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Stumm, D.

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DOUBT

CHALLENGING AUTHORITY THROUGH TEXTUAL CRITICISM IN 18TH-CENTURY CHINA

Daniel Stumm

Daniel Stumm is a PhD student at Leiden Institute for Area Studies. His thesis is about concepts of authorship and forgery in 18th-century China.

One of the tasks of philology, the study of the text as a written document, is to confirm or disprove the authenticity of a work. Since authenticity often is a pre-requisite for authority, textual criticism can become a ‘sharp weapon to respond to enemies’¹ in debates about the authority of a text and the figure associated with it, as it happened in China during the 18th century. This article takes a closer look at the subjective aspects of a discipline that is usually considered objective, arguing that because philology could do much to lend authority or take it away, scholars of the 18th century were willing to make it work in their favour.²

Introduction

For Chinese scholars who lived during the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644-1911), the classics³ were authoritative because they depicted the golden age of sagely government. They were the remains of a well-ordered society that had existed in high antiquity, roughly between 1100 and 500 BCE, and in them one could find the ways to restore this order.⁴ The texts were thought to date to that period as well. Therefore, they had gone through a long history of transmission. In the Qing Dynasty, when scholars developed an acute awareness of the temporal distance separating them from the sages, this factor became problematic.

This growing historical consciousness can be illustrated through an anecdote about the young Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777),⁵ who later became one of the most famous scholars of this period. Discussing Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) rearrangement of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), a canonical text from the late Zhou 周 Dynasty (ca. 1045-256 BCE), with his teacher, he asked:

‘How much time passed between the Zhou and the Song [宋 (960-1279)] dynasties?’ [The teacher] replied: ‘About two thousand years’. ‘But then how could Master Zhu know that it was like this?’ To which the teacher could not reply.⁶

Besides his critical spirit towards earlier scholarship, Dai Zhen displays here a keen awareness of the historical distance involved. What is most distinctive about Qing scholarship, however, is that the discourse on the classics was concerned with textual questions. Despite some generalisation, it is safe to say that whatever was claimed needed to be backed by textual evidence in order to find attentive ears, and that classical studies tended towards those questions that could be solved through recourse to the text. It was not uncommon, for example, to circulate a short essay solely to explain how a single character had to be understood.

The most effective way to challenge authority through textual studies is the accusation of inauthenticity. A claim of inauthenticity questions the connection between text and supposed author. It thereby aims to render the text devoid of both meaning and value. What constitutes authorship, however, is not so straightforward for ancient texts. In its narrowest sense, predominant today, the term ‘author’ refers to the person who wrote the text; that is, the one who came up with the idea and formulated it. However, for analytical purposes, I propose to understand the author as the originator of the content instead.⁷ This distinction is necessary because the exact nature of authorship remains unclear for many ancient Chinese works even today.

The case of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) can clarify this issue. This text purports to record the words and deeds of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, traditional dating 551-479 BCE). Even if the sayings attributed to Confucius in said work had indeed been uttered by him, the earliest explicit source about the *Analects* states that it had been put together by unspecified disciples from their notes.⁸ Consequently, the creator of the text is not the originator of the content, and this distinction can make all the difference: The authority of the *Analects* depends crucially on the disciples' claim to the faithful transmission of Confucius' words. As disciples, they themselves have only limited authority to bring to this work.

Thus, when scholars in the 18th century reinterpreted ancient texts to make them meaningful for their own world, they had to confront these uncertainties. Making use of the gradations of authority within the text itself enabled them to imprint their own readings back into the text. Textual criticism thus served to override the authority of a text without, however, touching the author.

The works of two scholars will be analysed to illustrate this tendency. Both employed textual criticism so that they could be selective about the content of ancient works and, subsequently, support their argumentation. Cui Shu 崔述 (1740-1816) tried to find the 'true Confucius' that had over time been buried under layers of popular lore and misleading anecdotes. His contemporary Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731-1815) constructed a respectable and profound Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (ca. 4th century BCE) from the raw material collected in the book thought to have been written by him, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Both Yao Nai and Cui Shu were not part of the inner circle of the academic elite of the times, but employed the same tools. Both, furthermore, were fairly typical for their time in that they gave up their official career to devote themselves to scholarship. They sustained themselves through teaching; Cui at local schools, Yao at academies.

