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What Did It Mean to Be a *Ru* in Han Times?

This paper is not meant to break new ground, but essentially to pay homage to Michael Loewe. All those who have touched upon Han studies must acknowledge an immense intellectual debt to his work. I have had the great privilege of being his student at Cambridge back in the early 1980s while I was writing my doctoral thesis on He Xiu 何休 and the Later Han “*jinwen jingxue* 今文經學.” Along with his vast knowledge about the Han period, he has kept giving me much more over the years: his unfailing support, his human warmth, and wisdom. All this, alas, has not transformed me into what I ought to have become: a disciple worthy of the master. The few general considerations I am about to submit about what it meant to be a *ru* 儒 in the Han period call forth an immediate analogy. I would tend to view myself as a “vulgar *ru*,” as opposed to authentic ones such as the great sinologists who have taught me.

Jacques Gernet, who is also one of them, asked me once half teasingly whether one could actually talk about an existing Confucianism as early as the Han. His opinion was that what is commonly called Neo-Confucianism from the Song onwards should actually be considered as the earliest form of Confucianism. Conversely, in an article on Yang Xiong’s 揚雄 *Taixuan jing* 太玄經, Michael Nylan and Nathan Sivin described the new syntheses of beliefs prevalent among leading thinkers of the Han as “the first Neo-Confucianism,”¹ meaning that “what sinologists call the ‘Confucianism’ of that time decisively rejected crucial parts of ‘Confucius’s Way.’ Its revisionism is as great in scope as that of the Song.”²

I HERE thank the anonymous referees for their critical remarks on my paper and apologize for failing, due to lack of time and availability, to make all the necessary revisions. Unless otherwise stated, all the Chinese sources are cited in the *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 edition (Zhonghua shuju, Hong Kong, 1978), and the dynastic histories in the Zhonghua shuju edition (Beijing).

¹ See Michael Nylan and Nathan Sivin, “The First Neo-Confucianism: An Introduction to Yang Hsiung’s ‘Canon of Supreme Mystery’ (*T’ai hsüan ching*, c. 4 B.C.),” in Charles Le Blanc and Susan Blader, eds., *Chinese Ideas about Nature and Society: Studies in Honour of Derk Bodde* (Hong Kong U.P., 1987), p. 41.

² Nathan Sivin (private communication). This formulation is further explained and illustrated in Nathan Sivin, *Medicine, Philosophy and Religion in Ancient China: Researches and*

Paradoxical as all this may sound, we find here a reminder that the term “Confucianism” (or “Confucian”) may be of doubtful use if it is to translate the only available Chinese word – *ru*. As Benjamin Wallacker has it:

There was (in the Han) a difference between common respect for the past and the recognition of the values of Confucius as its repository and transmitter, on the one hand, and acceptance of the specific values of the *ru*, on the other hand. The *ru* were a partisan group who believed, we must assume, in such articles as the superiority of rites over law, kin relationships over those imposed by the state, man’s innate sense of good and evil over externally dictated norms. ... The *ru*, the Han Confucians, indeed sectarian Confucians, thus remained merely one of several contesting schools to the end of Former Han.³

Martin Kern sees the *ru* scholars as constituting one of the two recognizable scholarly lineages of preimperial China: “The *ju* scholars of Warring States and early imperial times were essentially professionals in the ritual and textual tradition. Their esteemed knowledge, for which they were given salaried positions under various rulers, was independent from issues of any specifically ‘Confucian’ morality.”⁴ According to Michael Nylan’s analysis, there were at least three separate meanings to the word *ru* in Han texts:

1. “Classicist,” meaning one who has mastered the classical precedents stored in ancient texts, along with the performance of antique rites and music;
2. A “Confucian,” defined for the sake of brevity in this paper as a “committed adherent of Confucius’ Way of *jen* and the Five Relations,” typically distinguished by their oppositional stances; and
3. “Government official,” actual or potential (*shih*).⁵

If we admit that there was no clear-cut definition of “Confucianism” to speak of in the Former Han, it still remains a fact that there were, during that period, a number of people who identified themselves

Reflections (Aldershot, Ashgate: Variorum Series, 1995), p. 6, and in Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2002), pp. 47–48.

