasty, the Classics were said to deserve veneration not so much as ancient repositories of wisdom and culture but as the sacred works of a divine and infallible (if once-undervalued) Confucius, who had personally written or edited every book in the corpus with the express intention of benefiting the Han state. As one Han text put it, "The Classics are what Confucius put in order. They are the great canon of the Sage." Such assumptions go far to explain the hermeneutical approach adopted by many Han commentators, who tended to view the texts as entrée to the ethical commitments of the Master, Confucius. Many hoped that by studying the Classics they could immerse themselves in the revealed mind of the sage Confucius until they became so habituated to his orientation that it seemed second nature to them—at which point, they would themselves naturally become latter-day sages.

The collapse of Han institutions in the late second century AD almost inevitably spelled the demotion of the Han's special patron, Confucius, from

divine to human status. Those inclined to see Confucius more as man than as god put forward a different point of view about the Classics: "The term 'classic' refers to anything of lasting relevance. If a book has lasting relevance, it becomes a classic. Moreover, the fact that a book was not written by Confucius surely does not preclude its becoming a classic!" This reappraisal of the canon returned it in one sense to nearly the same place it had occupied prior to Han, in that the chief value of the corpus now supposedly resided in its enduring relevance. In another sense, however, this seemingly innocuous statement made the category of classic far more open-ended than it had seemed before, for in theory latter-day sages could continue to create new classics eligible for inclusion in the state-sponsored canon. Indeed, the corpus of the Five Classics was unusual in the degree to which it remained open, subject to continual amplification and revision. In Han times, the list of Classics was generally limited to five, but by Tang (618–906) texts refer to the Nine Classics, and by Song (960–1279) the list had grown to thirteen. Additional candidates for inclusion in the canon were proposed throughout the course of imperial China, Wang Su's (195–256) fabrication of as many as five new minor classics being an excellent case in point. Even certain noncanonical but neoclassical texts, for example, the *Canon of Supreme Mystery* (*Taixuanjing*) by Yang Xiong (completed AD 4), were accorded quasi-canonical status by many orthodox classicists.*

To summarize, by the end of Han in the third century AD, three main theories about the character of the Classics had been advanced: that the Classics were valuable as ancient repositories of wisdom lore; that their chief value lay in their association with Confucius as author and editor; that their number was not fixed, as any book of continuing utility qualified for inclusion in the canon. Today, few intellectual historians of China assume that the Five Classics represent either the collective teachings of the ancient holy sage-kings or the edited corpus of the historical Confucius, though a great number still believe, despite evidence to the contrary, that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* represents the "praise and blame" of the Supreme Sage himself. Most probably, Confucius did not compose any texts at all. Like Socrates, he seems to have preferred dialogues

*To some degree, this openness was a reflection of the propensity in early China to conflate canon and commentary. It was not until the time of Ma Rong (79–166), according to tradition, that Chinese authors began to distinguish canon from commentary by making two lines of commentary equal in width to one line of canon. As late as the Tang dynasty, commentaries and main text were not always clearly demarcated. In any case, so completely did commentators and their readers conflate canon, apocryphal traditions, and commentary that when scholars argued for their preferred readings of Confucian texts, they were often making implicit assertions about the relative merits of the interpretive traditions attached to those Confucian texts, rather than about the texts themselves.

with his students to the creation of texts. Still, the traditions associated with his name by disciples and disciples of disciples point to the general orientation of his teachings.

4. THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE CLASSICS

Early accounts speak of four main subjects of classical learning in Lu, the home state of Confucius: the odes, historical documents, rites, and music. Prior to the time of Confucius, learning in these four fields, not necessarily tied to study of canonical texts, was basically reserved for aristocrats in the Zhou feudal state, for whom cultivation was both a political necessity and a desirable personal attainment. Young scions of noble houses probably acquired the rudiments of such training informally as guest-attendants in the houses of other members of the nobility, just as their European counterparts did during the medieval period. So far as we know, Confucius was the first teacher to make the training of students his vocation, though there is no indication that he ever founded an academy. Tradition also claims that Confucius was the first teacher to admit students to his circle on the basis not of their hereditary rank or social estate, but simply of their eagerness to learn. Confucius declared, "From the very poorest upward—beginning with the man who could bring no better present than a bundle of dried meat—none has ever come to me without receiving instruction." In substantiation of that claim, an *Analects* passage shows Confucius's willingness to instruct a young village boy who has adequately prepared himself for the initial interview.

From this same source we also learn that Confucius required his students to learn the contents of an odes collection related if not identical to the received text of the *Odes* in our possession. One memorable anecdote in the *Analects* depicts Confucius chiding his lazy son for his signal failure to study the odes; according to Confucius, his son will surely, in consequence, "find himself at a loss in conversation." And because Confucius insisted that the noble man model himself upon the Way of the Ancients in seeking to attain the supreme goodness called *ren* 仁 (human kindness), his disciples must have been fully conversant with the contents of historical archives, which contained the necessary examples of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Still, Confucius seems not to have had in hand the received *Documents* text because he repeatedly laments his ignorance of the pre-Zhou period, the main subject of the early chapters in the received text of that name. In addition to guiding his students through these traditions, Confucius advised each of his disciples to practice the rites and music as a means of self-cultivation.

No reliable information is available concerning the followers of Confucius in the succeeding centuries, but the threats to the Central States culture

preserved in Zhou and Lu must have escalated as interstate warfare intensified during the Warring States period (475–222 BC). In that pressured climate, accounts supposedly based on the early rites and music came to be written down. Meanwhile, several alternative collections of authoritative state documents circulated, perhaps in competition with one another. But because the ancient Chinese script had no mechanism by which to distinguish the specific titles of texts from mass nouns (for example, the *Odes* from "odes" or the *Documents* from "documents"), many readers of the late Warring States and Qin-Han periods, understandably enough, took Confucius's pedagogical references to odes, to documents, to rites, and to music to mean that the Master's chosen curriculum consisted of four specific texts: the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, and the *Music*. This misapprehension set the stage for later canon construction in China, which focused on texts and textual transmission rather than on praxis.

The famous Confucian philosopher Mencius (d. 289 BC) advanced this process of canon construction—taking, not coincidentally, the first step toward the deification of Confucius—when he argued that the text of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, composed by Confucius, was equal in importance to the canons associated with the legendary sage-kings of antiquity. But judging from the texts they left behind, most thinkers in the Central States cultural sphere of the late third century BC seem less intent upon defining a set corpus of canonical texts than upon championing the traditional Six Arts (rites, music, archery, charioteering, composition, and arithmetic), the polite arts of the aristocracy. (Successive attempts to unify China and to fix an orthodox canon, as we will see, are roughly contemporary in time and similar in impulse.) Neither is there any indication that the Five Classics were exclusively identified with a Confucian camp. Indeed, there is ample counterevidence that such texts were regarded as part of the general cultural heritage or patrimony of all educated Chinese. No less significantly, neither Mencius nor his later critic Xunzi identified Confucius as either editor or compiler of a standard collection of Confucian texts, though Mencius and Xunzi were the two most ardent proponents of Confucius's message in the period prior to unification of the empire in 221 BC.

Sometime during the late fourth or third century BC, certain groups of Ru finally added the *Changes* divination text to the list of sacred Classics, a move that either prompted or responded to the inclusion in the *Changes* of some or all of the famous "Ten Wings" (or Appendices) devoted to cosmic correlations and human history. These appendices allowed all components of the many-layered text to be read as one organic treatise of considerable sophistication on

man's changing place with respect to the experiential world.* With the inclusion of the *Changes* into the canon, classicists now had a set curriculum of Six Classics (*liujing*)—sometimes labeled the Six Arts as if to co-opt the older frame of reference—which were said to give the would-be gentleman the necessary educational attainments: the *Odes*, *Documents*, *Rites*, *Music*, *Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

It was centuries later, in mid- to late Western Han, that a scholastic impulse to group things by fives, in imitation of the Five Phases 五行 (see Key Terms), worked to suppress mention of a *Music* classic in connection with the corpus, possibly resulting in the incorporation of a *Music* text (an abridged version of the earlier classic?) into a text on rites. For a while under Han, even ardent Five Phases proponents like Jia Yi (200–168 BC) had emphasized groupings by six, symbolizing the Five Phases and their supreme overlord, the Dao. Gradually, however, talk of six yielded to talk of five, for by this final change, ostensibly devised to restore the old rubric of the Five Classics, the newest aesthetic, cosmic, and intellectual theories could be satisfied.† With that the Five Classics—the *Odes*, the *Documents*, the *Rites*, the *Changes*, and the *Annals*—came into being as a set collection in the original Modern Script order.

As we have seen, there is little question that an *Odes* anthology existed in some form, oral or written, before the time of Confucius. Most scholars now date the compilation of an *Odes* anthology from earlier materials no later than 600 BC, though the text may not have been fixed in its present form much before the third century BC. The *Documents* followed. Though the *Documents* contains some indisputably early material dating from early Western Zhou (tenth century BC), rival collections of authoritative historical documents were

* Although classical Chinese usually does not indicate gender, there is no doubt that in most cases early authors imagined their subjects and readers to be male, in part because more males than females could read and in part because most authors presumed a "constant norm" by which females "follow" males. As historian, I feel that the automatic substitution of "he or she" whenever the Chinese text says "person" can create a serious distortion of the distant past. Accordingly, I refer occasionally to "man" rather than "human." Elsewhere, I have argued that women in the classical period were not nearly so downtrodden as modern stereotypes suggest. But ultimately each reader will decide for herself whether the Five Classics' gender construction disqualifies them from serious consideration.

† Six may have devolved into five by a relatively simple mechanism: the six powers (= Heaven, Earth, and the four directions) became five (the four directions plus the center) by the elevation of the sixth power, Heaven or Dao (symbol of the ruler), above the five. Originally, however, the alternative groupings of six or of five reflected two quite distinct political and cosmological visions, as Michael Loewe's work shows.

circulating as late as the end of the Warring States period. Only with Xunzi (that is, only a few decades before the Qin unification in 221 BC) can we safely assume that a text similar to the *Documents* known to us was used for teaching by a Confucian master. As for the texts of the rites and music, it seems doubtful they were written down much before the Han dynasty, though the teaching of prescribed rites and music had been considered essential to the education of true gentlemen for centuries. Last to claim a place in the canon were the *Changes* and the *Spring and Autumn* texts—texts certainly known by the fourth century BC but not regarded as full-scale Classics until the late Warring States. The so-called Modern Script order* that the Warring States and early Han texts use to list the Six Classics—*Odes*, *Documents*, *Rites*, *Music*, *Changes*, and *Spring and Autumn Annals*—seems to reflect, then, the approximate stages at which the written texts were incorporated into the canon.

These Five or Six Classics fall neatly into three groups, not only in their date of entry into the canon but also in their content. The earliest sections of the *Odes* and the *Documents* claim to preserve both the literary style and rhetorical preoccupations of the early Zhou court. Although this claim is surely false as regards most chapters, it is possible that such traditions preserved on bronze, stone, silk, or bamboo were known to Confucius, who referred to them when he located his vision of ideal antiquity in the early Zhou reigns. The *Rites* and *Music* texts alike present models of the civilized practices current among the lower nobility of the Warring States, whose outward attainments were said to match the perfection of their ethical standards. Finally, the *Yijing* and the *Chunqiu* share five similarities: they are the only texts (1) whose major commentaries have been regarded as integral components of the classic;† (2) that are traditionally attributed, at least in part, directly to Confucius, for Confucius was said to have written the "Great Commentary" to the *Changes*, included in the Ten Wings or Appendices, as well as the entire *Spring and Autumn Annals*; (3) that are thought to require an extensive hermeneutic for their meanings to be revealed in all their profundity; (4) that take as central theme the effect of human

*This ordering of the Five Classics appears in all early texts, including the *Zhuangzi*, Dong Zhongshu's various writings, and the *Shiji*. The Archaic Script (*kuwen*) order, which, judging from extant sources, first appears in Eastern Han, lists the texts in order of the relative antiquity attributed to them; hence the *Changes*, *Documents*, *Odes*, *Rites*, and *Chunqiu*.

†The work of commentaries and sayings in constituting a canon can hardly be overestimated. Writing an authoritative commentary on a venerated text (a) closes the text, after which nothing, except more commentaries, may be added; (b) marks the canonical status of the text; and (c) adapts the message of the venerated text to present concerns. Han writers like Wang Chong (AD 27–97) were fully aware of this.

behavior upon fate, demonstrating their points by reference to a wide variety of examples culled from history; and (5) that devote considerable attention to omens, prognostications, and cosmological speculations. In consequence, most Han classicists, despite their avowed intention to revere antiquity as the model, came to believe the *Yijing* and *Chunqiu*, the two latecomers to the canon, were the most important of the all-important Five Classics.

5. WHY WERE THE CLASSICS WRITTEN DOWN?

Rujia 儒家, the term usually mistranslated as "Confucianism," literally means "the weak" (possibly a taunting reference to the classicists' propensity to value ritual learning over military prowess that later served as an apt jibe for bookworms) or "the pliable" (as the classicists were likened to bamboo, which bends but does not break under pressure). Two traditional tales told about the origins of the Ru classicists, and in both their weakness and pliability are born of sociopolitical events. In the first of these, the Ru were descendants of the Shang people overthrown by the Zhou about 1050 BC. As a conquered people, they had little choice initially but to preach the virtues of yielding to the strong (hence their reputation for weakness), lest they be accused of treason by the new Zhou rulers. At some point, however, the surviving Shang descendants found that they could support themselves by teaching their superior knowledge of classical learning, music, and ritual to members of the Zhou court. (In versions of this tradition, Confucius was himself a scion of the survivors of the Shang royal house located in Song [fig. 2].)

A second legend also has the Ru supporting themselves by teaching, but it identifies them as collateral members of the Zhou royal family who had been disinherited after the breakdown of the feudal order in 770 BC. Bereft of their hereditary rank and feudal emoluments, these aristocrats were supposedly compelled to make a living from their superior knowledge of the ancient texts and rituals associated with the founders of their lines, especially the Duke of Zhou, regent to the second king of Zhou and first ruler of the appanage of Lu. Interestingly, both legends confer a royal origin on this group of classical scholars, doubtless in order to elevate their status and emphasize their vital importance to the state. Both also depict the profession of classical learning as a means to cope with dispossession, a notion that strengthened the appeal of classical teachings to men frustrated at being out of office. Probably neither legend is grounded in fact, but both surely convey an emotional truth: all great literature, as the most influential historian of China observed, is born of insights gained from suffering and dislocation. This observation bears in turn upon the question, Why were the earliest Classics (for example, the *Odes* and the *Documents*) written down at all?

Figure 2. Fifteenth-century illustrated Chinese primer (*Xinbian Dui xiangsi yan*) (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1967), n.p. The character Ru, the classical scholar, is illustrated in the leftmost column, fifth from the top, below the peddler and artisan and above the Buddhist monk and Daoist priest. At the top of the column is the *shi*, literatus of prominent social standing.