Cui Shu on Confucius: Challenging the authority of the text

Cui Shu was a scholar who became posthumously famous for his scepticism concerning ancient history, especially towards the existence of figures said to populate Chinese high antiquity, and his keen perception of the vicissitudes of textual transmission. In his *Record of Searching what is Trustworthy in [the History of] Confucius* (*Zhu-Si kaoxin lu* 洙泗考信錄), he applied his analytical skills to the different stories told about Confucius in various sources and tried to synthesise them into one coherent narrative.⁹

Cui's treatment of the *Analects* is of special interest due to the towering authority of this text in imperial China.

One of the recurring themes in the *Record* is Cui Shu's utmost respect for Confucius. In one of the more glaring eulogies, Cui describes him as a sage and the creator of culture, without whose teachings mankind would regress to the level of animals.¹⁰ Cui was much more sceptical, however, about the reliability of those who transmitted Confucius' words and deeds. In his opinion, the *Analects*, though largely reliable, had not been put together by direct disciples of Confucius, but by much later followers. Even though he explicitly described them as capable,¹¹ Cui widened the gap between the text and the master through this analysis. In accordance with his view of transmission as a process of gradual corruption,¹² Cui also stressed how rearrangements of the *Analects* in the Former Han 漢 Dynasty (206 BCE-9 CE) did more harm than good to the text due to the editor's lack of insight.¹³

Cui consequently had plenty of leeway to be critical about the *Analects* without having to question Confucius' status as a sage. Rather, according to Cui's reading, Confucius was a flawless moral paragon. Hence everything in the *Analects* that could take away from Confucius' sagely image was anathema to Cui, and he thus questioned the authenticity of many stories about Confucius. His approach, undeniably circular, can be summarised as follows: Based on a selective reading of the text, an idealised image of the author (understood as the originator of the content) is created, which is in turn used to criticise the text, which becomes the product of mere scribes.

A telling example is how Cui Shu approached a passage that had long been a thorn in the sides of *Analects*-commentators: Confucius' visit to Nanzi 南子, the wicked wife of a contemporary ruler, as alluded to in the scene with his disciple Zilu 子路 that ensued.¹⁴ The story goes as follows:

The Master having visited Nanzi, Zilu was displeased, on which the Master swore, saying, 'Wherein I have done improperly, may Heaven reject me! May Heaven reject me!'¹⁵

One possible interpretation of this terse passage is that Confucius sometimes had to lower his moral standards in order to gain influence: Whereas the *Analects* record occasions on which Confucius walks out on rulers who spend too much time admiring singing girls and too little time ruling their country, in this passage Confucius seeks the company of a woman

who interferes in government. Considering the historiographical trope that it is the wives who bring down dynasties through their influence on the ruler, Confucius does something that is at least controversial. Such an interpretation would furthermore be supported by the reaction of his disciple.

For Cui this was not just a tenable interpretation, but the only possible one, which is why this passage was so unsettling to him. Earlier interpreters of this passage had argued, for example, that Confucius had had no choice if he wanted to gain influence and better the world. Cui explicitly acknowledged these attempts to save Confucius from disgrace and commended their ingenuousness, but declared them futile: No such elaborate theories were necessary since this passage was simply a later addition with no factual basis. Someone who had good intentions, but suffered from a lack of discernment, had placed it there. Cui saw his argument supported by four aspects, pertaining both to the text and the historical background: The passage's position near the end of the chapter raises questions, because in Cui's theory, the bamboo strips on which the text was originally written were prone to break, which is why later transmitters had the incentive to fill those gaps. The appellation used for Confucius (*fuzi* 夫子, master) differs from the way the text normally refers to him (*zi* 子, also master). The improbability of the story told (meeting a woman despite separation of sexes) and the incongruence of Confucius' behaviour when compared to the rest of the text (swearing in front of a disciple) further detract from its credibility.¹⁶

This is but one of Cui's attempts to clean up the chaotic and contradicting lore surrounding Confucius, but it is exemplary for his approach. Cui hearkened back to the authority of textual studies to convince his readers of the spuriousness of this passage. Especially the implicit objectivity of textual criticism lends weight to his argumentation. The terminological analysis of the appellation used indicates that this passage is not of a kind with the rest of the work; not only in content, but also (critically) in language. The knowledge of the textual history Cui displays is meant to explain why this passage got inserted in the first place: Broken bamboo slips created a lacuna that needed to be filled. The evidence adduced, however, was secondary to ideological concerns, as Cui strove to eliminate all tension between different images of Confucius inherent in the text because he considered them a challenge to Confucius' authority.¹⁷