³ See Benjamin E. Wallacker, “Han Confucianism and Confucius in Han,” in David T. Roy and Tsien Tsuen-hsuei, eds., *Ancient China: Studies in Early Civilization* (Hong Kong: The Chinese U.P., 1978), p. 227.

⁴ See Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), p. 9.

⁵ Michael Nylan, “A Problematic Model: The Han ‘Orthodox Synthesis,’ Then and Now,” in Chow Kai-wing, Ng On-cho, and John B. Henderson, eds., *Imagining Boundaries: Chang-*

as *ru*. How did they get that sense of identity? In opposition to which other categories? How did this self-awareness develop into the distinction between “vulgar *ru*” (*suru* 俗儒) and “true *ru*,” that is, an awareness that this identity had somehow been lost by most and retained only by a few? And whom exactly did the Han literati designate as *suru*? All these questions are beautifully raised and dealt with in Michael Nylan’s article “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue about Their Own Tradition,”⁶ so that my own paper will appear in complementary dialogue with hers.

Already in preimperial times, the tone had been set by Xunzi. In his late works, Xunzi attacked “vulgar *ru*,” who took after the ancient kings in only a general way and who were not the equal of the “refined *ru*” (*yaru* 雅儒) who modeled themselves after the later kings. In chapter 6, “Against the Twelve Masters” (“Fei shi’er zi” 非十二子), Xunzi criticizes the development among the *ru* of a kind of “pharisaic” mentality, coupled with pedantry. In chapter 8 “The Teachings of the *ru*” (“Ru xiao” 儒效),⁷ he draws distinctions between “vulgar common people 俗人,” “vulgar *ru*,” “refined *ru*,” and “great *ru* 大儒.” By contrast with the “vulgar common people, who have no education, lack rectitude and moral principles, and consider wealth and material gain as exalted,” the “vulgar *ru*” have only the outer trappings of dignity (large-sleeved robes) and of culture (*Odes* and *Documents*), but are in fact attached to a comfortable and secure position (“they attach themselves to senior retainers”). Followers of such leading disciples of Confucius as Zizhang, Zixia and Ziyou are labeled as “petty *ru* 賤儒” for caring exclusively about clothes and caps, ornate speech and demeanor, and food and drink.⁸

Xunzi also reproaches the *suru* for their “eclectic learning”: “Their discourses, deliberations, doctrines and theories have no points of dif-

ing *Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1999), pp. 18–19.

⁶ Michael Nylan, “Han Classicists Writing in Dialogue about their Own Tradition,” *Philosophy East and West* 47.2 (April 1997), pp. 133–88. A most recent and thorough survey of the implications of the word *ru* is provided by Nicolas Zufferey, *To the Origins of Confucianism: The Ru in Pre-Qin Times and during the Early Han Dynasty* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003).

⁷ *Xunzi* 荀子 8, p. 88.

⁸ In the same vein, Han Fei zi, one of Xunzi’s foremost disciples, associates *wen* 文 (“patterns of tradition”) with the *ru*, reproaching them with unbalancing the legal system; see *Han Fei zi* 49, p. 344. In his commentary to *Analects* VI, 13, where the Master enjoins Zixia to “behave as a *junzi ru* 君子儒, not as a *xiaoren ru* 小人儒,” the famous Later Han exegete Zheng Xuan takes the word *ru* 儒 to mean “teacher” and consequently understands Confucius’ remark as “Be a teacher of gentlemen, not a teacher of petty men.” This, by the way, finds an echo in Yang Xiong’s *Fayan* which, as Michael Nylan has it, criticizes “the vulgar ‘faithful’ (self-identified Ju who fail to see the true Confucian vision)” for “the present shallow self-satisfaction they take in slavish imitation of the outer forms of ritualized behavior, behavior that they er-

ference with those of Mozi (and Laozi).” Xunzi disdains the *ru* who follow the example of the ancient kings because they are indistinguishable from the Mohists and they “invoke the ancient kings to cheat the stupid and seek a living from them.”⁹ In contrast, the “refined *ru*” and the “great *ru*” follow the model of the later kings, presumably because moral behavior is chiefly a matter of imitation, as Yang Xiong was to word it later: “Confucius imitated the Duke of Zhou and Yan Hui 顏回 imitated Confucius.”¹⁰ This, again, is echoed by Wang Chong 王充: “Now vulgar men like to regard antiquity as precious, but they do not honor the present. They say that the present writings are not as good as the ancient books. Now antiquity and the present are one and the same.”¹¹