To frame a plausible answer to this question, one must consider the early history of the Ru classicists after the death of Confucius in 479 BC. Not so long ago, they were viewed mainly as sober scholars divided into two main schools, the idealist followers of Mencius and the rationalist followers of Xunzi. Between them the two schools supposedly dominated the four intervening centuries from Confucius to 136 BC, the date when the Five Classics were officially elevated to canonical status. A closer look at extant accounts suggests that both the sobriety and the simplicity have been overstated. Where one might imagine stern taskmasters or elder statesmen on the model of *Hamlet*'s Polonius, the early classicists' contemporaries evidently viewed them as eccentrics who dressed in archaic robes and gathered in sectarian communities. Here are two descriptions, the first a Mohist critique of the Ru, the second an ostensibly more neutral account preserved in the dynastic histories:

> They bedeck themselves with elaborate dress. . . . They strum and sing and beat out dance rhythms to gather disciples. They proliferate rites . . . to display their decorum. They labor over the niceties of ceremonial gaits and flapping gestures to impress the multitudes.

> Now, when it came time for the High Sovereign Emperor [Liu Bang, founder of Han] to execute [his chief military rival] Xiang Ji, he led troops to surround Lu [the center of conservative classicism, where Xiang Ji was staying]. All the Ru in the state continued to discourse [upon the Way], to chant their lessons and practice the rites. The sounds of their strumming and singing never stopped [throughout the siege]. Did not Lu as a state exemplify the residual influence of the sages in its love of learning?

However united in their love of learning, even in Confucius's lifetime his disciples fell into at least four distinct groups, as the *Analects* itself reveals: (1) those like Yan Hui, who exemplified humane conduct; (2) those like Zigong, who specialized in perfecting their rhetorical skills; (3) those like Ran You, who aimed for government service; and (4) those like Zixia, who pursued cultural refinement. By Confucius's own account, his disciples were "headstrong and careless, perfecting themselves in all the showy insignia of culture without any idea of how to use them." If Confucius's assessment was accurate, their arrogance and superficiality may have spurred factionalism within the ranks of the classicists. At the same time, some evidence suggests that members of the Kong family clan—few of whom were esteemed by the Master—attempted early on to monopolize whatever benefits might accrue from their familial connection with Confucius, so they, too, may have formed factions promoting alternative

accounts that would better serve their interests. In any case, by the late third century BC, one opponent of classical learning, Hanfeizi (d. 234 BC), spoke of eight types of classicists, each with its own separate political and ethical orientation. Even the writings of Hanfei's teacher, Xunzi, a strong proponent of Ru learning, reveal deep rifts among the classicists marked by theoretical differences and liturgical variations.

Such disputes were bound to arise, given the proliferation in the fourth and third centuries BC of brand-new philosophical questions demanding cogent answers. As the exponential growth in interstate relations ended in repeated culture shocks, a number of issues rocked the world of late Warring States thinkers:

What is the definition of human nature?
What lessons may be derived from history?
What is the relation of words to reality?
What form of government is most likely to ensure the well-being of its subjects?
Does any tie exist between the natural and human orders?

Confucius had said little or nothing on questions like these, possibly because he thought them unanswerable, more likely because in his lifetime such topics did not yet engross educated men. Nonetheless, later followers of Confucius's Way of the Ancients had to address such issues, if their mode of learning was not to be dismissed as mere antiquarianism. After all, Confucius himself had taught his disciples that true learning consists of "reanimating the old" through the creative adaptation of core behavioral modes to changing circumstances. And once the Five Classics were linked with Confucius, it was obvious to later followers that new material must be added to the corpus, either as interpolations into the texts or as appended commentaries, for the Classics, insofar as they drew upon genuinely old material, failed utterly to address the urgent new speculations. In other words, when the Classics simply could not be made to say what was required, "discovered" chapters and supplementary passages would supply the lack.

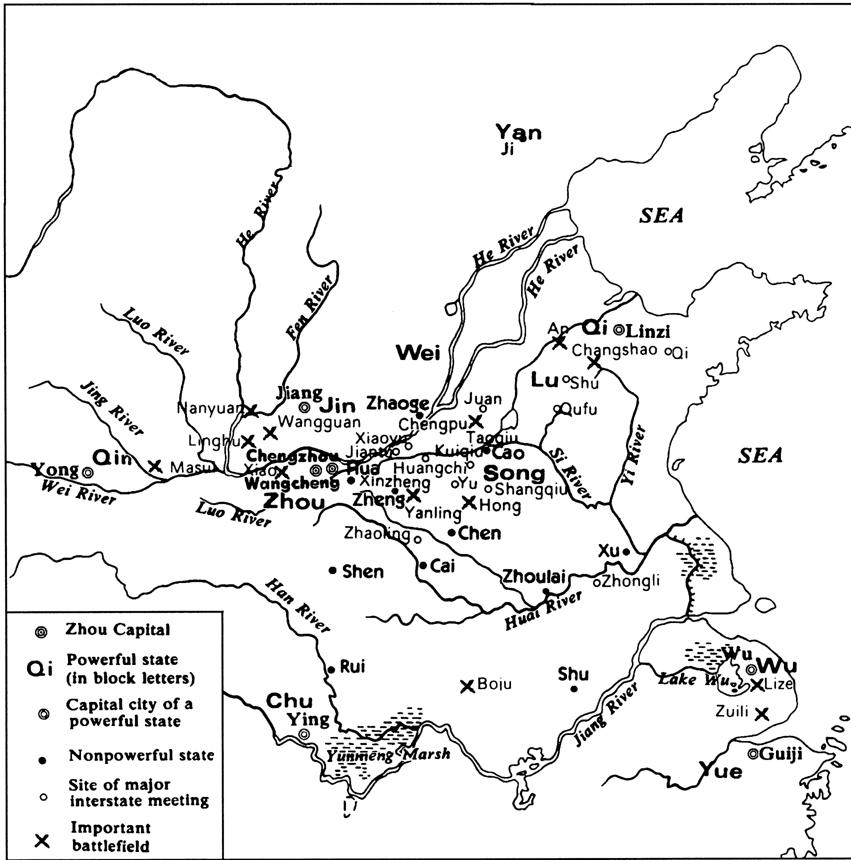
Not surprisingly, the continual reformulation of the classical message in response to changing theoretical concerns did not go unnoticed or unchallenged by all committed followers of Confucius. Centuries after Confucius, in mid-Han, good Ru would characterize the philosophical contentiousness of the Warring States period as a symptom of its stunning intellectual and moral decline—in stark contrast to many modern historians who see it as evidence of exciting intellectual ferment. This confusion associated with the surge of new ideas was merely heightened by the conundrums generated by the transmission or transcription of oral traditions. Especially in early China, where numerous

dialects were spoken, many of which were very different from one another, oral transmission from teacher to student would have occasioned frequent misunderstandings. In the absence of inexpensive writing materials (silk, bamboo, and wood were available in the pre-Han period, but silk and bamboo were expensive in north China, then the site of Central States learning), information was held in the memory, but that is never wholly reliable.

Good reasons existed in the pre-Qin period, then, for writing down the Classics. Having so much invested in their truths, students and teachers would have naturally wished to establish a corpus of authoritative texts, the better to advance their own readings while stanching the flood of strange readings based on alternate versions. The real push to standardize crested, of course, in reaction to the cacophony of opinions that erupted in the Warring States period with its "Hundred [Theoretical] Lines"; it was hardly coincidental that the desire to transcribe and propagate the Five Classics intensified in response to the intellectual ferment resulting from increasing interstate military and cultural contacts. In China, as in so many other cultures, venerable traditions were set down in writing when masters disputed meanings.

States, no less than the adherents of Confucius, had a clear interest in establishing written texts for authoritative works: written texts are easier to control than sayings attributed to charismatic teachers.* Consequently, the first recorded attempts to impose state control over the dissemination of texts—including those associated with the Five Classics corpus—date not long after the establishment of centralized empire under the First Emperor of Qin (known to many as Qin Shihuangdi, r. 246–210 BC). The first ruler ever to succeed in unifying the whole of the territory then considered civilized (see the accompanying map), Qin Shihuangdi was not averse to co-opting certain kinds of authority through his patronage of leading teachers. Besides, the First Emperor understood that state-mandated unity would aid in consolidating his power and facilitating communication. To this end, he decreed throughout his empire uniform weights and measures, a single writing system, and a unified road system. Unity in the physical sphere naturally cried out for ideological unity, and the more highly routinized the bureaucratic state, the greater its need for stable precedents. For these reasons, the First Emperor appointed academic advisers to his palace staff.

*Many traditions record a fear that the writing down of texts will distort subtle concepts, ossify a cultural heritage, or open legal loopholes. In early China, as in classical Greece, written laws were also associated with tyrannical governments. Thus, some Ru insisted that the Ru had always objected to the writing down of laws, and they proved their contention by citing the *Annals* for the sixth year of Duke Zhao. Certainly such a fear seems to underlie the legend that ghosts wept at night when the sage Cang Jie invented writing.



Map of the Chunqiu period, after Yu Weichao, *A Journey into China's Antiquity* 1:186.

Among such advisers were several masters appointed on the basis of their knowledge of two texts associated with the Five Classics canon: the *Odes* and the *Documents*. Presumably, then, the Qin imperial library in the palace complex at Xianyang (near modern-day Xi'an) contained some version of the *Odes* and the *Documents*, if not of the *Rites*, *Annals*, or *Changes*, along with a host of supplementary writings on ethics.

Certain classical scholars operating on the fringes of power at the Qin court tried to use their specialized knowledge to win over the ruler to their beliefs. Before long the First Emperor began to complain that the classical scholars exhibited a wicked propensity to "use the past to criticize the present" and to "harp on the past to injure the present." Stung by the classicists' political criticisms and infuriated by the duplicity of the court magicians loosely associated

with them, the First Emperor in 213 BC, on the advice of his chief minister, Li Si, prohibited all "private learning" that had not received explicit government sanction, as well as all "private discussion" outside government circles. Singled out for special condemnation were the historical records of the pre-Qin feudal states, since these records undoubtedly would have contained criticisms of Qin. Still, Qin Shihuangdi's famous edict specifically exempted three important groups of texts: (1) those stored in the palace archives or used by government-appointed academic advisers; (2) those recounting the historical glories of Qin; and (3) technical manuals on medicine, herbs, and divination. All other books in private collections were to be burned. Those found guilty of disobeying the prohibitions were to be drawn and quartered. The severity of the prescribed punishment reveals just how troublesome these classical scholars and their associates had become to the ruler.

The Han, which conquered the Qin in 206 BC, circulated allegations that this Burning of the Books was responsible for major lacunae in each of the Five Classics (with the possible exception of the *Changes*, which was legally exempted from destruction as a divination text). It was said, for example, that the original pre-Qin *Book of Documents* ran to 100 or even 120 chapters, as compared with the early Western Han version of only 29 chapters. Many classicists after the Han victory joined forces with the new ruling house to decry the tyranny of the despotic Qin, for Qin statesmen like Li Si had denounced the classicists as despicable vermin whose theoretical constructs and ethical qualms impeded the machinery of state.

Despite its mythic significance, the Burning of the Books legend does not bear close scrutiny. First, researchers know that several classical scholars who specialized in the *Odes* and the *Documents* were appointed as court advisers under the First Emperor. The edict to burn the writings, the text of which has been preserved in an early historical account, explicitly exempted all writings in the possession of the Qin court academicians as well as all manuals of divination. Therefore, at least three of the Five Classics (the *Odes*, the *Documents*, and the *Changes*) should have escaped destruction entirely. Second, this same record links the draconian prohibition against private learning to a court debate over the advisability of reinstituting the feudal system under Qin. Given that none of the remaining Classics (the *Rites*, the *Annals*, and, if it existed, the *Music* texts) especially glorified the vanquished states of the late feudal system and that neither the *Rites* nor the *Music* contained "histories of a defeated kingdom" (a potentially inflammatory subject), what reason could Shihuangdi have had to consign them to destruction? Indeed, one early Han text associated with the classical master Jia Yi has the Qin burning quite another type of text: the old "wisdom lore" then in general circulation. While it is not implausible that a

newly unified state would wish to foist a unified memory of the past upon its conquered subjects, in essence, the charge that the Qin specifically targeted the Ru canon for destruction probably evolved partly from the Han interest in slandering the defeated Qin, abetted by a misapprehension of the history of classical scholarship. Men of Han, moreover, writing after the Five Classics had been securely labeled Confucian, would have simply assumed that the texts of the Five Classics was anathema to the despotic Qin, whose rulers embraced the rival modernist theories of government. But as no extant text earlier than 100 BC ties the figure of the sage Confucius to any Classic except the *Chunqiu*, there was no reason for Qin's First Emperor, in his annoyance with interfering advisers, to single out the Five Classics for their support of contrary political views because in Qin times those texts simply represented the standard authorities containing old traditions handed down from the past.

Though mass destruction never befell the Five Classics in 213 BC, contrary to Han legend, surely texts of all types were lost when the Qin capital was razed in 207 BC, during the prolonged civil wars that ended the unstable Qin empire. By contemporary reports, the imperial palaces in the capital of Xianyang burned for three whole months. Three months may be hyperbole, but the conflagration was sufficiently massive to consume the entire contents of the imperial library. It was this Burning of the Books, the work not of the Qin government but of antigovernment rebels, that may have prompted classical masters to write down the many traditions hitherto dependent upon oral transmission. The devastation wrought by a single calamity of this magnitude might well have convinced scholars of the need to transcribe more texts for wider dissemination throughout the empire.