Yao Nai on Zhuang Zhou: Establishing the authority of tradition

The *Zhuangzi* is a dazzling text full of fables about talking animals and skulls, the value of physical deformation and improbable dialogues between mythical figures, butchers, fishermen, kings and sages, to name but a small portion of its cast of characters. It contains, among others, paradox passages on equanimity in the face of death and the limits of knowledge. Tradition ascribes this text to a certain Zhuang Zhou, who is said to have lived in the 4th century BCE.

In Yao Nai's commentary to the *Zhuangzi*, textual criticism is again invoked as a means to ideological ends. In the preface to his commentary, Yao explains that there '[...] certainly are sayings that have been inserted at will later'¹⁸ into the text. A rough guideline given to the readers is that '[...] for the most part, the Outer and Miscellaneous chapters were not written by Mister Zhuang.'¹⁹ Nevertheless, a much more fine-grained criterion can be inferred from the way Yao handles certain passages. There is, for example, one chapter that he finds problematic and dates to a later period, the Former Han Dynasty: 'This chapter ['Ingrained Ideas' (*Ke yi* 刻意)] is of a kind with Sima Tan's "Discussing the Basic Principles of the Six Schools", thus it is a Han text. Yet it still has passages that can be accepted.'²⁰ It can be presumed that this chapter is problematic because of the ideas it contains, but Yao does not elaborate his reasoning.

Not the whole chapter is beyond redemption, since there are qualities that distinguish valuable passages from others – one of these being philosophical depth. Compare the following lines from Yao's commentary:

These words are extremely evocative; they are probably by a master of the Zhou Dynasty.²¹ (Zhou traditionally ca. 1045-256 BCE, i.e. before the Han)

The one who wrote down this passage was a follower of Zhuangzi's students, it is base.²²

In the first comment, the quality of the passage indicates that it must date to an early period, even if it is not necessarily by Zhuang Zhou. In the second one, lack of quality is proof that it cannot have been written by him. This shows that for Yao Nai, the best (most evocative) passages were by Zhuang Zhou, whereas quality declines with increasing distance to this figure. Here, the imagined author functions as a quality standard

However, Zhuang Zhou stood for more than philosophical depth. It is well recognised that genealogical filiations can be used to organise texts into a temporal or hierarchical order.²³ Such a filiation was also established for the *Zhuangzi*. According to Yao, Zhuang Zhou's learning is distantly related to Confucius'.²⁴ Since Yao assumes that they share basic premises, it makes sense to measure Zhuang against Confucius. The result is a completely different perspective on the *Zhuangzi*. When, for example, one reads in an exaltation of the 'great man' that he cannot be lured into taking office, even with material rewards, Yao comments that this 'harms the teaching to the utmost'.²⁵ He may have found this too opposing to Confucius' ideal of using one's talents to bring order to the world, and therefore concludes that Zhuang Zhou cannot have written the passage.²⁶ If the genealogical filiation is brought to bear on the work, it casts doubt on those passages that cannot be explained by it. Taken together with the distrust towards the received text, an entirely different reading can be justified.

Considering the content of the *Zhuangzi*, it would not be difficult to argue that it is actually hostile towards Confucius and his values. However, Yao does not consider this and even establishes a genealogical connection between the two figures. In this respect, the restraint of the commentary, in general not very extensive, is surprising: Yao does not remark upon the passages where Confucius is used as a mouthpiece for all kinds of opinions. Where Zhuang Zhou does disagree too much with Confucius, however, Yao acquits the former with reference to textual corruption.

In Yao's commentary to the *Zhuangzi*, then, two distinct challenges to authority are negotiated. Instead of considering the work a challenge to the authority of Confucius' teachings, Yao suggests basic agreement between them. On the other hand, the authority of Zhuang Zhou, the supposed author, is strengthened at the expense of the text as Yao filters out passages of subpar quality that might detract from Zhuang Zhou the profound thinker.

