Conceptualizing authorship in late imperial Chinese philology
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Conclusion

Scholars who lived during the Qing 清 dynasty (1644-1912) hardly ever engaged in metaphysical speculation.[340] Instead, they focused their energies on philology, sticking to verifiable issues such as pronunciation, historical details and character glosses. This does not mean, however, that abstract interpretations did not play a role in their work. On the contrary, interpretation shaped Qing scholarship to its very core. It was only the *act* of interpreting that often remained conspicuously absent from their writings.

Qing scholarship was marked by a distrust towards received texts. While this distrust was partly due to the awareness of the long history of transmission behind every text, the most destabilizing factor was the concept of authorship prevalent among scholars. Scholars had the ideal that the originator of the content was identical to the author – a narrow concept of authorship. However, as they were well aware, most early Chinese texts were written by followers of the originators, an insight that was at odds with their concept of authorship. Qing scholars considered these followers to have possessed agency, and they expected the quality of the teachings to decline as they were transmitted over time. They did not think of the texts they were able to read in the 18th century as necessarily in accordance with the teachings of the originator. Only a thorough critique of the received text could potentially ascertain to what extent a text reflected the views of the person to whom it owed its name. Scholars thus proposed changes that would have brought the text more in line with the narrow concept of authorship. This concept remained the ideal, while everything else was treated as a deviation from the rule.

Even though Qing scholarly practice was based on philology, scholars relied on purist interpretations that centered on one assumption: The sages of antiquity never erred in ethical matters. Together with the narrow concept of authorship, this gave them both the motivation and the means to question the authority of the received texts and propose changes to bring them more in line with their own expectations. Scholars developed many arguments of philological merit that, to varying degrees, served this goal.

Against the background of the prevalence of the narrow concept of authorship and the tendency to defend purist interpretations of the past, how did Qing scholars read pre-imperial texts? Through a case study of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), I have shown in my first chapter that the

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[340] Cui Shu's 崔述 (1740-1816) impatience with scholars who wasted their time on "human nature and fate" (*xing ming* 性命) is symptomatic in that regard; he makes clear that they should instead have looked at the real manifestation of the Way, namely the actions of Confucius. See chapter 1, part 3.

potential presence of the disciples' voices stimulated attempts to separate their input from the genuine wisdom of their master, Confucius. For Qing scholars who attempted to salvage the authority of the text, challenges came from two sides: First, the narrow concept of authorship drew attention to the then-accepted understanding that second-generation disciples of Confucius had put the text together, which gave rise to the question of how much genuine "Confucius" the *Analects* actually contained. Second, some of the stories could be understood in ways that Qing scholars could not bring into accordance with their idealized image of Confucius. In their responses to the challenges, Qing scholars destabilized the received text of the *Analects* by developing increasingly fine-grained theories of its messy textual history, while their image of Confucius as a flawless sage was reinforced. Scholars labored to identify individual contributions to a text without reflecting on the concept on which their work was based.

In the second chapter, I addressed criticism of the narrow concept of authorship. Some scholars argued that it was inappropriate for the study of pre-imperial texts, and relied on an inclusive concept of authorship instead, which acknowledged as valid every contribution to a text during its long process of creation. While this formulation did not attract much attention at the time, the discussions about the *Venerated Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書) show that scholars were sometimes willing to defend a text based on this principle. Some scholars adopted the inclusive concept of authorship to generate a more accurate picture of textual production, yet at the same time, others also used it to defend the value of disputed texts.

On its own, the concept of authorship that Qing scholars applied does not suffice to explain the directions their work took. In general, they used the narrow concept to dissect received texts, and the inclusive concept to keep them intact. However, which texts they chose to dissect and which to defend depended on other variables, such as the status of the text and the acceptability of its content. The concept of authorship was a central factor, as evidenced by the attention Qing scholars paid to the question of responsibility for a text, but it was not the only one. The weight of tradition that kept existing interpretative frameworks in place and the period-specific social conservatism were decisive for how scholars approached a text. This interplay between concept and interpretation characterizes Qing dynasty evidential studies.