Yet even the loss of many texts would not have meant a sharp break in classical studies, for the teaching of ancient learning, prior to the invention of paper or paper substitutes in mid-Han times, perforce depended mainly upon oral transmission and memory. The Qin prohibition against private learning, in force for only two decades, was lifted by the second Han emperor in 191 BC. Many mature scholars would have retained the pre-Qin versions of the Classics in memory, especially the relatively short texts like the *Documents*. The Han histories, in fact, tell of several classical masters like Master Shen of Lu, a specialist in the *Odes*, who quickly resumed their teaching careers, presumably interrupted under Qin, once peace was restored under Han. In any case, the main effect of the Qin burnings (rumored and real) may have been to persuade the Han house to throw its considerable weight behind the task of cultural reconstruction. Not surprisingly, then, as soon as Han rescinded the Qin prohibition against private learning, many Han subjects "rediscovered" (that is, took out of hiding, wrote down, or in some cases forged) private copies of forbidden texts supposedly hidden away or held in memory during the dark days of Qin. As soon as

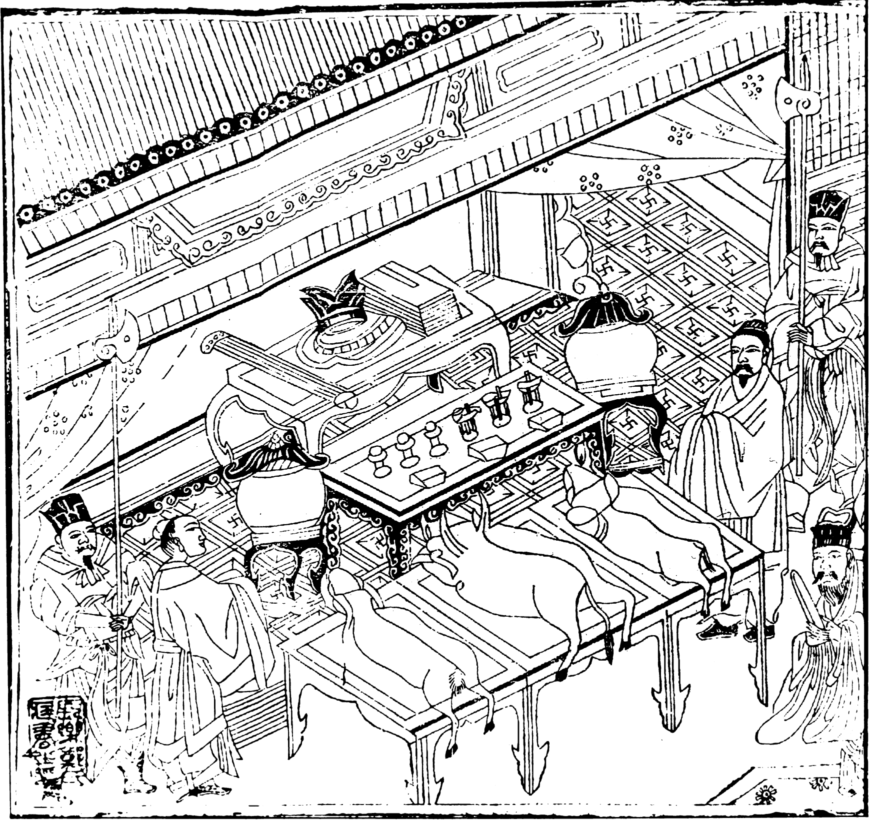


Figure 3. The visit in 195 BC by the Han dynastic founder, Liu Bang, to Shandong to offer sacrifices to the sage Confucius, apparently the first time a Chinese emperor paid homage to the Sage. As shown in the *Shengjitu*, late Ming edition purporting to be the 1444 original, Beijing Library (Rare Book no. 166645), scene 38. After Zheng Zhenduo, comp., *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan*, Appendix A-6.

relative stability came to the new Han empire, specialists in the *Odes*, *Documents*, and *Annals* once again served as academic advisers at the courts of Emperor Hui (r. 194–188 BC), Emperor Wen (r. 179–157 BC), and Emperor Jing (r. 156–141 BC) (fig. 3).

6. THE CLASSICS AS STATE-SPONSORED IDEOLOGY

The single most important prerequisite for the formation of canons is the continual reproduction of the work or works. Given human frailties, the physical reproduction of knowledge in texts helps to ensure that traditions will be transmitted to successive generations of readers. It is easy to forget that the Five

Classics eventually triumphed over their rivals simply because more parts of the collection existed throughout the empire in more copies. Possibly the alternative canons (for example, the Mohist) were no longer copied in sufficient quantity to influence cultivated opinion, since classical learning by Han had already incorporated many of the most distinctive elements from the other theoretical traditions. One early source states that Mencius and Xunzi had been remarkably successful in making the Five Classics learning appear "glossy and appealing" to the men of their time, with the result that there flourished in the last century prior to unification a strong tradition of teaching and learning this corpus, a large part of which had been written down by that time. Unfortunately, little is known about how literary works were reproduced, disseminated, read, and taught in early China, though recent archaeological finds have clarified matters a bit. Some evidence exists that self-identified Confucian circles may have undergone a momentous change in identity during Western Han: whereas in the pre-Qin period the authority of such groups centered on their transmission of archaic rites, whose performance and explication were aided by a few old texts, by late Western Han (with Yang Xiong and Liu Xin) the classicists' authority began to derive mainly from their reputation as faithful keepers of ancient texts. Two anecdotes, the first dated to 208 BC and the second to AD 24, point up the contrast. In the first, the Ru, "spreading out their long robes and carrying on their backs the ritual vessels belonging to the family of Confucius," are heading for the camp of the Qin rebel Chen She, in whose service they intended to enlist. In the second, recorded some two centuries later at the time of rebellions against Wang Mang, the inheritors of the Ru tradition go seeking office only with "their charts and texts"; "from then on," the story tells, "there were none who did not carry in their arms or on their backs stacks of texts, when they gathered like clouds in the capital." This shift in emphasis from authoritative praxis to authoritative texts, already under way in the pre-Qin period, may relate to Emperor Wu's (r. 140–87 BC) decision in 136 BC to elevate the Five Classics to canonical status.

Extant historical records offer little more than intriguing glimpses into that decision. From those we surmise that three discrete acts during the reign of Emperor Wu confirmed the Five Classics as basis for state ideology: Sima Tan's (d. 110 BC) analysis of divisions between six fields of expertise in early China, which seemed to reserve the texts of the Five Classics specifically for the Ru; the statement by Sima Tan or his son that all the Five Classics were either written or edited by Confucius; and Emperor Wu's decree favoring those Five Classics as the official basis for state-sponsored academic activities.

According to the *Shiji* of Sima Tan and his son Sima Qian, it was Sima Tan who, as official archivist for the Han court, had conceived the idea of compiling

a history of civilization from its earliest days down to his own time, a project so ambitious that it could be completed only by his son after Tan's death. The *Archival Records*, as the history came to be known, includes the entire text of Sima Tan's "Essentials of the Six Lines," an essay outlining six competing approaches to political rule. The influential essay not only acknowledged but strengthened the special ties between the Ru and the Classics, even as Sima Tan registered his reservations about the utility of Ru learning. As Sima Tan wrote,

> The Ru consider the Six Classics [that is, the Five Classics plus the *Music*] to be their law and model. But the canonical traditions for the Six Classics number in the thousands and tens of thousands. One could not master their learning over several generations. Nor could a man in his lifetime thoroughly comprehend all their rituals. . . . Still, when it comes to their rituals ranking ruler and subject, father and son, or their distinctions ordering husband and wife, elder and younger sibling, not one of the other Hundred Lines can improve upon them.

It was this same *Shiji*, submitted to the throne about 100 BC, that first asserted (or recorded an earlier assertion?) that Confucius was the author or editor of each of the Five Classics. Perhaps because the textual traditions had evolved so recently from disparate oral traditions, binding the corpus together required the authority of a single notable figure from antiquity.

Sima Tan's ruler, Emperor Wu, soon after his accession to the throne, is said to have conferred canonical status on the Five Classics by making them the basis for "official learning" (*guanxue* 官學) in 136 BC. Thenceforth, some proficiency in one or another of the Five Classics would be required of most candidates for most official positions in the imperial bureaucracy. If the dynastic histories are to be trusted, this momentous decision sprang from very complicated motives. On the one hand, Emperor Wu, noting the enormous prestige accorded princely bibliophiles in previous generations, would have been determined to outdo them all, for as one astute observer remarked of such patron-collectors, "Those who gained the hearts of scholars became powerful while those who lost the scholars perished." At the same time, the young emperor and empress undoubtedly hoped to use imperial patronage to undercut the influence of the powerful faction led by the Dowager Empress Dou; because she and her cronies preferred a political theory called Huang-Lao, Wu, with the backing of the Wei family, would favor the activist programs touted by their rivals, the Ru, who had considerable support in the ranks of the educated. As "authority once achieved must have a secure and usable past," the emperor would benefit from having the Supreme Sage as his patron, all the more since Confucius's teachings were recognized for their superb

"rituals ranking ruler and subject." Aside from such starkly utilitarian motives, the initial decision to favor Ru classicism may have reflected the court's genuine admiration for the bold vision enunciated by one Dong Zhongshu, who imagined radically expanded powers for the Han throne and argued that the continued success of the Han sovereignty ultimately rested on its ability to undertake major political reforms. Han must be put on an entirely new basis: though the dynasty had been founded by force, it would be legitimated by a demonstration of supreme moral authority. The primary task of Emperor Wu, then, should be to show his subjects that the throne repudiated the deeply flawed model set by the tyrannical Qin. As Dong memorialized in 136 BC, "The proverb says that rotten wood cannot be carved nor a wall of dry dung be trowelled. Now in adopting Qin policy, the Han is just like rotten wood and dried dung. Even though it wishes to repair conditions, how can it possibly do so?"

Once the throne accepted the initial premise that major policy reforms were necessary—a premise bound to appeal to an energetic young ruler intent upon glory and restive under the supervision of senior advisers with a pronounced conservative bent—the activists had only to persuade the emperor that the Five Classics associated with the Confucian Way of cultivation were indispensable to any enlarged conception of Han sovereignty. This Dong proceeded to do, according to one Han account, by outlining his theory of the "Harmony and Unity between Heaven and Man" (*Tianren heyi* 天人合一). According to this theory, the human and cosmic spheres are closely linked by a network of sympathetic correspondences resonating within the triadic realms of Heaven-Earth-Human, with high Heaven taking a special interest in the works of the Son of Heaven, the emperor. Almighty Heaven would favor a radical expansion in the powers of the Han Son of Heaven, exempting the dynasty even from the natural forces of historical decay, so long as the emperor acts always in strict conformity with Heaven's ordained program of rites and music as set forth in the Classics. Should the emperor backslide, however, gracious Heaven will issue repeated warnings to its Son in the form of prodigious omens. Such omens should then be interpreted in light of the hallowed texts of the classical tradition, for these texts hold the key to understanding the latent sympathies tying the macrocosm, the world of Heaven-and-Earth, to the microcosmic world of human action. Their superior training in analyzing those Heaven-sent omens, of course, makes Ru classicists the best advisers to the throne on imperial policy matters. And when the Son of Heaven himself embraces the underlying message embedded in the Five Classics, he may hope to commune with Heaven directly. Together, the joint efforts of the emperor and his classicists to promote strict adherence to prescribed practices and doctrines will not only unify and shape society under Heaven's blessing, but also draw in the entire universe (perceived as intelligible

by Dong) to the royal domain. And this was not all: Dong in his enthusiasm alleged that Confucius, as "uncrowned king" and deputy to Heaven, would deign to act as patron for the Han, interceding with Heaven so long as the Confucian Way was upheld by its emperor:

> In my humble opinion, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* seeks the ultimate ends of the Kingly Way. . . . Confucius once said, "The phoenix does not come! The Yellow River does not put forth its chart! It is certainly all over with me!" Confucius' own despair over the situation would have been enough to elicit these signs [indicating his kingly appointment], had he not been of low rank. Now your majesty, honored as Son of Heaven and commanding the wealth of all within the Four Seas, dwells in a position powerful enough to elicit these [signs of Heaven's favor]. . . . Nevertheless, Heaven and Earth do not respond to him. Good omens do not come. Why? Because his suasive moral example has not been established and the masses are not yet upright. Now Confucius wrote the *Spring and Autumn Annals* . . . to set out the text of the "uncrowned king" in it. . . . When Confucius wrote the *Annals*, he measured it above by Heaven's way; he based it below on human feelings. He checked it by antiquity; he tested it by current events.

In response to successive memorials along these lines, Emperor Wu in 136 BC is said to have reserved all the official Academicians' posts at court for specialists in one or more of the Five Classics. Presumably any other court Academicians were summarily dismissed. A decade later, in 124 BC, Emperor Wu founded the Imperial Academy (*taixue* 太學), an institution of higher learning whose course of training was based primarily on the Five Classics. Success in the classical examinations periodically administered by the Imperial Academy, where students reportedly numbered some three thousand by the end of the first century BC, became one recognized route to bureaucratic appointment and prestigious official careers. Tradition hailed these decisions by Emperor Wu as glorious precedents by which the classical texts so recently ascribed to Confucius became central to the political life of the state—all the more readily since the other belief systems that later gained mass followings in China (principally religious Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Nestorian Christianity) said comparatively little about the requirements or mechanics of bureaucratic rule. Almost immediately, enviable careers at court were granted those fully conversant with the Classics. Classical learning would begin to be transmitted in a more controlled fashion through the state's designation of prescribed texts, through state rewards for model behavior, through apprenticeships to state-approved Acade-

micians, and through formal participation in a variety of state-sponsored rituals at all levels, including court academic conferences. And, as the culminating revelation in history, the Five Classics could be wielded to further the throne's interpretive monopoly.

Tradition therefore credits Emperor Wu* (and, of course, Dong Zhongshu) with establishing the orthodox pattern governing the relationship between the state and the intellectual, between power and influence, and between politics and culture, a pattern it sees as persisting throughout imperial China. Emperor Wu is said to have determined the content of learning in imperial China, for prior to his time learning presumably referred to the entire complex of Six Arts in which the aristocracy had trained or to the peculiar praxis transmitted through the classic master-disciple relation. Because the nascent civil service examinations begun in the Han period tested a candidate's familiarity with one or more of the Five Classics, the conventional story goes, a new sort of political elite evolved, one whose primary qualification was full literacy. Tied to government service, learning in imperial China would come to mean more than mere cultural refinement or antiquarian practice; it would entail at times the push for programs to integrate personal ethics with pragmatic politics.

For Emperor Wu and many of his successors, however, the primary attractions of classicism would have lain not in any cultural or moral benefits it might confer upon an emerging literate elite, but in the irresistible package of benefits it offered the state in its centralizing efforts. The Ru were famed for their eloquent phrasing, a skill that could be put to use in publicizing the advantages of state policies. Classicism afforded a wealth of precedents, including some that justified a relentless push for the consolidation of state power. Moreover, it attracted a literate group whose members knew how to preserve and transmit

*Historians conventionally speak of "Emperor Wu's decisions" in the same sense in which commentators refer to Nixon's policies. Most historians agree that Emperor Wu was largely under the thumb of the Dowager Empress Dou and her senior advisers until the empress's death in 136 BC. There is a strong possibility that the Wei family, the relatives of one of Emperor Wu's empresses, determined the direction of policy later on in Wudi's reign. Note also that from the beginning, mastery of the Five Classics always presupposed an acquaintance with a far larger corpus of texts, including the works of prominent thinkers and literary figures.