Interestingly enough, Xunzi’s criticism of the vulgar *ru* sounds very much like the criticisms against them found in the text of *Mozi*:

They are greedy in matters of goods and drink and are too lazy to create things or to devote themselves to their responsibilities. So they suffer from hunger and cold and are in danger of starving or freezing, but they will not abandon their views. They act like beggars, stuffing food away like hamsters, staring like he-goats and jumping up like castrated pigs. ... When the Five Foods have been gathered, they follow around after large funerals. They take their sons and grandsons along so they can satisfy themselves with food and drink. They need only be in charge of several funerals, and they have enough for their requirements. They rely on the resources of other men’s families to support their dignity and on other men’s fields for what wealth they possess.¹²

This announces the later criticism by those whom Michael Loewe calls the “modernists” in the 81 BC Salt and Iron Debates against both *ru* (identified as *wenxue* 文學) and Mohists:

The *ru* and Mohists, with greedy hearts and dignified mien, roam back and forth with their sophist’s arguments. Their “perching here and perching there” can also be explained by their appetite not being satisfied, for the scholar’s desire is also honor and fame; wealth and rank, the object of his expectations.¹³

roneously believe sets them apart from ‘lesser’ men” (Nylan, “Han Classicists,” p. 152); see in particular *Fayan* 2, p. 5.

⁹ *Xunzi* 8, p. 88.

¹⁰ *Fayan* 法言 1, p. 1.

¹¹ *Lunheng* 論衡 82, p. 279.

¹² *Mozi* 墨子 39, sect. “Fei ru, xia” (“Against the *ru*,” part B), pp. 180–81.

¹³ *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 18, p. 21. Nicolas Zufferey sees *wenxue* 文學 as “an expression which was in all probability an abbreviated form for *wen xue zhi shi* (文學之士) or *wen xue ru zhe* (文學儒者); these literati were clearly *ru*, as is apparent from the general context, and still more

If we take up Xunzi's classification, we find that the *ru* first felt that they had to distinguish themselves from "vulgar common people" "who have no education, lack rectitude and moral principles, and consider wealth and material gain as exalted." The notion that knowledge ranks above birth and wealth was well established in the Confucian tradition by Xunzi's time:

Although a man may be the descendant of commoners, if he has acquired learning, is upright in conduct, and can adhere to ritual principles, he should be promoted to the post of prime minister or high court official.¹⁴

It was only in Han times, however, that the institutional framework for this ideal became functional. In preimperial China, the "expert" (in the broad sense, as opposed to the "manual worker") was most commonly designated by the word *shi* 士. Although its etymology is still subject to scholarly debate, it seems to have originally corresponded to a social category.¹⁵ In the traditional distinction within Zhou society of five categories, the *shi* represented the lowest layer of aristocracy, that of minor officials taking part in the administration of the state, therefore acting as intermediary between the aristocracy and the common people.¹⁶

It was during the transition between the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States that the *shi* began moving upwards to a social status strongly associated with knowledge as an instrument for promotion. The *shi* category then moved towards intellectual "specialization" in that it gained the type of access to knowledge and writing that was hitherto reserved for royal scribes. By Han times, according to Ch'ü T'ung-tsu,

The term *shih*, in its broad sense, included both scholars who had already entered officialdom and the commoner-scholars. Since the

clearly from the chapter devoted to the *ru* (ch. 11, "Lun ru"), in which these literati defended the *ru shu* (儒術) against the attacks of Sang Hongyang. From several passages in the work, it seems that, at the time of the *Yantielun*, the words *wen xue* and *ru* were interchangeable." (Zufferey, *Origins of Confucianism*, pp. 352–53)

¹⁴ Xunzi 9, p. 94.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Zhongguo zhishi jieceng shilun (gudai pian)* 中國知識階層史論 (古代篇) (Taipei: Lianjing, 1980), and Anne Cheng, "Le statut des lettrés sous les Han," in Charles Le Blanc and Alain Rocher, eds., *Tradition et innovation en Chine et au Japon: Regards sur l'histoire intellectuelle* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1996), pp. 69–92. For a summary of the controversy, see Léon Vandermeersch, *Wangdao ou la Voie royale: Recherches sur l'esprit des institutions de la Chine archaïque* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1980) 2, pp. 13 ff.