The third chapter addressed the centrality of the author-figure. Through an analysis of the imagined relationships between historical figures to whom text were ascribed, I argue that for Qing scholars, a text became legible through its author. They needed the figure of the author to

anchor a text within intellectual history; without it, the lack of pedigree and the concomitant shadow of uncertainty were constant threats to the status of a text. The biographical data that scholars assembled reflect this purpose: The more important scholars considered the text to be, the more sympathetic their portrayal of the author. This biographical data, especially the author's interactions with and links to other historical figures, was an expression of how scholars read the text.

The fourth and final chapter took a step back from the discussions about author ascriptions and author figures to study the consequences that the more stringent application of the narrow concept of authorship had on scholarship in general. While they did not draw the connection to authorship, contemporaries realized, often with alarm, that some scholars gave themselves a lot of leeway in their handling of received texts. Philology came to be seen as a threat to the textual heritage. To what extent do theories of scholarship and intellectual controversies reflect the growing instability of texts that the narrow concept of authorship had caused? The urge to exercise caution when amending the received text permeates many of the discussions about evidential scholarship, and controversies regularly erupted over the justifiability of amendments. Both developments make clear that contemporaries were fully aware of the corrosive potential inherent in evidential scholarship. Critics blamed their colleagues' preconceptions and over-confidence in their own judgment for the transgressions. These apprehensions mirror the prevalent use of the narrow concept of authorship.

Beyond the way in which it functioned in Qing philology discussed so far, the question arises when the nimbus of the founding figures began to fade and reference to them no longer sufficed to hold the works ascribed to them together. In this dissertation I have described the effects of the narrow concept of authorship when it had already reached the academic mainstream. How it got there, and how this relates to the rise of evidential studies more generally, is a question that remains open for future research.

Some comparative observations on authorship in early modern philology
In their introduction to a recent volume on authorship in East Asian literatures, Schwermann and Steineck have argued that the concept of the author as "an omnipotent source of the text

and its meaning" is "firmly embedded in European classical modernity."[341] The legal[342] and intellectual[343] developments that accompanied the birth of the modern author in Europe are well documented, and to my knowledge, no comparable research on China exists. However, it is necessary to distinguish between authorship in literary theory and authorship in philological research. While these two aspects are not mutually exclusive, literary theory usually contemplates the relationship between the two known entities of text and author, whereas philology faces a different set of challenges. It might be the case that it first has to establish such a relation, that little about the author is known other than his name, or that the text is of uncertain pedigree. Philology has to deal with at least one unknown in the equation. Yet, it shares the assumption that the author is the principle source of meaning, an aspect that is not unique to Europe, as this study has shown.

The author that allegedly died in the 20th century was the conscious subject,[344] the inspired genius celebrated by the romanticists. Whether or not rumors of his demise are exaggerated, this figure indeed originates from early modern Europe. However, the author as an organizational principle of the textual heritage is both older and more universal than that, though not timeless. Grasping its role in textual scholarship and its transformations, both globally and over time, would enhance our understanding of the trajectories along which philology developed by showing how disparate phenomena relate to this one concept. The concept of authorship is not the only factor that shaped early modern philology, but it functioned as a catalyst that caused, or at least intensified, other tendencies. A theory of authorship in philology is required to complement the theories of the author proposed for literature. At this point, I can only offer some preliminary observations based on the results of this study and the findings in the secondary literature on Europe that point towards a theory of the author in early modern philology.

Looking at European philology in the late 18th century, a tendency to historicize the author-function emerges. While the human authors of individual books of the Bible received heightened attention as scholars inquired into their historical circumstances, the figure of

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[341] Raji Steineck and Christian Schwermann, "Introduction," in idem (eds.), *That Wonderful Composite Called Author. Authorship in East Asian Literatures from the Beginnings to the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1.