Borrowing Benjamin Elman's formulation in *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), I equate orthodoxy with "that which the late imperial state, represented by the overlapping but asymmetrical interests of the bureaucracy and the throne, publicly authorized and . . . the core of the civil service examination curriculum."

documents and who were also masters of symbolic action and cosmic principles, the miranda and credenda of government. In upholding, rationalizing, and yet subordinating the ancestral clan system with which most of the population identified, state classicism fostered the formation of a highly loyal literate class eager to interpret and adapt government policy. The very "emulation of models" proposed by classical masters—provided that its concomitant emphasis on moral order was downplayed—served as an excellent tool for social control, mandating strict conformity on the part of political inferiors with the announced wishes of their superiors. Still, from an emperor's point of view, favoring the classicists could prove costly, for any marked gain in the classicists' authority could come at the expense of rival thinkers and strategists who were often more ready to strengthen the royal hand. History had shown that proponents of a single authoritative interpretation might effectively challenge the throne on key issues of policy. That explains the marked ambivalence shown classicism by Emperor Wu and his successors. (At one point, Dong Zhongshu himself was sentenced to die, accused of parlaying false doctrines.) Emperors tended to favor classicists only when they perceived the interests of the royal house to coincide with those of their classically trained officials.

Although the later histories stress the monumental consequences of Emperor Wu's decision to reserve certain kinds of patronage for scholars trained in one or more of the Five Classics—so much so that Emperor Wu is principally remembered for this in later history—the Han histories focus less on the edicts of 136 and 124 BC than on his ritual reforms and expansionist campaigns in Central Asia for the purpose of controlling the profitable trade routes along the Silk Road. The Academicians, for example, receive no official notice again until 51 BC, suggesting their lack of influence at court. The early historians, unlike most of their later counterparts, knew that Emperor Wu never fully imposed the state's interpretive monopoly over a closed canon via an examination system or the Academy. It is doubtful that Emperor Wu was ever committed to doing so. For why set up so many opposing interpretive traditions (at least one and usually several for each Classic, for a grand total of up to fourteen competing state-sponsored Academicians' versions of the Way), if absolute political and philosophical unity was the principal goal? Why call for the ancient texts to be stored in secret archives? And why not mandate the continued financial support of specifically Ru institutions, including the Imperial Academy, instead of leaving those decisions to each successive emperor? For without mandated support, sooner or later the official schools would "fall into decay, with cowherds tending cattle and grass cutters gathering fodder on their grounds."

State-sponsored classical learning in Han was never intended to culminate in a complete "victory of Confucianism," despite some modern claims. Hence, the

lack of any orthodox synthesis in Han, let alone a Confucian synthesis, is hardly astonishing. In any period, it would have taken a conjunction of imperial patronage, self-promotion by the literati, and perfect interpretive consensus among classical masters to make the Five Classics the single moral and literary standard throughout the empire, for if, as they say, a dialect becomes a language only when it has an army behind it, then surely an orthodox classic presupposes an entire empire behind it. No such victory could ever have been achieved unless three fundamental conditions had been met: (1) the transformation of classicists into a distinct group having a separate ideology; (2) a clear and consistent articulation of the empire's pressing need for a single ruling orthodoxy, as some later Confucian masters advocated; and (3) consistent and effective state support for specific projects and activities, leading to a notably greater uniformity in thought and in practice than had existed in the pre-Han period. The Han histories give no clear evidence that any of these conditions were met under Han. To the contrary, they portray a world in which even self-identified Confucians are determined "each and every person to have his own mind."

This is not to deny that certain Han thinkers longed to forge something like an orthodox synthesis based on Confucian principles. (Dong Zhongshu and Yang Xiong come to mind.) It is rather to observe that such attempts could not succeed, for several cogent reasons: The pool of professional classicists pushing diverse and self-interested agenda was always so much larger than the pool of committed Confucians. And once most candidates for office became nominally classicists (by virtue of their long schooling in the Classics), an enormous range of thought and activity, some of it not Confucian by any measure, was apt to be introduced into official learning, winning the dual sanction of antiquity and the state. Then there was the fact that the classical traditions contained internal tensions, puzzles, and paradoxes that resisted easy resolution. Most important, for its transformative influence (*jiaohua* 教化) to be accepted by the relatively uncivilized masses, classical theories had continually to adapt to political shifts and local conditions. As some classical masters conceded, "He who differs with the customs of the time will find himself isolated from [both] the lower officials and masses." In the process, the canonical traditions were altered—greatly for the worse, many devout adherents insisted—by their close association with the state. Furthermore, the state was determined to shift priorities among the classical virtues, so that filial piety and loyalty, two virtues not especially stressed in the teachings of Confucius, would be ranked far above humaneness. (The state's reasoning was impeccable: steadfast devotion to the state's interests found its closest analogy in loyal service to the patriarchal family.) For the remainder of the Han dynasty, the Han classicists, whether committed

Confucians or not, would try, but fail, to bring some order to the ensuing jumble of competing readings.

Had a state-sponsored orthodox synthesis been forged in Han, it could never have entirely dominated culture in China in the thousand years between Han and Song, despite the contrary claims of some present-day cultural nationalists. There were so many strands within Ru thinking—not to mention the Daoist and Buddhist teachings—each exerting strong countervailing influences to the state teachings. Even the dominant version of state-sponsored learning in late imperial China (the Cheng-Zhu interpretation) was never fully hegemonic in Antonio Gramsci's sense; its spirit, in other words, never mandated all taste, custom, and religious, political, or philosophical principles. Our perceptions of the imperial examination system, frequently mislabeled as one key component of a Confucian educational system, deserve a related clarification. The examination system became the principal avenue to official careers only in the last millennium of imperial rule, the period from Song to Qing (AD 960–1911). Before that time, upward mobility usually depended far less on the examination system than on family lines and on patronage by highly placed families with connections at court; besides, the early examinations tested literary ability (for example, the ability to compose poetry) as often as a knowledge of the Five Classics. Moreover, the examination system, contrary to common wisdom, was never intended specifically to increase social mobility, a goal the ruling classes expressed little interest in, except insofar as a degree of social mobility might foster social stability. Rather, the examinations were meant to define what kind of education qualified a person for the prestigious job of serving in government. Access to the imperial examinations was open, during most of the period from the Han to the Qing, to almost anyone who could manage to get an education. But for obvious reasons, comparatively few of the truly poor ever rose to high public office in imperial China. Their memorizing of bodies of written literature made the literate elites the virtual embodiment of culture. Thereby empowered, they found it relatively easy to bar from their ranks any unwelcome newcomers.

These caveats notwithstanding, it would never do to discount the monumental (if sometimes unintended) consequences of the imperial sponsorship of classical learning. Two anecdotes drawn from Han literature dramatize these. The first shows Emperor Zhang of Eastern Han meeting with his old tutor Zhang Pu in AD 85, some two centuries after Emperor Wu, and submitting to a lecture based on the *Documents*, while "performing the ceremonies of a disciple." Like the throne's sponsorship of the Five Classics, the emperor's purely formal submission was meant to bolster the strong connection between political and moral authority, considered crucial to legitimate authority. But to some minds this

raised an ominous specter: that the empire's patronage of the Five Classics might limit state power, if committed Confucians sought to curtail initiatives and abuses by quoting the very classical traditions backed by the throne.

A second anecdote portrays another worrisome prospect, for the ranks of career-minded classicists at court included omen interpreters, some of whom were willing to manipulate portents flagrantly for personal political advantage—against the best interests of the throne. As the story goes, Minister over the Masses Zhu Zhang, holder of one of the three highest ceremonial offices at court, was the subject of a critical memorial addressed to the throne by one Yu Xu. The statement charged that Zhu, then over ninety years of age, was too decrepit to perform his job. Learning of the memorial, Zhu screamed at his assistants, "Of what use are such as you who see their master falling but do nothing to prop him up? Remember: 'When the master is in trouble, his men are disgraced!' " Zhu's subordinate, Zhou Ju, then advised him, "Every one of the sage emperors and enlightened kings of bygone days kept astronomical records of the sun, moon, stars and planets, as mirrors of Heaven's warnings. Recently, the planet Mars has exhibited unusual changes. Could you not draw up a letter on that subject to be secretly passed on to the emperor?" Zhu liked the idea, so he ordered his subordinate to draft a fine memorial to the emperor chock full of classical allusions to flatter as well as edify the royal person: "On reading Zhu Zhang's memorial, the emperor was so gratified by [the unctuous tone of] its loyal proposals that he decided that whatever the weakness in Zhu's eyesight, he still wrote a very fine hand. Assuming that Yu Xu had merely built a case against a major official to further his own personal ambitions, the emperor had Yu remanded for trial. Yu was subsequently forced to apologize to the emperor while Zhu Zhang was showered with approbation."* Factor in the self-

*The skillful manipulation of omens to coerce the throne continued without interruption down through Ming and Qing, as when the Ministry of Rites by such means persuaded the undereducated Ming founder to resume the civil service examinations.

Omen interpretations prompted complex questions about the nature of ultimate authority in the empire. Such questions were matters of grave concern to many early scholars, as is clear from one Han anecdote that would have readers consider whether ultimate authority lay in the canonical pronouncements or in the emperor's will. Fan Ying offended Emperor Shun (r. 126–144) by his obvious disinterest in a career at court. The emperor in his fury said to Fan, "I can keep you alive or I can kill you. I can have you honored or dishonored. I can enrich you or impoverish you. Why have you neglected our royal orders?" To this Fan Ying calmly replied, citing the *Analects*, "I received life from Heaven. And it will be Heaven that grants me life to live out my days or sentences me to death. . . . How could it be your majesty that keeps me alive or kills me? I view a tyrannical ruler as my enemy" (HHS 82A:2723).

righteous tone adopted by many Ru moralists and one sees why the more independent-minded Chinese emperors—Emperor Wu among them—were often inclined to discredit or ignore whichever classical sayings were apt to prove inconvenient or disruptive of state power, despite their loud professions of boundless admiration for the Supreme Sage, now safely dead. But that is, perhaps, to get ahead of the story.

7. AUTHORITATIVE VERSIONS OF THE FIVE CLASSICS

Historical complexities aside, the decision to reserve certain kinds of imperial patronage for the Five Classics presented their adherents with an immediate problem: how best to choose an authoritative edition for each of the Classics? After all, well into the mid-Han period (first century BC), relatively few editions of the individual texts now called the Five Classics had circulated among the early masters, many of whom, adopting the model of Confucius, relied on informal tutorials supplemented by occasional lectures to pass along their own distinctive traditions to students. After the Han state announced its decision to select candidates to office on the basis of their classical learning, students flocked to recognized Ru masters, demanding instruction. Ironically, the new market value of learning, calculated in proportion to the fame of the teacher, probably increased the potential for serious errors in transmission. One famous anecdote recorded about Dong Zhongshu, for instance, says that "he used to lower the curtains of his room and lecture from within them, his older disciples passing on what they had learned to the newer ones, so that some of his students had never seen his face." In another tale, recorded centuries later, Zheng Xuan (127–200)—the most famous of the Han exegetes—never once encounters his renowned teacher Ma Rong (79–166) during his first three years of study ostensibly under Ma's direction. Such anecdotes suggest that a lack of personal contact between beginning students and their masters was not unusual. (They incidentally highlight the enormous difference between Han scholasticism's propensity to exalt and mystify the figure of the great master and the down-to-earth conversations, relaxed jokes, and individualized question-and-answer sessions used by Confucius himself.)

So long as the Five Classics had been nothing more than receptacles of ancient learning, their uniform transmission, either orally or in writing, was not necessarily a top priority among scholars. But as soon as the Five Classics were seen as essential legitimating documents for the dynasty, representing at once sacred scriptures and political programs, practical concerns demanded the establishment of a single authoritative written recension for each Classic, in part to provide

an objective standard by which to gauge each student's knowledge, in part to fix the teachings and thereby render them more controllable than loose oral traditions. It was equally necessary to disseminate the authoritative written texts as widely as possible in order to promote the values and behavioral modes favored by the state. The very concept of a sacred canon or scripture had sprung from the imperial desire to impose tighter connections between the central state and local traditions of scholarship. Over time, the continual proliferation of public offices increased the demand for coordinated efforts referring to a stabilized, normative set of texts (fig. 4).

Given the nature of language in early China, establishing authoritative texts of the Classics was no easy task. The earliest written texts that we know of had originated in response to the perceived need of the Shang ruling clan from 1300 BC to record their applications to the illustrious ancestors-become-gods residing in heaven. While the script remained in the hands of a small circle of people drawn from the highest ranks of the political-religious elite, who understood the meanings of the written graphs by virtue of their rigorous training in ritual, it could function as a kind of aide-mémoire for that group, who did not always feel the need to differentiate phonetically similar words by the use of graphic radicals. But in the centuries after the collapse of Shang about 1045 BC, the Chinese script came to be ever more widely used for secular purposes by an ever larger and less homogeneous literate population, with the result that significs (also called radicals or determinatives) were often added later by those anxious to distinguish homonyms, near homonyms, and extended meanings of the same character. That early Chinese was unpunctuated only compounded the possibilities for misinterpretation.*

Though the ferocity of the Han scholastic debates over the correct readings of pre-Qin texts was vastly overstated by polemicists in late imperial China, the Han controversy between Modern Script texts, those transcribed in Han-time script, and Archaic Script texts, those transcribed prior to unification in 221 BC, would become so crucial to later self-mythologizing among the Ru that it is worth a short digression to review the facts. A surprising number of modern scholars seem to hold the mistaken impression that enormous caches of genuinely old texts resurfaced early in the Han dynasty, after the Qin prohibition against private books was rescinded in 191 BC. Actually, relatively few texts or parts of texts, genuine or spurious, reappeared in Han

*Much later, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), perhaps the most famous classical scholar of all times, remarked that he would sometimes have to read a classical passage some forty or fifty times to understand some 60–70 percent of the text. See *Zhuzi yulei* chap. 81.

Figure 4. In the premodern period, families that could produce five healthy sons were thought to be blessed by the Lord of Heaven, as this woodblock print suggests. Such families had reason to hope, then, that the family fortunes would be secured by at least one son doing well in the civil service examinations. From *The Graphic Art of Folklore* (Taipei: National Museum of History, 1977).

times.* The most notable rediscoveries reportedly included some material attributed to the *Documents* classic (at least one complete chapter, plus scattered passages and chapter titles), along with the entire texts of the *Zhouli* (*Zhou Rites*) and the *Zuo Traditions* attached to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Despite the small number of texts concerned, the sudden reappearance of multiple texts transcribed in Archaic Script could not but unsettle the academic establishment in Han because it was claimed that the recently "rediscovered" texts in pre-Qin script were genuinely older editions containing "many archaic characters and ancient phrases." Were these texts really old? If so, did their relative closeness in time to Confucius make them more authoritative? (Some, though not all, of the Han scholars rightly discerned that older editions were not necessarily better editions.) Serious scholars, not just career academics concerned for their government stipends, were understandably loath to urge state approval of texts of such uncertain provenance, when the texts transcribed in Modern (Han-era) Script were so much better known. After all, the Five Classics had originally been valued less as a group of ancient texts than as a storehouse of ancient traditions. (For example, Han scholars certainly knew that at least two of the three *Rites* canons had been written down only during Qin or Han.)