¹⁶ Nathan Sivin translates *shi* as "gentleman-retainer" when it is not an official title, see Sivin, *Medicine*, p. 22, n. 36.

vast majority of the civil officials had been students and many of them still were scholars, the distinction between scholars and officials was not clear-cut, and the two usually overlapped. The term in its narrow sense, however, referred only to those who were engaged in study or teaching and who had not yet entered officialdom. The group included those who sought to enter officialdom as well as those who refused to enter. Once they were appointed they were considered not scholars but officials. Scholars had the highest status among the commoners, for they were the only group engaged in mental labor, which was traditionally considered superior to physical labor.¹⁷

As noted by Martin Powers,

Shi (literally “knights”), which formerly referred to the lower aristocracy, now designated an educated man of any social background whatever. Many were scions of wealthy families, but others had begun their careers as swineherds, dishwashers, or even slaves. The compound *shimin* 士民 singled out that portion of citizens who were highly educated. There was the *zhong* 眾, or the undifferentiated mass of common people. This was distinct from the *su* 俗, the vulgar, or people of little education. The *su* were not ignorant – it is clear that many could read and held opinions about public affairs – but the word does not refer to men highly educated and eligible to hold public office. Hence, it is sometimes applied to scholars of shallow learning who, it was thought, should not hold positions of responsibility.¹⁸

What Wang Chong called *shisu* 世俗 (“the general public”) comprised bureaucrats, as well as scholars and readers of popular literature:

All throughout, this book (*Lunheng*) points up the errors one commonly finds among men, and so I have particularly exhausted my efforts in censuring the general public (*shisu*). It is the nature of the general public to be attracted by strange and marvelous stories and fantastic literature. Why? Because the simple facts do not satisfy the imagination. Therefore scholars of talent and glib essayists exaggerate and embellish the facts with lush, beautiful language. Writers create falsehoods and make up stories. Those

¹⁷ See T'ung-tsu Ch'ü, *Han Social Structure* (Seattle: U. Washington P., 1972), pp. 101 ff, for further developments on the social background of scholars in Han times.

¹⁸ See Martin J. Powers, *Art and Political Expression in Early China* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1991), p. 93.

who hear these things take them for real and never tire of repeating them; those who read them take them for facts and transmit them in an unbroken chain so that, at last, they are recorded in books of bamboo or silk. Being further repeated, these mistakes even impose upon the wise. It may even be that his Majesty honours such a man as a teacher and spreads his forgeries, and that the officials and nobility all read such books.¹⁹

Within this “general public,” *Lunheng* makes a further distinction between the *shi* 世, “the people of the world,” who have classical education, and the *su* 俗, “the vulgar people,” who may be literate but who do not read the classics:

(The reports on physiognomy) which the public (*shi* 世) hears and which the *ru* scholars all speak about are transmitted in the Classics and commentaries and thus can be relied upon. But many more examples could be drawn from the light literature and popular (*su* 俗) annals handed down in formats of bamboo and silk, such as the *ru* scholars do not read.²⁰

Or, in another place in the text:

The vulgar court those who are successful and disdain those who have failed. As long as Wang Chong was rising and holding rank and office, they all swarmed about him like ants. But when he had lost his office and was living in poverty his former friends abandoned him. He pondered over the heartlessness of the people (*suren* 俗人) and in his leisure wrote twelve chapters entitled ‘Censures on Popular Habits,’ hoping that reading these books would bring the people to their senses.²¹

One should here be reminded of the role played, at the outset of the Han, by the edition of the classics in the identification process of the *ru*, who ideologically perceived themselves first and foremost as guardians of a written tradition that had purportedly been jeopardized under Qin and was supposed to be restored in its unity and coherence.²² Through their control over the sacred wisdom and hallowed scriptures of the past, the *ru* constructed a new and unique role for themselves in the government of the unified empire.

¹⁹ *Lunheng* 83, p. 280; trans. Alfred Forke, *Lun Heng: Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung* (London: 1907, 1911; rpt. New York: Paragon, 1962) 1, p. 85.