[342] Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market. Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), esp. 35-55.

[343] Jochen Schmidt, *Die Geschichte des Genie-Gedankens in der deutschen Literatur, Philosophie und Politik, 1750-1945. Bd. 1: Von der Aufklärung bis zum Idealismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985).

[344] For a thorough critique of this narrative, see Seán Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author. Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 3rd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008 [1992]), 10-14.

Homer began to dissolve once Friedrich August Wolf (1758-1824) considered the possibility that he had never existed.[345] Viewed at the most abstract level, European philologists separated compilations dating to the early periods of recorded history into their components and analyzed them accordingly. Their "authors" were no longer a monolithic entity, but a series of historical agents. These agents were authors in the narrow sense, and their individual experiences mattered. Philologists oscillated between a critical acceptance of revised author ascriptions (Bible) and their dissolution (Homer).[346]

Textual scholarship of the mid-Qing worked along very similar lines. Textual critics questioned the link between a figure and the compilation bearing his name and either looked towards individual contributing actors or the dynamic process of textual accumulation to explain textual production. References to founding figures such as Confucius or Zhuangzi 莊子 no longer sufficed to bind together multi-layered works that may have needed centuries to take shape. Depending on the level of detail in the surviving historical records, the writer needed to be grasped as an individual agent in order not to disappear in the fog of history. Scholars required him to be an individual, of flesh and bone, endowed with verifiable agency; otherwise the author was of very limited use to them.

Judging from these parallel developments in early modern European and Chinese philology, scholars historicized and, to some extent, de-mythologized the role of the author-figure. A certain spiritual inspiration that the human authors of the Bible and the followers of Chinese masters may have received could no longer explain what they wrote; only history could. The received text *as text* with all its peculiarities in language, style and content posed a challenge to the accepted author ascription that philologists attempted to deal with by specifying and thereby modifying the image of the author. While such modifications were often based on historical knowledge, elements of myth-making remained part of the picture. Whether it was the flawless

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[345] James Turner, *Philology. The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014), 115-119. For Wolf's claim, see Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer, 1795. Translated with Introduction and Notes by Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E.G. Zetzel* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 70.

[346] It is worth noting that Wolf was a contemporary (and pen pal) of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), the author of some of the most fiery celebrations of the creative genius, such as the poem "Prometheus." Broadly speaking, the emphasis on the individuality of the author in literature gained traction at the same time as philologists moved towards the individual that had shaped the text, be it actual author or later transmitter. Whether or not the one influenced the other, and by which mechanism, is a question that has to remain unanswered for the time being. It is intriguing, however, that in what would appear to be a parallel development, Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹 (early 18th century-1763/64) inserted a *sphragis* into his *Dream of the Red Chamber*. With this, contrary to the common practice of anonymity, he inscribed his authorship into the first chapter of the work: "Later, Cao Xueqin perused it in the Studio of Mourning Red for ten years, editing it five times, (…)." See Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber) (Taibei: Zhiyang chubanshe, 1999), 3.

moral character of Confucius or the depiction of Homer as a primitive bard,[347] scholars brought assumptions to the texts that were clearly indebted to contemporary intellectual trends. In whatever direction these assumptions took researchers, their roots lay in the need to delineate in detail who the author was.

As I have shown in this study, the concern for more detailed knowledge about the author of a text can be linked to the destabilization of the text and attempts to bring the text in line with purist ideals. For both developments, the narrow concept of authorship served as the catalyst. As Michel Foucault has pointed out, "the author-function does not work in a universal and constant manner in all discourses."[348] In order to clarify how the author-figure functioned in different philological traditions, it is necessary to trace in detail in which contexts scholars evoked it, and how they used it to make sense of the text. Beyond the institutional, social and wider intellectual factors (such as interpretation) that shaped philology in its development, highly abstract concepts informed the practice of textual scholarship.

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[347] Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, 8-14.
[348] Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" in idem, *Dits et écrits 1: 1954-1969* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 799.