Just beneath the surface of such qualms and quandaries over authenticity lay larger political issues, as one might expect of any court-sponsored ideologies. So apt were the Han literati—and their successors into the Song—to conflate

* Other so-called Archaic Script texts were basically the same as the Modern Script texts, except for a few variant characters. Generally there were no more variants between the Archaic and Modern Script versions than among the Modern Script interpretive traditions. Sometimes the Modern and Archaic Script texts differed by the inclusion of a single additional short passage, as in the *Xiaojing*, whose Archaic Script version contained a single passage of 120 characters not found in the Modern Script.

Much of the growth in commentarial traditions, then, was driven less by conflicting interpretations of the Five Classics themselves than by conflicting interpretations of the commentarial traditions attached to the Five Classics. Commentaries sought to reflect the different rhetorical uses to which the same Classic might be put. They also tended to supply three main sorts of information: (a) detailed philological analyses of words and clauses; (b) allegorical explications of passages; and (c) cross-references to other canonical texts. The strong Anglo-American bias in favor of original works as against "derivative" commentaries (inherited from Thomas Hobbes and John Locke) would have baffled many literati in imperial China, as well as the modern Continental philosophers, who have been happy to see themselves working in the school of an intellectual master. But each age in China has registered its protests against unthinking scholarship. In an amusing story recorded by Ji Yun (1724–1805), a ghost reveals that scholars preoccuppied solely "with a mound of exegesis" emit an aura of nasty black smoke, dense clouds, and fog.

canon and commentary that when scholars argued for their preferred interpretations of Archaic or Modern Script texts at court, they were really making implicit assertions about the relative merits of entire interpretive outlooks connected with those canonical texts. The most important of the Modern Script traditions attached to the Five Classics had been completed by the first century BC, in contrast to the Archaic Script textual traditions, which began to be elaborated some two centuries later, in Eastern Han. In the intervening centuries, enormous social and intellectual changes had taken place. As government gradually became less centralized, ethical ideas favoring meritocracy and contingency yielded to those emphasizing hereditary prerogatives and fixed rules. The throne itself exemplified—and so furthered—such impulses; while Western Han thinkers could hardly forget that the wily Han founder, an upstart commoner, had wrested supreme authority from aristocratic Qin, the Liu ruling clan by Eastern Han had held the throne for centuries, so it had grander pretensions to divine right. Meanwhile, with the power of the Han weakening under a series of underage, indifferent, and incompetent emperors, it became ever more difficult to subscribe to Modern Script claims that a deified Confucius had himself conferred his eternal blessing upon the Han mandate.

Han scholars were fully aware of the major inconsistencies between the Modern Script and Archaic Script commentarial traditions. Those who had written the Modern Script commentaries stressed the commonalities between emperor and commoner, in the belief that the same ritual rules bound "everyone from the Son of Heaven on down to the lowest commoner." For example, one commentary to the *Gongyang* began its discussion of the first entry in the *Spring and Autumn* classic with the daring pronouncement, "No one under Heaven [including the emperor] is [necessarily] born to high rank." By contrast, for most Archaic Script proponents it was axiomatic that the emperor enjoyed a unique position by virtue of his patrilineal line. At one point during Eastern Han, for instance, the Archaic Script counterpart to the *Gongyang*, the *Zuo Traditions*, won the court's backing precisely because its adherents persuaded the reigning emperor that their tradition "exalted the sovereign and the father, while belittling the minister and son, reinforcing the trunk while weakening the branches." On the other hand, in denying that a semidivine or divine Confucius had bestowed his specific imprimatur upon the Han experiment, some Archaic Script commentators may well have been considering their self-interest. By the mid–to late second century AD, with the decline of Han, the Archaic Script scholars would have had at least two reasons to dissociate the figure of Confucius from the Han imperium: to ensure the continued validity of the Classics in the future and to command increased respect as protectors of a surviving civilization rather than as lackeys in service to a moribund Han court. To

understand the position of a group of scholars risking much to promote a single group of agreed-upon texts as authoritative guides for private morality and public administration, we need think only of the current impassioned debates over the content of textbooks used in the public school curricula. Reputations and revenue from lucrative official posts, from publishing, and from teaching, no less than the fate of one's culture and the state, were conceivably at stake in early China. (Chapter 3, devoted to the *Documents*, returns to this problem.)

When such debates proved too divisive for the court, the throne would summon scholars to resolve inconsistencies and contradictions within the Five Classics. Indeed, successive courts under successive dynasties convened multiple court conferences whose sole aim was to resolve problems in textual interpretation. Sadly, such court conferences seldom functioned as cooperative exercises by literati well schooled in patterns of deference. One Eastern Han history, for example, shows a classical master, Dai Feng, engaging in the very sort of aggressive competition that violated Confucius's dictum "Gentlemen never compete." At a court audience, Dai Feng refused to take his assigned place. When the emperor asked him why, Dai replied, "None of the Academicians is my equal in explicating the Classics, yet they are ranked above me." The emperor responded by testing those present on problematic passages in the Classics. Finding that Dai did, in fact, know more than the official Academicians, the emperor raised him to a higher office. As it was the custom in court academic conferences that those who could not offer a satisfactory explanation of problematic passages had to cede the mats they sat upon to those with plausible answers, one court conference ended with Dai Feng sitting atop a pile of more than fifty mats taken from eminent scholars whom he had bested.

The dynastic histories relate how all too often the conferences degenerated, as the appointed "Imperial Academicians and their disciples all argued from personal opinion, without adhering to the Ways associated with their scholastic lines." Scholars pushing new ideas usually found it politic to utilize the authority of the Classics, and so they forged new works attributed to the Master or appended explanatory apocrypha to the Classics to uncover the "hidden meaning" in what were then commonly regarded as the "Secret Classics" of Confucius. As one Han skeptic noted, "The average person today holds the ancient in high esteem but looks askance at the new. . . . Today, if writings by new sages were to be taken and labelled as those of Masters Confucius and Mo, then certainly many adherents would express admiration for the works and accept them." Because imperial patronage was always more readily forthcoming for an interpretive line that fit into the framework of accredited theories and thereby wore the aura of hallowed tradition, scholars sought, consciously or not, to couch their ideas safely in the language of the approved commen-

tarial traditions. That is how commentaries and commentarial modes of thinking came to dominate later intellectual history.

The increasing reliance on written commentaries rather than on oral transmission initially seemed to represent at least a stopgap solution to nagging questions about authenticity. Nonetheless, the practice soon created problems of its own. Scholars intent upon making a name for themselves felt a powerful impetus to overinterpret each line in a Classic. And proponents of new ideas found that the voluminous subcommentary format afforded a conveniently safe cover; under the pretense of explaining old texts and their commentaries, new ideas could easily be inserted into older textual traditions. As a result, within a century after Emperor Wu, commentaries and subcommentaries of incredible length came to be composed for the Five Classics. One Han text cites an extreme case in which a single three-character phrase had appended to it some 300,000 phrases (*yan* 言) of explication. But apparently, it was not unusual for Han commentaries and subcommentaries to go on for hundreds of thousands of characters. By comparison, the entire text of the *Laozi Daodejing* [*Lao tzu's Tao te ching*] is some 5,250 characters long. (As early literary Chinese language is far more compressed than modern English, the numbers of characters must be quintupled to approximate the word length of the Han commentaries when converted to the highly inflected English.)

Such verbosity earned vigorous condemnation. The Western Han master Liu Xin (53 BC–AD 23), for example, asserted that in the good old days of antiquity scholar-farmers had mastered one entire Classic every three years, and they knew them all by heart by age thirty. Nowadays, he continued, even the most dedicated of students needed a lifetime to read the commentaries and subcommentaries on a single chapter of a single classic, so in the end he forfeited any overall understanding of their content. Such protests went largely ignored, however. State-sponsored classicism could never reconcile the bureaucratic desire to treat a particular topic exhaustively with the contrary need, especially of beginners and those outside the academic profession, to distill the heart of the ethical message.

Moreover, the state's need to disseminate texts as widely as possible so as to forge a uniform social morality itself undermined real uniformity. For the greater the number of copies of the Five Classics that came into general circulation, the more the Classics became a kind of common intellectual property, open to wider literate audiences for acceptance, revision, or rejection. Whatever tenuous unity the original Confucian vision may have had in the pre-Qin period, thanks to careful transmission by masters to small circles of adherents, that unity easily dissipated. By the first century AD, texts of all types were to be found in the marketplaces at reasonable prices. The penniless scholar Wang Chong (27–97) is said, for instance, to have "roamed the Luoyang market, examining the texts for sale"

at the bookstalls—texts that he sometimes interpreted in a most iconoclastic fashion. With texts becoming more accessible, the temptation grew for the general public to try to make sense of the Five Classics and their commentaries without the benefit of a long apprenticeship under an acknowledged master. Paradoxically, then, the very attempt to establish a single authoritative edition of each of the Five Classics tended to spawn multiple versions of them, each claiming to be authoritative. Clearly, if the imperial house was to retain, let alone increase, its control over the dissemination of learning in the empire, it would have to take decisive measures to determine which of the variant editions of the Five Classics and attached interpretive traditions to authorize for teaching in the Imperial Academy.

Attempting to curb an increase in variant editions, many Han emperors extravagantly rewarded scholars who carefully "preserved the [approved] interpretive lines." Such measures failed to stem the interpretive flood, for the most vociferous of the polemicists, it was widely rumored, were daring enough to bribe the imperial librarians to tamper with the Five Classics texts themselves. Accordingly, the Han emperor in AD 172 ordered a definitive edition of the Five Classics to be carved on stone tablets at the Han capital, outside the Imperial Academy, so that students and teachers would have a standard to consult for ready reference. Cai Yong, heading the team of scholars, may have labored eight full years (175–83) on that first set of Stone Classics. His efforts hardly brought an end to doctrinal disputes, however, as is obvious from the following lengthy yet partial list of later Stone Classics carved for precisely the same purpose (fig. 5):

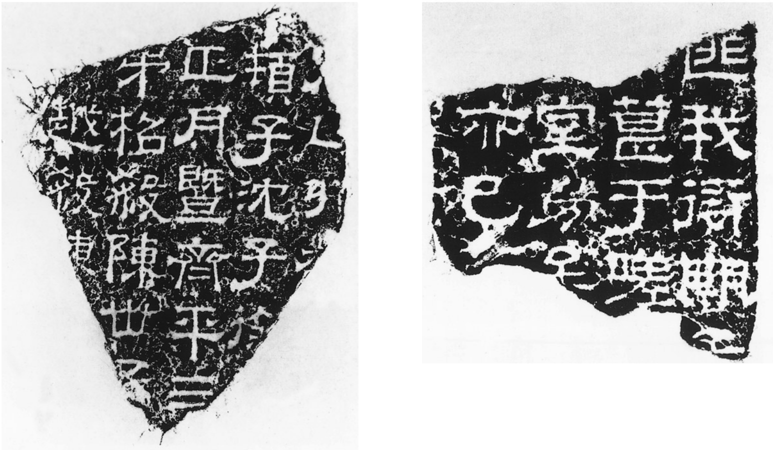


Figure 5. Stone Classics of Han, after Jessica Rawson, *Mysteries of Ancient China* (New York: Braziller, 1996), 215, fig. 117.1–2.

1. an incomplete set on which Hantan Chun worked for eight years (240–48)
2. a set associated with Xi Kang about AD 260
3. a Western Jin (265–316) set of unknown date
4. a Northern Wei (386–534) set of unknown date
5. a Northern Zhou set (completed 581)
6. the Tang Stone Classics (833–37), with repairs and supplemental stones made during the periods 874–80, 907–22, and in the Ming (1368–1643)
7. a Five Dynasties set carved in Chengdu (begun in 938)
8. a Northern Song set carved in 1040–61
9. a Southern Song set carved in 1135–43
10. a Qing set carved in Peking during 1791–94.

Even carved into massive stone steles erected in the capital within sight of the imperial palaces, the texts of the Five Classics could not be fixed or the scholarly debates halted. It was hardly more likely that the publication and empirewide distribution of the *Correct Meanings of the Five Classics* (*Wujing zhengyi* 五經正義) in AD 653, despite all the attendant fanfare, would settle such questions once and for all. Essentially, as long as the Five Classics were in any way authoritative, they would remain important subjects of controversy. Even within the professional academic community, the impulse to invent or manipulate the past—whether deliberate or subconscious—animated those hailed as the greatest of Ru scholars. History records, for instance, that Kong Rong (153–208), a direct descendant of Confucius and a most erudite commentator, extemporaneously invented a legend in utter contradiction to traditions attached to the *Documents*, merely to save the two most powerful men of his time, Cao Cao and Cao Pi, from embarrassment over their sexual peccadilloes; by such means the most renowned classical masters were brought to see that "their freedom [need] not be constrained by classical principles." And notwithstanding the popular image of the Chinese as docile, submissive, and conformist, records culled from early and medieval China attest not only to lengthy disputations among scholarly rivals but also to healthy skepticism toward the state-sponsored canon on the part of those outside the official sector. One anecdote from the Six Dynasties period (317–581) illustrates this point beautifully:

> Lady Liu, wife of Senior Tutor Xie An (320–385), would not allow him to house any favorite concubines in separate quarters, though his lordship, who was very fond of music and female beauty, wanted to set up female entertainers and concubines in separate establishments. Xie's nephews on

> both sides of the family intuited his feelings, so they banded together to admonish Lady Liu to make some accommodation, citing the first and fifth odes in the Classic, said to illustrate the virtues of a lack of jealousy. Lady Liu, realizing what her nephews were about in their criticisms of her, asked them, "And who wrote those songs?" They replied, "The Duke of Zhou." Lady Liu retorted, "The Duke of Zhou, being a man, wrote them for his own benefit, that's all. Now if it had been the Duchess of Zhou, the tradition would never have contained any such words!

The crux of the matter was this: any decree reserving special patronage for certain texts associated with Confucius occasioned dilemmas that the state could never resolve by fiat. For instance, how could the state on the one hand regulate official teachings about the Five Classics and on the other instill deep reverence for the Classics in its subjects? And how to distinguish the relatively few who studied the Classics for their moral-didactic value from the legions of opportunists who did so only to worm their way into government office? Presumably only the first group were trustworthy; those in the second bore watching. That the state failed to devise such a gauge is suggested by the fact that in many periods candidates for public office shunned the most difficult of the Five Classics, which tended to have the longest commentarial traditions, and took the state examinations in a shorter Classic with more concise commentaries, confident that this would not prejudice their chances for appointment. Under Emperor Wu's grandson, Emperor Xuan (r. 73–49 BC), a certain Wei Xuancheng had been appointed chancellor, the highest office in the land, purely on the strength of his classical learning. From that time on, conventional wisdom held that "to leave your child a trunk of gold is less good than leaving him a text of one Classic." Conversely, the lowborn who lacked talent for classical study had to be resigned to living out their days down on the farm. But as soon as classicism was widely seen as a marketable commodity, complaints mounted about poseurs polluting the ranks of government, crowding out better men. One typical early complaint, registered by the Han thinker Wang Chong, alleged that "the vulgar students in the end are unwilling to thoroughly master the Classics, making a comprehensive study of ancient and new. They are preoccupied with mastering the 'chapter and verse commentaries' of one interpretive school, so as to get its general idea."*

*The *Documents* and *Changes* were always considered the most difficult of the Classics, given their archaic language. As the two shortest classics, however, with about twenty-five thousand graphs in each, the *Documents* and *Changes* proved to be perennial favorites among civil service examination candidates; in Ming and Qing, for example, roughly 50 percent of all candidates specialized in one or the other of these two canons.