²⁰ *Lunheng* 11, p. 23; trans. Forke, *Lun Heng* 1, p. 304.

²¹ *Lunheng* 84, p. 284; trans. Forke, *Lun Heng* 1, p. 68.

²² See John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1991), pp. 40 ff, and Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1999).

Martin Powers stresses the fact that what he calls “the strains of Confucian rhetoric heard in the palace halls” pervaded the greater part of Han society, or at least “were the common property of a very broad segment of the population. Court officers, with their eloquent speeches, dipped into the same pool of imagery as village quacks, with their tall tales.”²³ Gu Jiegang, in a well-known book,²⁴ has shown that it is hardly possible, in the Han period and especially the Later Han, to draw a clear distinction between the *rusheng* and the experts in technical arts called *fangshi* 方士. The word *fang* 方 in this context may have the meaning of “art,” “method,” “technique.” Consequently, *fangshi* 方士, as specialists of specific techniques, distinguished themselves from *boshi* 博士 (literally, men of broad learning, or erudites.)²⁵ But, as stressed by Gu Jiegang, both inherited a common knowledge nourished by preimperial literature. The absence of a sharp distinction between the two is one of several ways to understand the level of fluidity in communication between “high” literate culture and “low” popular culture that was reached precisely in the Han period. Such writings as *Xiaojing* 孝經, or, at a much later date, *Taipingjing* 太平經, are cases in point.²⁶

Gu Jiegang goes as far as to talk of an “osmosis” between *ru* and *fangshi*.²⁷ Well-known *ru*, for example, Dong Zhongshu and even the very critical Wang Chong, advised on official rain-inducing sacrifices.²⁸ Conversely, many *fangshi* were intent on showing that they too knew their classics, so much so that they sometimes gained appointment as

²³ See Powers, *Art and Political Expression*, p. 229.

²⁴ See Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛, *Qin Han de fangshi yu rusheng* 秦漢的方士與儒生 (rpt. Shanghai, 1978).

See also the much more recent work by Li Ling 李零, *Zhongguo fangshu kao* 中國方術考 (Beijing: Renmin Zhongguo chubanshe, 1993) and idem, “Zhangguo Qin Han fangshi liu pai kao” 戰國秦漢方士六派考, *Chuantong wenhua yu xiandaihua* 傳統文化與現代化 (1995) 2.

²⁵ On the *boshi* of Han times and their relationship with the *ru* category, see Zufferey, *Origins of Confucianism*, pp. 167–223, and more particularly the concluding remarks to the chapter: “Our conclusions on the *boshi* during the early Han dynasty thus reinforce the hypotheses offered above that the *ru* did not form a structured group, that they were not ‘Confucians’ in the strict sense, and that what they had in common was only *wen* – a knowledge of ancient texts, and more generally, a concern for education and culture” (p. 223).

²⁶ As Nicolas Zufferey judiciously remarks, «the concern to keep ‘esoteric experts’ and literati separate is primarily found in writers committed to preserving the dignity of ‘Confucianism’: modern Confucians are more likely to describe ancient literati as enlightened ‘intellectuals’ battling on in the face of obscurantism and authoritarianism, rather than as people who to some extent could be confused with ‘esoteric experts’” (Zufferey, *Origins of Confucianism*, p. 251).

²⁷ See in particular the biographies of exemplary literati and officials in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 76, 79.

²⁸ See *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 74 and *Lunheng* 45 and 47. In *Lunheng* 24, p. 67, mention is made of “*ru* texts” that celebrate immortals. On this passage, see Zufferey, *Origins of Confucianism*, pp. 248 ff.

boshi.²⁹ In fact, the “Yiwenzhi” chapter of *Hanshu* introduces the category of literature known as “numbers and techniques (*shushu* 數術)” by studding the description with classical allusions, not only from the *Book of Changes*, but also the “Yaodian” and “Hongfan” chapters of the *Book of Documents*, which came to be regarded as the canonical foundations of the *shushu* tradition. In this respect, the *ru*, with their traditional ritual mastery,³⁰ could be considered as “experts” among others, the *fangshi* being more specialized in other techniques, like magic, alchemy, and medicine.³¹