Yao's textual criticism is based more on ideas and content, and less on linguistic markers. Furthermore, he considers the transmission history not only of the text, but of the teaching before it was even written down. The ability to

define the nature of the transmission history was important because it could justify the manipulation of the text. Even without evidence of the kind Cui Shu gave, Yao invalidates certain passages as inauthentic because since Zhuang Zhou had learned from Confucius, he could not have championed the ideas contained therein.

Similar to Cui Shu's approach, the transmitted text in its present state posed a challenge to its author as he was imagined by contemporary scholars. In order to deflect this challenge, the blame was shifted to the transmission history and incapable editors. The dangerous passages were then quarantined by means of commentary and textual criticism. Whereas ideologically dubious utterances were invalidated in the process, the light of the author who had *not* said them shined even brighter, and, last but not least, his work was more in accordance with contemporary demands.

Making arguments with textual criticism

The awareness that traditionally revered texts may be in a less than pristine state could, at least in theory, become a burden. One conceivable scenario would be that venerated ideas turn out to be later insertions. For people more steadfast in their trust in ancient wisdom, this was not a burden. Rather, that textual history came to figure in discussions about the meaning of the

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texts could become a boon: Not the venerated ideas, but the questionable ones were inauthentic. Those who resumed the dialogue with antiquity were thus able to ignore certain answers they received, and through this selective reading produce classical support for their arguments.

The amount of philological backing for claims of inauthenticity could vary greatly. While Cui Shu marshalled a number of different arguments to buttress his doubts about certain parts of the text, Yao Nai displayed a greater reluctance to do so. What they agreed about, however, was that textual studies were an appropriate tool in dealing with ideological questions. On the one hand, textual studies clearly are relevant because they shed light on the issue of authenticity. Through linguistic analysis, for example, it can be shown that the language does not fit into the time in which the text was purportedly written. This is particularly important for the most venerated texts of a culture. The same approach, however,

is also precarious because it can easily become a tool for interested parties to imprint their reading back into the text. Not that in any of the cases discussed here the passages were actually erased, but such behaviour was not unheard of in earlier times, either.²⁷

Philology undeniably made great strides in 18th-century China, and many important works of textual criticism were produced.²⁸ The implication of this trend in the study of the classics was, however, highly ambivalent. Philologists were not always neutral researchers. Rather, they were guided by certain ideologies. This became especially visible when they joined the discussion about the correct interpretation of the classics, which to them was inextricably linked to issues of textual corruption. Without questioning their own ideological presumptions, they could question the text and make it fit their own ideas more closely.

Notes.

- 1 ‘夫以考證斷者，利以應敵.’ Yao, Nai 姚鼐. ‘Preface to *Uncovering forgeries in the Venerated Documents*’ (*Shangshu bian wei xu* 尚書辨偽序). *Complete collection of Yao Nai’s works* (*Xibaoxuan quanji* 惜抱軒全集). Beijing: Zhonghua shudian, 1991. Print. 193. It should be noted that Yao considers ‘meaning and principle’ (*yili* 義理) even more effective when it comes to convincing others.
- 2 For a similar perspective on European philology, see Grafton, Anthony. *Forgers and critics. Creativity and duplicity in Western scholarship*. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1990. Print. Esp. 92-98.
- 3 Usually, five works are honoured with the title ‘classic’ (*jing* 經): *Classic of Songs* (*Shijing* 詩經), *Venerated Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), and the *Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋).
- 4 Chow, Kai-wing. *The rise of Confucian ritualism in late imperial China. Ethics, classics and lineage discourse*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. Print. 172.
- 5 The convention for Chinese names is: Family name precedes given name.
- 6 Qian, Mu 錢穆. *History of Chinese scholarship of the last 300 years*, vol. 1 (*Zhongguo jin sanbai nian xueshu shi* 中國近三百年學術史). Taipei: Shangwu chubanshe, 1997 [first published 1937]. Print. 337.
- 7 See Baum, Armin Daniel. *Pseudepigraphie und literarische Fälschung im frühen Christentum. Mit ausgewählten Quellentexten samt deutscher Übersetzung*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001. Print. 193.
- 8 ‘Treatise on literature’ (*Yiwen zhi* 藝文志). *Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書). Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962. Print. 30.1717.
- 9 Kai-wing Chow also discusses this work, but he does not pay attention to the role of textual evidence in the verification of the pre-conceived image. See Chow, Kai-wing. ‘An alternative hermeneutics of truth. Cui Shu’s evidential scholarship on Confucius’. *Interpretation and intellectual change. Chinese hermeneutics in historical perspective*. Ed. Tu Ching-I. New Brunswick: Transaction publishers, 2005. Print. 19-32.
- 10 Cui, Shu 崔述. ‘Lower scroll of the essentials of the Record of searching what is trustworthy’ (*Kaoxin lu tiyao juan xia* 考信錄提要卷下). *Works bequeathed by Cui Shu* (*Dongbi yishu* 崔東壁遺書). Ed. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛. Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1983. Print. 18b.
- 11 Cui, Shu. ‘Record of searching what is trustworthy in the [history of] Confucius’ (*Zhu-Si kaoxin lu* 洙泗考信錄). *Works bequeathed by Cui Shu*. 321b.
- 12 Cui, Shu. ‘Higher scroll of the essentials of the Record of searching what is trustworthy’ (*Kaoxin lu tiyao juan shang* 考信錄提要卷上). *Works bequeathed by Cui Shu*. 3a-5b.
- 13 Cui. ‘Record of searching what is trustworthy in the [history of] Confucius’. 284b-285a.
- 14 Makeham, John. *Transmitters and creators: Chinese commentators and commentaries on the Analects*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003. Print. 57f.
- 15 *Analects* 6.26. *The Chinese Classics, Vol. I: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean*.