In addition, there was always a certain ambiguity, if not downright contradiction, in the roles that the Five Classics were required to play for the benefit of the state. The divergence first glimpsed in Dong Zhongshu's early memorials to Emperor Wu became ever more obvious over time: the Classics served both as mundane administrative tools for the running of government and as magical "weaving strands" joining society and the cosmos into a seamless whole. Which function or functions of the Classics should the state value most? In one popular story circulating in late Han, the grand patriarch of Confucian scholars, Dong Zhongshu, courageously repulsed a dreadful shamaness's curse by donning court robes, facing south (the direction of light and enlightenment in China), and chanting the Classics. That these talismanic properties of the Classics were equally available to quite ordinary individuals is shown by another popular tale dating to the end of Han, wherein a certain Zhi Boyi defeats a bloodthirsty demon out to destroy him by reverently chanting the *Changes*. But the magical, even talismanic attributes that the texts of the Five Classics quickly acquired were less likely to be taken up by the sober souls who preferred to locate the center of classicism in a this-worldly ethic, downplaying its profoundly religious character.* All could agree that the Classics taught men how to be both "inner sage" and "outer king," that is, how to govern oneself as well as others. But how were these roles to be defined and which should take precedence, if only one could be achieved? Inasmuch as no clear conceptual boundary separated the Classics from history, literature, or political philosophy, did the Classics simply comprise the highest achievements in those intellectual genres?

8. THE CLASSICS IN THE POST-HAN PERIOD

Despite the occasional imperial patronage awarded the Five Classics and their consequent propagation outside the court, the Han dynasty made notably little progress toward the anticipated Great Peace. Modern historians have suggested even that the tremendous attention devoted to state-sponsored classicism may have itself contributed to the eventual breakdown of the centralized state, insofar as it helped to create a welter of conflicting obligations, all in theory absolute, to ruler and bureaucratic patron, teacher and patriarchal family. Certainly the steady proliferation of competing readings of the Classics (many verging on the bizarre)

*In 1923, nearly two decades after the abolition of the traditional civil service examinations, peasants in Phoenix Village, Guangdong, reportedly still invested the Five Classics with magical potency. Even today, Chinese medical prescriptions may include ashes from the texts of the Classics. Down through the ages, some humanistic scholars have scoffed at the supramundane properties associated with the Five Classics, preferring to associate such wild "superstitions" with the religious Daoists and the Buddhists. But many self-identified Confucian literati have credited the Five Classics with special magical powers.

did little to enhance the general prestige of either the Classics or classicists. Hence the repeated critiques at the end of Han in response to the perceived dual collapse of Han power and Han classicism. Many law-and-order proponents blasted the Han court for failing to impose a greater standardization of thought. Others argued that Ru institutions needed supplementing, if not correcting, by infusions from rival traditions, especially those associated with the Legalists, later Mohists, Laozi, and Zhuangzi. And some thinkers came to the belated realization that the historical process, including the rise and fall of dynasties, could not help but diverge from moral prescriptions. Why not, then, make practical ability, instead of moral conduct or classical training, the main criterion for government posts?

Xun Xu, living just after the disintegration of the Han (during the Wei dynasty, 220–64), acknowledged this restored sense of the conceptual separation of morality from power in his bibliographical categories, which sharply distinguish the classics from both history and political philosophy. Long before the late Song, when the Cheng-Zhu school asserted the primacy of inner self-cultivation over external political rule, the connection between inner sage and outer king had broken down. Thus many came to see official learning as the diligent study of statutes, precedents, and bureaucratic management techniques, utterly without reference to ethical principles. Some literati, in arguments that recall present-day disparagements of academe in the world of Realpolitik, went so far as to assert the total inapplicability of the Five Classics to political life. Perhaps the Classics as history were of little use as guides to the future; perhaps the Classics, after all, represented at best "only the dregs of the sages."

During the so-called Period of Disunion (220–581) following the Han, when no single state managed to control all of Chinese territory, official classicism declined, in part because the monies that the Han state had regularly devoted to civil enterprises, including classical scholarship, were more often diverted to war budgets and also because rulers and scholars alike turned to two religions newly institutionalized in China, Buddhism and religious Daoism. (In this period, the Buddhists produced their own literary canon, whose contents challenged many Han and pre-Han conceptions of society and cosmos, and they introduced forms of social organization hitherto unknown in China, including the celibate monastic system). Some interpretive traditions associated with Han classical learning, lacking the financial support of an imperial court, failed to survive in the cultural marketplace. But historians have tended to vastly overstate the diminution of interest in the Five Classics during this period, many accepting at face value the rhetoric of Han Yu (768–824), who proclaimed that the one Confucian Way had been unrealized in China since the fall of the Han. In AD 241, when Dao teachings were in vogue, for example, the Wei court still conducted a seminar on the Confucian *Analects*, at which an exposition of the

text was accompanied by solemn sacrifices to Confucius's spirit. By such deliberate acts, the Wei emperors reaffirmed the principle that "honoring classicists and valuing learning is the basis of kingly teachings." And it was in AD 489, under the Northern Wei (386–534), that possibly the first temple to Confucius was built in the capital.

By no means, then, did Six Dynasties statesmen and thinkers entirely reject the teachings of the Five Classics. Most sought insight into a unitary Way that embraced Daoism and Buddhism as well, valuing pluralism over ideological purity, just as most of their predecessors had done. Even during the Tang period, the high point of Buddhist influence in China, scholars showed substantial "commitment to the preservation and study of the . . . canons and to official service on Confucian terms." One modern classical scholar, Pi Xirui (1850–1908), whose history of Chinese classicism remains the standard work on the subject, considered it altogether beneficial that Confucian ethical teaching was largely left to privately funded academies led by private scholars. Absent court patronage, the intense study of the Five Classics was left once again to those who prized the texts themselves rather than the expected material rewards.

But the fate of Ru classicism during this Period of Disunion is also subject to a less sanguine interpretation. It may be that the Han exegete Zheng Xuan, one of the few scholars who could plausibly claim to have mastered the entire spectrum of commentarial traditions in Han, had synthesized the divergent interpretations of each of the Five Classics so satisfactorily that no further need was felt for the many separate textual traditions. Zheng had stated his ultimate scholarly objective thus: "By raising one principle, to open up ten thousand items; by explaining one chapter, to clarify many sections, so as to reduce effort and minimize [the need for prolonged] consideration." Never doubting the universal appeal of reduced effort and thought, Zheng was apparently oblivious to the possible negative consequences of his syntheses. But once "the learning of Zheng had unified All-under-Heaven," the classical traditions were impoverished, deficient in the play necessary to fire scholars' imaginations and prevent scholastic ossification. The timing of Zheng Xuan's neatly collated texts and a conservative syncretism could hardly have been worse; they appeared just at the dawn of a period of incessant warfare, forced migrations, and repeated sackings of the old capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an, with their impressive libraries, in AD 189 and 311. In the face of the neglect of so many early scholarly traditions compounded by the physical destruction of so many texts, many classicists, acknowledging the multiple losses, concluded sadly that further developments based in authentic Confucian traditions were unlikely.

By the time the empire was unified under Sui (581–617) and Tang (618–907), the main thrust of classical scholarship was therefore directed at elucidating not

the Five Classics themselves but rather the ethical norms that presumably informed the commentaries—so impossible did it appear to be to bridge the long conceptual and chronological gap separating the later exegetes from the distant figure of Confucius as author and editor. Living in an age when scholastic approaches to the various branches of thought tended in any case to be highly compartmentalized, Kong Yingda (574–648) and his coeditors in the massive *Correct Meanings of the Five Classics* project, aimed only to adjudicate among the extant Han and post-Han commentaries. For each classic they selected what they deemed the most reliable commentary and to it appended their subcommentary, which mainly amplified, "for the most part mechanically," the arguments of the commentary. But between Han and Tang there lay a major difference: for generations of dedicated Han classicists, the compelling motive was personal immersion into the presumably unified moral perspectives of the Classics' sage-authors, whereas for the Tang scholastics seeking to recover and revive Ru learning, it was the classical texts and their prescriptions of duty (*yi* 義) that constituted the primary hermeneutical concern.

Few students of classical learning may have noticed the shift at the time because the Han attempt to find the sages behind the Classics was less an attempt at psychobiography than a search for examples of the ethical orientation of the fully realized person. In general, the ranks of the Tang elite may have contained fewer serious students of the Five Classics than in the heyday of classical learning under Han. Under Tang, as during the earlier Period of Disunion, only one of the groups competing for power within the imperial court, the *shi* 士, measured qualifications for office by its literary training. Moreover, the men of Tang tended to gauge literary ability by skill in composing verse, not by any specialized knowledge of the Five Classics. This would not change till early Song times, when the demise of aristocratic lineages cultivating the polite arts left greater power in the hands of the self-consciously classicizing *shi*; in Song, for the first time, such literati had no significant rivals for political power at court except the emperor himself (and not coincidentally, imperial patronage of the cult of Confucius as model classicist escalated then).

With so many important players gathered into the fold, it is hardly surprising that Song thinkers quickly threw off many of the constraints that the Tang *Zhengyi* approach had exemplified. One interpretive school in Song, which developed out of the teachings of two brothers, Cheng Hao (1032–85) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107), as transmitted by Zhu Xi, claimed to have rediscovered an inner-oriented hermeneutics devoted more to questions of human nature than the old Han learning, which had sought to define shared patterns of sympathetic interaction operating in the political, social, and cosmic realms. From 1241, when it received state sponsorship, through the last three dynasties (Yuan,

Ming, and Qing), the Cheng-Zhu school dominated state ideology. Adherents of the Cheng-Zhu, or True Way Learning, branch of Confucian learning were apt to downplay the two sources of extracanonical authority that were most central during Han, the received classical legacy as it had evolved through history and the physical world of Heaven-and-Earth as precise model for social action. The first, they argued, had long been tainted by heterodox ideas, and the second was somewhat peripheral to the central Confucian task, the attainment of perfect self-cultivation through a contemplative interaction with set texts. Such preoccupations with relatively interiorist metaphysics probably originated in political opposition to Wang Anshi's (1021–86) New Policies and in political despair over the Song's disastrous military situation. Although the new mental style of the Cheng-Zhu masters predicated a startling degree of autonomy from current sociopolitical events, the masters themselves nonetheless intended to exert a considerable influence over those events.

Building upon certain Tang developments in exegesis, the Song masters elaborated something of a new approach to understanding the Classics: (1) a general preference to explicate a Classic by juxtaposing passages within it rather than by reference to additional works within the canon; (2) an inclination to draw freely from many separate commentarial traditions in explaining the text of a given Classic; (3) a propensity to locate in each Classic one or more touchstone passages that presumably functioned as condensations or keys to the whole; and (4) a tendency to attribute contradictions within any one text to either (a) a sequence of authors living in different periods or (b) a single author's decision to adjust his replies to address the varying concerns of different audiences. In Han times, all parts of the Five Classics were accorded immeasurable value, even if certain passages proved eminently more quotable than others, but now the Classics were to be viewed on the model of anthologies, whose selections might vary in worth.

Armed with these general interpretive principles, the leaders of the True Way Learning posited the ability of each literate male to interpret the Classics with intellectual independence, following, of course, long years spent in intensive moral self-cultivation under the guidance of a True Way Learning master. In some ways, then, this dominant strain in the movement represented a revolution comparable in kind,* magnitude, and scope to the Protestant Reformation.

*I say "in kind" because the desire to return to the pristine core of the canonical texts, unencumbered by exegetical traditions, reflects the same impulse to effect untrammeled communication with the Ancients. Thus Zhu Xi urged his followers to discard the Han commentaries on the Classics, but five centuries later, when Zhu Xi's own commentaries had themselves become encumbrances to the desired direct insight, Zhang Dai (1597–1679) in his *Encounters with the Four Books* urged readers to put aside Zhu Xi's commentaries.

Whereas Han Confucians had considered a thorough grounding in the exemplary sage-kings' traditions the best possible preparation for practical political action in an ever-changing world, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and his followers sought to elicit directly from their texts a set of eternal ethical precepts that would lift them entirely out of the realm of change. And whereas Han Confucians had sought to bring together in a comprehensive whole all of the startling insights proposed by various thinkers in the pre-Han period, thinking that "all roads led to the Dao," Zhu Xi and his followers, following Han Yu, desired to locate in history the single, straight line of the correct Confucian Way conveyed directly from the heart of one Confucian sage to that of another; by this process, they hoped to strip away faulty accretions stubbornly adhering to what they saw as the greatest of all teachings. (It is hardly coincidental, then, that with respect to the contents of the Five Classics, "no one before him [Zhu], and none after him, has uprooted the authenticity and authority of so many works." Zhu Xi considered some of the *Odes* less than properly elevating; he doubted half the standard text of the *Documents*, the so-called Archaic Script chapters; and he dated the *Rites Records* to a time many centuries after Confucius.)

Just as the Protestant Reformation focused on select portions of the Bible, Zhu Xi's three-part educational program (see below) elevated the Four Books over the Five Classics. Believing that a thorough knowledge of this small group of ancient materials would serve students better than a nodding acquaintance with the lengthy Five Classics, Zhu advised his students to engage in deep rather than broad reading, lest they draw unorthodox conclusions when faced with an overwhelming amount of material. Zhu further warned his disciples not to mistake mastering details with mastering the text: "Not the places where you have questions, but rather the places where you have none: that is where you should focus your energies." In essence, Zhu Xi was determined to fix a program of study to help students avoid the two most common scholastic errors: the tendency to subscribe uncritically to long-held interpretations and the countertendency to cling to one's presuppositions, however idiosyncratic. Zhu Xi therefore asked committed students to (1) read less and recite what they read until it became absolutely familiar to them; (2) turn the text continually over in their minds; and (3) apply it in their lives. (In this program, Zhu Xi borrowed freely from the Buddhists, who continually recited sutras in order to internalize their meanings.)