However, what they shared most in common was certainly the relationship they had with power; all were supposed to provide the ruler with explanations or interpretations of the world. As reported in *Shiji*, in 210 BC the First Emperor dreamed that he was struggling against a sea divinity, and subsequently asked one of the seventy *boshi* to furnish an explanation.³² This anecdote reveals that knowledge itself, the self-appointed appanage of the *ru*, was then conceived of in terms inspired by the divinatory frame of mind, as has been amply shown in the works of Michael Loewe.³³ Knowing was first and foremost knowing how to decipher the signs of the universe and of man. What made the foremost common characteristic between the *ru* and the *fangshi* was also what actually divided them in the first place, namely their struggle for imperial attention and patronage. The “Treatise on the Feng and Shan Sacrifices” in *juan* 28 of *Shiji*,³⁴ in the process of describing the situation under the reign of emperor Wu 武, shows that fierce competition existed both among the *ru* group, and between the *ru* and the *fangshi*, who also occupied emperor Wu’s court, although in a less formal capacity. The *ru* party attempted to persuade the emperor to implement or reestablish certain ritual practices and institutions (the *jiao* 郊 sacrifice, the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices, the Hall of Illumination [Mingtang 明堂], tours of inspection, and the promulgation of a new calendar).

²⁹ See Ngo Van Xuyet, *Divination, magie et politique dans la Chine ancienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976), pp. 67–68.

³⁰ See Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1990).

³¹ Peter Bol observes that, even in Tang times, “*ru* techniques” (*rushu* 儒術) featured among a number of others such as *shushu* 數術 that were associated with the literati milieu, see Peter K. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1992), p. 362, n. 72.

³² See *Shiji* 史記 6, p. 263.

³³ See especially Michael Loewe, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death: Faith, Myth, and Reason in the Han Period (202 BC-AD 220)* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), and idem, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994).

³⁴ See especially *Shiji* 28, pp. 1397–1400.

But in the vast majority of cases recounted in the “Treatise,” emperor Wu sought out and instituted ritual practices following the advice of the numerous *fangshi* at court. These included worship to a number of divinities such as the Five Emperors (the sacrifices were performed at Yong 雍, the former capital of Qin), the Lord of the Earth (Houtu 后土) and the Grand Unity (Taiyi 太一). All these cults found in the theories of the *fangshi* a coherent grounding, centered on the quest for immortality. These local cults were disseminated throughout the empire, since virtually any place could become a place of worship (for example, caves, wells, mountains, rocks, rivers, and islands). Many places of worship were located in the former principality of Qi, from which many *fangshi* originated. In 31 BC, however, Kuang Heng 匡衡 and Zhang Tan 張譚 proceeded to reform the imperial cult by suppressing a number of services at shrines dedicated to the ancestral spirits of the emperors “supported by the central government and performed in the provinces by various types of intermediary. Of a total of 683 such sites, only 208 were regarded as conforming with the prescribed rites; the other 475 were abolished. Similarly of the 203 sites at Yung, only fifteen, which were dedicated to the mountains, rivers and constellations, were saved from destruction.”³⁵ It was against the proliferation of these impressively numerous local cults, teeming throughout the empire and in some cases centuries old, that the *ru* attempted a reform of the imperial cult.

But some ritual practices propounded by the *ru* themselves ended up serving religious ends different from those originally envisioned, and the *fangshi* were largely responsible for this shift in purpose. For example, under emperor Wu, the Mingtang came to be associated with the search for immortality. Of even more dubious success were Dong Zhongshu’s attempts to institute an imperial religion that stressed the supremacy of Heaven as an object of worship with the “revival” of the *jiao* sacrifice.³⁶ By turning the interpretation of omens into a powerful political weapon which provided convenient opportunities to criticize the emperor in the name of Heaven, the *ru* officials were in a position of direct competition with the *fangshi*. By establishing Heaven as a supreme authority over the emperor, seen as the Son of Heaven, the *ru*

³⁵ See Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974), pp. 175–76, and Loewe, *Chinese Ideas*, chap. 12.

³⁶ See Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, According to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1996), and Marianne Bujard, *Le Sacrifice au Ciel dans la Chine ancienne: Théorie et pratique sous les Han occidentaux* (Paris: Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient, 2000).

endowed themselves with a crucial role: that of intermediaries between Heaven and the ruler of all men. They claimed that only they could interpret the heavenly signs, be they of benevolence or of wrath, and that only they could perform the proper sacrifices to placate Heaven. In the absence of institutional religious structures independent of the emperor's authority, was there not a danger that the *ru* and the *fangshi* might get involved in the same type of political role, as was obviously the case under the reign of emperor Wu?