- Trans. James Legge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893. Print. 193.
- 16 Cui. 'Record of searching what is trustworthy in the [history of] Confucius'. 290b-291a.
 - 17 Cui Shu is not alone in arguing along these lines. His contemporaries Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1727-1814), Yuan Mei 袁 (1716-1797), and Lu Wenchao 盧文弨 (1717-1796) all alluded to the textual history when they discussed questionable passages, without matching Cui Shu in the rigueur of the practical application, however.
 - 18 Yao, Nai. 'Preface and content of *The Meaning of the Zhuangzi, section by section*' (*Zhuangzi zhangyi xumu* 莊子章義序目). *The Meaning of the Zhuangzi, section by section* (*Zhuangzi zhangyi* 莊子章義). Yao Nai. n.p.: n. pub., 1879. Print. *juan shou* 卷首 2a.
 - 19 Ibid. 2.5b.
 - 20 Ibid. 3.1a.
 - 21 Ibid. 3.1b.
 - 22 Ibid. 3.6a.
 - 23 Beecroft, Alexander. *Authorship and cultural identity in early Greece and China. Patterns of literary circulation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. Print. 72-84.
 - 24 Yao Nai is here explicitly following Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824). See Han, Yu. 'Preface to seeing off the blooming talent Wang' (*Song Wang xiucai xu* 送王秀才序). *Collection of Han Yu's works, collated and with commentary* (Han Changli wenji jiaozhu 韓昌黎文集校注). Ed. Ma Maoyuan 馬茂元. Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2014. Print. 292-293. The link is a disciple of Confucius' disciple Zixia 子夏. See Yao. 'Preface and content of *The Meaning of the Zhuangzi*'. *juan shou* 1b.
 - 25 Yao. 'Preface and content of *The Meaning of the Zhuangzi*'. 3.6a.
 - 26 Curiously, though the reasons change, the verdict remains. A recent translation justifies the exclusion of this part because content and context show that it is an interpolation: 'Dit is, te oordelen naar de inhoud en de context van dit hoofdstuk, vrijwel zeker een latere interpolatie, zonder verband met het voorafgaande of het hierop volgende, en is daarom weggelaten.' Schipper, Kristofer. *Zhuang Zi: De volledige geschriften: Het grote klassieke boek van het taoïsme*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Augustus, 2007. Print. 224n16.
 - 27 The case of the 'debauched songs' in the *Classic of Songs* is the classic example. After being declared immoral in the early years of the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), one scholar completely left them out in his edition. See Rusk, Bruce. *Critics and commentators: The Book of Poems as classic and literature*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012. Print. 157-8.
 - 28 See Elman, Benjamin. *From philosophy to philology. Intellectual and social aspects of change in late imperial China*. Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1984. Print.

[illegible]