Zhu Xi preferred the Four Books to the Five Classics for at least three other cogent reasons besides their relative brevity. First, the Five Classics emphasized good rule, whereas the Four Books were more concerned with personal self-cultivation. Zhu held self-cultivation to be unquestionably the first step along the ancient "Way of Yao and Shun." Though he affirmed the transformative

influence of moral virtue and the deep affinities between the person and society, Zhu considered that only a strong priority on self-cultivation would eventually ensure a better-governed world. Second, the Four Books, far more often than the rest of the Five Classics, dealt with psychology, human nature, and metaphysics. It was essential that these topics be developed if the new ethical teachings were to satisfy members of the elite long accustomed to the Chinese Buddhists' sophisticated discourse on the connections between original mind and the universe, which had already been adopted by leading proponents of institutional Daoism. Third, dedicated scholars over the ages had often been unable to discern in the Five Classics corpus a coherent vision of the world and a single, unified message. Zheng Xuan had gone so far as to trace the same scholarly frustration to the Sage-Master Confucius himself: "Since the subjects and meanings of the Six Arts [here referring to the Six Classics] differ so much from one another, Confucius worried that the Way might fall apart, with future generations unable to grasp its basic essence." As centuries of debates focused on inconsistencies in the Five Classics had resolved little, why not seek a new path out of an age-old problem?

A curriculum based on Zhu's beloved Four Books undoubtedly eased the students' lot. Being more recent and less terse than the Five Classics, the Four Books were easier to read. Also, they had all been composed within a shorter span of time (late fifth–second centuries BC), making them more coherent and more intelligible to most beginning readers. One famous classical scholar in Japan, noting this, recorded his suspicions about Zhu Xi's motivations in promoting the Four Books in notebooks dating to 1717:

> By the time Han Yu made his appearance in the Tang, . . . writing had undergone a great change. Then came the two Chengs and Zhu Xi, admittedly scholars of great stature, yet nonetheless unacquainted with the archaic language. Unable to read and understand the Six Classics properly, they showed a preference for the "Doctrine of the Mean" and *Mencius* because these texts were easy to read. This is how such . . . writings came to be mistaken for the true expression of the Way of the Sages in its original form.

Although the famous classicist Gu Yanwu (1613–82) cast no such slur upon the founders of the Cheng-Zhu school, he likewise alluded to the considerable effort required just to read the Five Classics corpus and its resulting unpopularity among students: "With competitive fellows who want to establish a reputation quickly, speak to them of the Five Classics and you'll find that they are unwilling to study them." Most Ming scholars, for example, when faced with

the many interpretive problems presented by the Five Classics, simply resorted to the Four Books for their explications.

Inevitably, such an emphasis on the Four Books provoked a reaction, so that by late imperial times many of the finest scholars were once again working to understand the "subtle phrasing" of the Five Classics texts via their Han and pre-Han interpretations. One of the first notable signs of the concomitant retreat from the Four Books in favor of the Five Classics came in late Ming, when some scholars urged that the Great Learning and Doctrine of the Mean chapters be returned to their original status as chapters within the *Rites Records* text. Such proposals implicitly challenged the legitimacy of the Four Books as an independent corpus representing the supreme distillation of the fundamental message faithfully transmitted by Confucius from his paragon, the Duke of Zhou. Proponents of Han Learning accused Song Learning of an overpreoccupation with personal morality grounded in metaphysics and a corresponding failure to address pressing issues of statecraft and scholarship. Their complaints, which continued during the Qing period (1644–1911), were acknowledged by the state in changes made to the examination system in 1756, changes that put the Five Classics on a more equal footing with the Four Books. The revived interest in the Five Classics was not always apparent outside elite academic circles, however. Arthur Smith, an early missionary fluent in Chinese, reported in his *Village Life in China* (1898), "It is a strange fact that one occasionally meets schoolmasters who have never studied anything beyond the Four Books, and who therefore know nothing of the Five Classics,—an outfit comparable to that of a Western teacher who should only have perused his arithmetic as far as simple division!"

Over time the corpus called the Five Classics had risen from its original non-canonical status to the status of official scripture in 136 BC, only to be reduced, some thousand years later, to secondary canonical status. And although the Han Learning scholars' advocacy of these texts in late imperial China excited interest in the Five Classics in some quarters, it could not save the corpus from serious decline. By the turn of the twentieth century, the Five Classics had become an attractive target for a new set of reformers protesting the perceived conservatism and elitism of the old society, in large part because such a high level of erudition was required just to read them. In 1912, the very first year of the Republic (1912–49), formal study of the Five Classics was promptly dropped from the prescribed national studies curriculum. And by 1930, most colleges and universities in Peking had canceled such courses as "The History of the Confucian Classics" and "General Survey of the Confucian Classics." As the course of classical learning in twentieth-century China is the subject of the final chapter in this book, I note here only that modern scholars of Chinese classicism seem to have absorbed many of the prejudices common to the

Cheng-Zhu followers of late imperial China and the May Fourth reformers. For example, the eminent sinologue William Theodore de Bary, in a book devoted to the Oriental Classics, makes no mention at all of the Five Classics (only of the Four Books), to all intents and purposes ignoring the first fifteen hundred years of Confucian classicism.

9. EXEMPLARY FIGURES

As we have observed, the classical Way was by no means synonymous with the Confucian Way. In order to appreciate the special commitments undertaken by those dedicated to the Way associated with Confucius, three short biographies of famous classicists will show the main concerns holding that imagined community together through history: a dedication to improving state policies so as to "aid the king" and "educate the people"; a preoccupation with certain rites associated with transmission of the ancient Way; and a belief that the study of past events could illuminate present predicaments. Fundamental to each of these was the equation of moral excellence with the cultivation of self and others; ideally, through the joint exercise of *jingyi* 經義 (canonical principles) and *zhishi* 治事 (managing [practical] affairs) humans might come to realize "the perfect out of the finite existence of humankind." Such concerns with governance, ritual, and history did not necessarily predispose a committed classicist to political or social conservatism. In their attempts to realize the standard of moral excellence demanded by Confucius, ethical classicists were just as likely to propose reformist, even radical programs designed to "reanimate the past." Neither did such concerns predetermine the personal choice between the partly competing priorities of internal self-cultivation versus the improvement of society through benevolent government. They only ensured that the polite arts, including book learning, would always be thought the means to, rather than the end of, the good life.

Any selection of exemplars is bound to strike some as arbitrary, but three men are treated here because of their lasting influence over history: Han Yu, the Tang prose master who urged that minds clouded by the foreign religion of Buddhism return to the classical teachings of ancient China; Wang Yangming (1472–1529), whose theory of "unity of knowledge and action" challenged the very premises of state-sponsored Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy; and Kang Youwei (1858–1927), the religious reformer and political iconoclast whose peculiar vision of Confucius as religious savior demanded the rejection of nearly half of the "Confucian" Classics. (Readers particularly interested in the subject of classically trained women might start with, *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, Tseng Chi-fen's *Autobiography of a Confucian Woman*, and *The Sage and the Second Sex*, listed in Suggested Readings.)

Han Yu

Han Yu is best known today in two capacities: as an advocate and practitioner of a literary prose style modeled on the "patterns of antiquity" (*guwen* 古文) and as a tireless promoter of a specifically Chinese Way, which he regarded as inherently superior to that of the "foreign" religion of Buddhism. Determined to transmit aspects of the antique culture, Han Yu is usually perceived as the central conservative figure bridging pre-Tang intellectual trends and those of later imperial China. But Han Yu, at least in his early, idealistic years, before disillusionment and disappointed ambitions set in, never claimed the conservative mantle. He preferred rather to present himself as no particular respecter of persons or conventions: "My [only] teacher is tradition. . . . It matters neither whether one is rich nor poor, old nor young. Where the tradition lies, there my teacher is."

Though Han had been a precocious child, reciting the classics by the age of six, he was thirty-six or thirty-seven years old before he began to make his name by his political and ethical positions. A stickler for regular bureaucratic procedures and a staunch opponent of bureaucratic corruption, Han Yu was progressing slowly but steadily up the ladder of success at court, when by a single audacious act that he later came to regret he nearly ruined it all. Early in AD 819, the emperor ordered members of the court to venerate a relic of the Buddha for three days at the palace; the relic was thereafter to be displayed for the public at various temples in the capital. Han Yu promptly sent a memorial to the emperor, asking him to rescind the order. The memorial was less than tactful. Portraying the preservation of the empire as a monumental contest between civilization and barbarism, it argued that the relic should be destroyed, lest the Chinese emperor show himself to be a mere servant of a barbarian, the Buddha. Moreover a bone, as it partakes of death, might kill off the emperor in the absence of proper exorcisms, and Buddhism has no precedent in China, nor does it support filial piety.

Anticlericalism was common enough among late Tang literati, even among those who were adherents of the Buddha in their private devotions, but Han Yu certainly went further than most when he publicly denounced not merely the evident abuses perpetrated by wealthy and powerful Buddhist institutions but also the fundamental character of Buddhist teachings. For Han, the true excellence of classical teachings lay in their presumption that self-cultivation could occur only in the real world of political and social action, not in the seclusion of the monastery. But the emperor was so infuriated by Han Yu's memorial that he considered condemning him to death. Thanks to the inter-

cession of patrons and friends, the sentence was commuted to exile. One year later, a general amnesty allowed Han to come home and resume his bureaucratic career.

Perhaps because of that near catastrophe, in later life Han Yu distanced himself from his earlier anti-Buddhist, anti-Daoist positions; he even ceased advancing some of the educational ideals for which he had been celebrated. His final years saw Han appointed director at the Imperial Academy, a job somewhat isolated from the main political arena. There his official attitude toward the capital's educational institutions proved so thoroughly conventional as to be in conflict with his unofficial opinions on teaching. He declared blandly that the examination system should encourage the broad humanistic training that was likely to supply a firm moral foundation. He also wanted candidates for office to demonstrate their consistent concern for the welfare of the populace. Still, there were remnants of the old firebrand left. In court debates, he tended to side with those factions determined to root out separatist movements, for Han believed that Confucius had written the *Spring and Autumn Annals* classic to clearly demarcate the cultural boundaries between the Chinese and the "uncivilized."

All too often portrayed simply as forerunner of the orthodox masters of late imperial China, Han Yu was distinctly a man of his times. He placed greater value on sublime literary expression and high office than on scholarly activities or introspective metaphysics. He enjoyed his drinking bouts. Indeed, his sly sense of humor and his playful quips sat better with his contemporaries than his pretensions to sagehood. (It surprised none of them that he composed a poem entitled "Ridiculing the Snorer.") But even the serious advocates of True Way Learning had to acknowledge Han Yu's contribution to their rethinking of Confucian tradition. For Han was one of the first after Yang Xiong to insist upon Mencius as the foremost disciple of Confucius in place of Xunzi, whose writings had been far more influential up to his time; also, despite his celebrated opposition to certain Buddhist practices, one of the first to popularize a new style of exegesis modeled on the traditions of reading the Buddhist classics, the style that would later be adopted by Zhu Xi (see above). Add to this Han Yu's advocacy of the *guwen* "archaic" literary style, which embodied the hope that a return to antique models might restore the moral perfection and political puissance attributed to the empires of antiquity, and it is easy to see why many late Confucian masters considered Han's writings a turning point in the history of Chinese thought. Thus in AD 1084, Han Yu was officially recognized as a master of the Way, and his spirit tablet placed for worship at the Confucian temple in the capital.

Wang Yangming

For most of his adult life, Wang Yangming pondered with rare single-mindedness one of the central puzzles of the moral life: the nature of reality as it relates to knowledge and action. Confucius and his early followers—in contrast to the Buddha—had averred that the human faculties, including the senses, are reliable tools in the service of human development; that the phenomenal world is real and apprehensible enough to true insight; and that humans can attain the Good not by detachment but by an ever-greater attachment to human society and cosmic norms. The Cheng-Zhu synthesis, enshrined as state orthodoxy from 1313, suggested that a person's best path to moral understanding lay in the thorough investigation of material things and events (*gewu* 格物), which afforded a basic knowledge of the unseen cosmic principles (*li* 理) that could "extend" (*zhi* 至), by further speculation, to the moral (fig. 6).

Wang Yangming, as scion of a reputable scholarly family, was trained in the Cheng-Zhu tradition, but early on he put to the test Zhu Xi's assertion that cosmic principles were to be discovered in every tree or blade of grass. With a friend, Wang spent seven days in intensive contemplation in a bamboo grove, after which he fell dangerously ill. At first, Wang was unsure whether his inability to apprehend cosmic principles resulted from insufficient virtue or from a defect in Zhu Xi's axiom. Over time, however, he came to reject outright Zhu Xi's recommended course of "investigating things," in which "the principles of things and the mind remained dual," and to resist its implicit abstract intellectualism that required perfecting knowledge and words before taking ethical action.

Despite his disdain for conventional learning, Wang took the examinations and passed them at the highest level, the *jinshi*, in 1499, after which he was appointed a minor court functionary. In 1506, he submitted a strongly worded memorial protesting governmental abuses, a particularly unexpected act in view of Wang's relatively low status as junior secretary. As a result, Wang was imprisoned, publicly flogged, and exiled to the malarial mountains of distant Guizhou. In despair, he had a stone coffin made, before which, filled with a sense of the urgency, fragility, and ephemerality of human existence, he practiced the quiet sitting associated with devotees of Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism. Eight years in exile proved an inadvertent gift, for one night while meditating Wang came to the realization that values and commitments are not external to the self but part of the very structure of our beings. Recalling Mencius's formulation that "the ten thousand things are all complete within me," Wang reasoned that "knowledge and action are one," meaning that moral understanding and right social practice are indivisible. One does not know (that is, correctly value) a

Figure 6. "Wang Yangming contemplating the bamboo," from *K'ung tzu: On the 2540th Anniversary*, 207.

specific moral act unless one feels compelled to act on it. Real goodness may be achieved only by unrelenting efforts to care selflessly for others, efforts that required an unflinching moral courage.

Recalled from exile after eight years of intensive practice, Wang had a chance both to test his newfound convictions and to teach by personal example when he was appointed governor in 1516 over a large area in southern Jiangxi overrun with bandits and rebels. To restore social order, Wang used every means at his disposal: the newest military strategies and the most advanced weaponry in the field, together with strict controls over the civilian population to prevent enemy infiltration. As governor, he also instituted local schools and village compacts in order to engage the local people. Within three years, the area was pacified. Wang was transferred to a new post, where he quashed a local rebellion under the Prince of Ning. His brilliant success in that undertaking nearly proved to be his undoing, for certain court factions, anxious to claim credit for the victory, questioned his pacification methods, his failure to make the pro forma declaration giving credit for victory to the capital powers-that-be, and hence his basic character. To these experiences, which helped Wang realize the inherent difficulties of knowing when and where and how to act, he responded by redoubling his efforts to discover within them the path to sagehood.

During the period 1521–27, Wang committed himself to teaching groups of disciples his most important insight: that the basic substance of the mind was formed slowly by unremitting moral effort consisting of caring for others; that the highly educated mind did not, in other words, contain more innate awareness of the ultimate good than that of an ignorant commoner. The Confucian Way once more—as articulated by Confucius himself—was not to be a privilege or polite art reserved for the literati, but a way of acting open to all humans with the requisite courage and vision. Determined to have all men strive simultaneously for both inner sageliness and outer kingliness, Wang and his disciples promoted a kind of muscular Confucian teaching that envisioned the full integration of all intellectual, spiritual, and physical activities as the first step toward the perfection of self and society; in this they pushed in effect for a virtual return to pre-Qin ideals, though their sayings were often couched in Buddhist vocabulary.

Wang spent the last two years of his life working to pacify a tribal rebellion in Guangxi and Guizhou. Exhausted by public service, Wang died in January 1529 while on his way home from a successful military campaign. After his death, many honored him as a witness to the Confucian Dao, though others excoriated him for "false learning" that allegedly broke with the Ancient Way of the Sages. Wang's condemnation of pedantry and scholasticism offended the classicists prone to such literalism; his reduction of the basic Confucian teachings to the single phrase "apply one's [acquired] knowledge of the good" (*liangzhi* 良知) implicitly deni-

grated the elaborate theorizing of many thinkers. As a result, Wang's loyal supporters were unable to defuse the animosity of his fiercest detractors, some of whom went so far as to hold him responsible for the downfall of the Ming in 1643 on the grounds that Wang's influential teachings were empty, heterodox (that is, beholden to Chan Buddhism), "hot-blooded," even "mad," and conducive to the worst kind of self-indulgence. It is hard to square this accusation with Wang's twenty-eight years of practical service as an effective local administrator, tactician, general, and teacher. In 1584 Wang's merits were recognized, and a memorial tablet was erected to his spirit in the capital Confucian temple.

Kang Youwei

By his own self-promoting accounts, the charismatic Kang at long last was thrust into the position of national prominence he so richly deserved when he gained unprecedented influence over the young Guangxu emperor (r. 1987–1908) during the period of the Hundred Days Reform (16 June–21 September). Faced with an unceasing barrage of imperialist assaults on China's territorial integrity, Kang allegedly persuaded the emperor as a "self-strengthening" measure to issue a series of edicts committing Manchu rule to a vast array of policy initiatives inspired by Kang's thorough acquaintance with foreign models, initiatives that would have required a complete revamping of the dynasty's chief educational institutions, a reorganization of its military, rationalized administrative procedures, and rapid capital expansion in agriculture, commerce, and industry. Though Kang in 1898 was by no means as influential, as knowledgeable, or as radical in his politics as he later claimed, there is no doubt that the ambitious "scholar-celebrity" Kang ran afoul of the relatively conservative coalition of powers behind the Manchu throne that included the age Dowager Empress Cixi Taihou, the chief ministers, and the Manchu princes. As the Reform alerted the coalition to the speed with which the most ambitious reformers had evolved in their thinking from "barbarian affairs" to "foreign affairs" to "current affairs," the coalition panicked, fearful lest Manchu sinecures be lost and the dynasty's authority weakened. Accordingly, the emperor was placed promptly under virtual house arrest, and orders went out to execute Kang Youwei and other activists accused of multiple acts of treason: beguiling the innocent with talk of "protecting national China but not the great Qing"; playing into the hands of rival foreign powers during a time of grave national crisis; and conspiring to murder the emperor or members of his court. More fortunate than five associates and his younger brother, Kang narrowly escaped with his life, then wandered with a price on his head in exile until 1913, seeking to convert to his way of thinking Chinese residing in Europe, America, Japan, Hong Kong, and Penang. Kang then was able to return home to spend most of his final years in

China, where he was still at the center of controversy—decried as an archreactionary rather than as radical reformer. Swiftly moving political events had in 1912 toppled the Qing dynasty and brought the Republic of China into being, but Kang remained outspokenly loyal to his ideas of a constitutional monarchy. Unknown to the political revolutionaries, however, Kang was sketching plans for an incalculably more revolutionary world than they could ever imagine: a utopian Great Commonwealth that would unite all the world in a single democratic state of perfect gender, class, and age equality guided by Confucius's chief virtue, developed human kindness.

Trained in the practically oriented Qing (1644–1911) Modern Script school, the youthful Kang Youwei had reacted to the imperialist presence in China, with its gunboats and missionaries, by concluding that only a complete reconceptualization of relations among the monarchy, the classical tradition, and "Western learning" would enable China to remain "at the center of world evolution." Reinventing tradition, Kang came to portray Confucianism as the dominant religion in China, occupying a position comparable to that of Christianity in Europe and America. Confucius was to be transformed into a Savior, first for the Chinese people and ultimately for the entire human race. According to Kang, Confucius, having received from Heaven a direct revelation concerning the future, had set himself the task of writing—not editing—each of the Five Classics, in order to ensure that each Classic contained the "hidden message" (*weiyan* 微言)* that the whole of humankind would inevitably (if gradually) progress through successive stages of institutional reform until it attained an era of complete harmony and equality in which all things and relations would be held in common. In this final ideal state, contemporary institutions, including the secular state, would fully be imbued with the spirit of *ren* 仁, which Kang understood as the Heaven-sent capacity to recognize one's kinship with all the "ten thousand things" of the cosmos through empathetic social interaction. The world could confidently expect to approach this futuristic Great Commonwealth of unparalleled moral autonomy, egalitarianism, and material abundance in three discrete stages Kang located in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: the present era of Chaos, the succeeding era of Increasing Peace, and the final era of Great Peace. By the time of the Great Peace, the world community would have transcended all those particularistic distinctions and boundaries that give rise to human suffering, including gender and racial biases, to form a federally organized and democratic universal state. To demonstrate that countries in the West were tending toward the exact same Way, Kang loosely equated *ren* with

* That was Kang's idiosyncratic rendering of the binome usually understood as "subtle phrasing."

universal love, utility, and enlightened self-interest, arguing that *ren* inclined human beings to make the most socially productive choices over the long term, thereby achieving ever-greater human happiness. The Chinese government must therefore do its part to hasten this healthy transformation of world institutions by establishing Confucianism as the official state religion. For once official evangelizing missions had been sent abroad to propagate the Confucian message and worship of the immortal Sage, a reinvigorated China, "restored" to religiocultural parity with the foreign powers crusading under the banner of their "heretic faiths," would then be braced to resist the imperialists' aggression and to undertake a cultural renaissance better adapted to Chinese ways.

To account for what he perceived as China's current backwardness along the universal path to perfection, Kang offered an explanation. By adopting the Modern Script versions of the Classics during the Warring States and Han periods, China had embraced the most advanced and civilized spiritual heritage in the world at that time. But in late Western Han (206 BC–AD 8), Liu Xin, corrupt ally of the dastardly usurper Wang Mang, passed off a number of forgeries he had written as canonical scriptures in order to further Wang's bid to seize the throne. Those forgeries gained credence as the Archaic Script texts and, being included in the Five Classics, naturally obscured the original revelations transmitted from the Sage. Once China's spiritual preeminence was lost, its competitive edge over other nations followed. Derailed from the True Way, China became increasingly backward relative to other nations, so that many Chinese had mistakenly come to assume the inherent superiority of Western cultural models over the Chinese.

Reactions to Kang Youwei's ideas and to his undeniable charisma varied dramatically. At the height of Kang's influence, Liang Qichao (1873–1929), his foremost disciple, praised Kang, portraying him as a "volcanic eruption and a hurricane," a virtual Martin Luther of Confucianism. Liang Shuming (b. 1893), often called the "last Confucian" in treatments of the Republican era (1911–49), said that the idea of a Confucian church made him "nauseous," even if Liang essentially concurred with Kang's belief that the special genius of Chinese culture lay in its early grasp of the absolute value of "personal disinterestedness."

These three famous classicists, so dissimilar in their beliefs and actions, suggest the variety that has marked classical traditions from the beginning. Confucius himself had most admired two disciples who could not have been more different in their virtues: the bookish Yan Hui, "who had but to hear one part in ten in order to understand the whole" and who despite his wretched poverty "was capable of occupying his whole mind for three months on end with no

thought but that of goodness"; and Zeng Dian, who expressed the desire "at the end of spring, to go with thirty newly capped youths and forty-two uncapped boys to perform the ritual lustrations at the River Yi, take the air at the Rain Dance altars, and then go home singing." (From the example of Zeng Dian no less a figure than Wang Yangming had concluded that the Master's "teachings are not so restrictive or difficult to endure. Nor do they mean that people should assume the appearance of a rigid, strict schoolman.") Certainly the Master, when asked his fondest wish, had replied with utter simplicity, "In dealing with the aged, to be of comfort to them; in dealing with friends, to be of good faith with them; in dealing with the young, to cherish them." Dedicated adherents of the Way of the Ancients knew that exact imitation of the past was neither practical nor desirable, for noble virtue, as one authoritative text stated, does not "necessarily rest in one principle alone." Each person's efforts to achieve the Way necessarily represented a distinctive response to the unpredictable turns that life takes. Though this central teaching of the Classics was lost to vulgar classicists preoccupied with the trappings of culture, like-minded friends and teachers engaged in mutual criticism and encouragement could help the would-be sage keep firmly to the path of moral virtue.

* * *

In spite of steady advances in the study of the archaeology and history of ancient China, we still know little about how the Five Classics came into existence. Clearly they were the heterogeneous products of various oral and written traditions that flourished over time notwithstanding social upheavals. In the long process of canon formation, those responsible for the actual compilation and editing of particular texts may have done their best to obscure their identities, as they believed the texts to have a transhistorical value in themselves. Relatively late in the process, in response to conflicting scriptural traditions and repeated acts of physical destruction, the decision was made to collate a single authoritative version of the entire corpus, though agreement on such a version was never destined to last. And even after the state elevated the Five Classics to canonical status in 136 BC, it took centuries for the collection to become truly canonical in the sense that its teachings were reflected in law and considered binding by most of the literate population. By that point, in the Tang and Song periods, there were fewer debates over questions of authenticity, for many found it unthinkable to challenge the basic authority of texts hallowed by such a long tradition. Still, disagreements about the proper moral applications of canonical passages to daily life continued, for each new generation and each reader had to try to establish the relevance of a given Classic to a variant context. If they were now most often read in light of standard readings of the Four Books, the Five Classics were far from static entities. The interpretations attached to them

at any one time mirrored larger changes in Chinese society and state, no less than personal concerns. Chapters 2–6 in this book will therefore address the central question, What did readers see in these Five Classics, that the texts remained so powerful throughout imperial history in China?

Some modern scholars assert that the Five Classics really have little or nothing in common—a position that needlessly exaggerates problems in interpretation, for the Five Classics as a group brilliantly articulated a number of core cultural assumptions in early China. Standing outside the tradition, one can see that inconsistencies and contradictions within the Five Classics, no less than the variety of topics and approaches, insights and analogies, allowed the canon as a whole to continue to perform many disparate functions for many minds over many centuries. It was also fortunate that such cryptic texts as the *Changes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* came to be included in the canon when more systematic treatises were excluded. Only texts sufficiently laconic in style and mysterious in message could inspire endless constructions appealing to successive generations of later exegetes, each of whom came to the texts with specific personal preconceptions about sociocosmic order.

Why study the Five Classics at all? Some readers will want to examine the early culture of the Pacific Rim, given its increasing economic and political impact on their lives today. And some, no doubt, will be led to this corpus by reawakened fears of the Yellow Peril, occasioned by an ever-present awareness that "from the Western point of view, China is simply the other pole of the human experience." American history buffs may be drawn to consider the Five Classics because of the Founding Fathers' abiding interest in things Chinese and in Confucius.* Even today the justices of the United States Supreme Court hear oral arguments in a chamber whose frieze depicts Solon, Hammurabi, Lycurgus, Augustus, and Confucius as the most eminent lawgivers in ancient history.

But a reconsideration of the Five Classics is called for less by global politics or American history than by contemporary debates in ethics. There have always

*West European and American Enlightenment figures were full of praise for China, seeing it as a state wonderfully free of regional wars, religious persecution, and undue influence by an established Church—as proof positive, in other words, of the moral power of natural human reason. Under the influence of late-eighteenth- to early-nineteenth-century philosophy, beginning with Montesquieu (especially in German Idealism under Hegel), China came to be viewed as a backward Oriental Despotism populated by unthinking slaves. Max Weber popularized that view, seeing in the "relentless canonization of tradition" the chief barrier to rationalism, when he might well have viewed it instead as a carefully framed attempt to locate the normatively valid. After all, the classically trained Carsun Chang, as China's first ambassador to the United Nations, was significantly involved in the wording and content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

been two standard ways to consult a classic: ask what it meant to the author and his immediate circle of readers, a question whose answer largely depends upon philology and history, or ask what it can mean to readers now, if they make the effort to meet the Classic halfway, allowing some measure of accommodation and adaptation. The first approach tends to treat the Classic as a closed book that learning can partly open; the second, as a universal text from which new meaning can spring ad infinitum. A synthesis of the two approaches—careful research into classical learning on the assumption that it has much to teach us—has the blessing of tradition in China, where the Classics by definition were capable of speaking to all types of subjects in all kinds of situations. Certainly, over the course of imperial history in China, the Classics were brought to bear upon a host of conditions quite unimagined by their authors. In this determination to bridge the gap between philosophy and history, such adaptations of the older readings may prove truest to the spirit of Confucius, for it was the Sage himself who instructed his followers to think how best to "make the ancient new" [that is, relevant], using ancient models to inspire necessary innovations.

In keeping with this maxim, chapters 2–6, each of which is devoted to one of the Five Classics, attempt to balance two tasks: to situate the Classic within the context of its early history and to treat one or more major themes in the Classic in such a way that may engage readers today. Each of those five chapters follows the same format: opening remarks on the Classic are followed by a section devoted to questions of dating and authenticity, which in turn precedes a broad discussion of one or more ethical themes associated with the Classic. Readers with no particular interest in the technical issues of textual history should feel free to skim or skip the sections on dating and authenticity, which are clearly marked. (The notes, which are posted on the Internet at www.yale.edu/yup/nylan, are likewise meant primarily for the advanced reader in that they often refer to texts written in foreign languages.) But the discussions of ethical themes that follow are essential to arrive at some sense of early classicism. Ways of knowing and acting effectively are the subject of the *Odes* chapter. The relation of past to present identity comes up in connection with the *Documents* chapter. The transformative effect of the rites is discussed in the *Rites* chapter. With the *Changes*, the main topic is the sages' duty to act selflessly in behalf of others. Traditions associated with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* inevitably raise questions about the power of language and of exemplary models.

Of course, to assign one basic topic to each of the Classics is somewhat arbitrary, given that these same themes and related ones thread through the whole corpus of the Five Classics with their commentaries. (The *Odes* and the *Changes* are equally preoccupied with types of knowing, for example, though they define

the parameters of knowing somewhat differently.) My main concern has been to resist the twentieth-century call to reduce the Classics to mere history likely to be of interest only to antiquarians. For that reason, the seventh and final chapter, on the use and abuse of Confucian classicism in modern China and beyond, assesses the general impact that political events in modern China have had upon the current appreciation of early tradition.