One distinctive feature of the *ru* was that they remained attached to the scriptural tradition, combining their competence in omenology with the interpretation of texts. The *ru* could witness omens and events and interpret them much the same way as they might interpret passages in the classics. In this way, natural events came to be adopted into the discourse of classical exegesis, especially through the so-called "apocryphal literature" (*chenwei* or *chanwei* 讖緯, literally "prophecy and weft"). The consequence was the proliferation of *chen* prognostication texts in close association with the *fangshi*, on one hand, and the *wei*, as the weft interwoven with the canonical warp 經, associated with the *ru*, on the other.³⁷ Significantly enough, the *chenwei*, which were in fact political riddles, messages addressed to power and supposed to have emanated from Heaven, developed mostly during crises of legitimacy. To borrow Gary Arbuckle's phrasing,

Omens, prodigies, puns and prophecies first came to center stage in Chinese dynastic politics as the Former Han entered its final decline. The use of cosmological correlations and prophetic happenings already had centuries of history behind it at that time, but never before had it been taken so seriously or had so much influence – perhaps because there had never before been a large educated class with broadly similar ideas and assumptions, who would be relied on to respond in predictable ways to what were sometimes little more than hints requiring sophisticated "decoding" before they could be understood.³⁸

To the latest rulers of the Former Han down to Wang Mang and the early rulers of the Later Han, the *chenwei* provided a sort of "direct" legitimation, issuing from Heaven above and therefore not subject to controversy. Conversely, they were also used by the *ru* as instruments

³⁷ See Anne Cheng, "La trame et la chaîne: Aux origines de la constitution d'un corpus canonique au sein de la tradition confucéenne," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 5 (1984), pp. 13–26, and Zhong Zhaopeng 鐘肇鵬, *Chenwei lunlüe* 讖緯論略 (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1992).

³⁸ See Gary Arbuckle, "The Gongyang School and Wang Mang," *MS* 42 (1994), p. 135.

of indirect criticism against power, at times even to hasten the end of the dynasty.

Manifestations of hostility towards the *chenwei* were not, as has sometimes been claimed, characteristic of a so-called “rationalism” attached to *guxue* 古學 scholarship as opposed to a “superstitious” *jinxue* 今學. They reflected rather the fear that those texts might be used with a view to reinforce beyond measure the imperial power and prestige, ruining thereby the delicate balance between the *ru* officials and the emperor. As it appeared clearly from the dramatic events toward the end of the dynasty, the preservation of such a balance was one of the major political problems of the time. The recourse to prophetic texts and omens could be perceived by the *ru* as impingements on their prerogatives, either from the ruling dynasty or from common people. Fan Ye 範曄 remarks in *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 that under the reign of emperor Zhang (r. 76–88) numerous favorable tallies and omens that were submitted to the throne were in accord “in hundreds and thousands of cases with the (apocryphal) diagrams and scripts.”³⁹ Such presentations to the throne, emanating in many cases from common people, were considered as direct revelations from Heaven and could therefore appear as threatening the supremacy of the *ru*.

As the Han rulers gradually saw their legitimacy being challenged, the recourse to the “preternatural” (including *fangshu* 方術 “technical arts,” *chenwei* “apocrypha,” and the like) tended to gain in intensity, and the “true *ru*” had a growing feeling that they had to draw the line between themselves and the “technicians.” The latter are depicted in caricatural terms by Ban Gu:

During the Yuanding (116–110 BC) and Yuanfeng (110–105 BC) eras, the *fangshi* who came from Yan and Qi, rolling their eyes and clenching their fists, and claimed that they possessed the techniques for attracting happiness by sacrificing to gods and immortals, could be counted by the tens of thousands.⁴⁰

By the end of Former Han, Yang Xiong argued that many activities may be “natural,” but, except for following the Way, none is proper.⁴¹ As Michael Nylan remarked, Yang Xiong’s opening chapter of *Fayan* “breaks the presumed tie between ‘love of learning’ and ‘learning longevity techniques,’ insisting that ‘love of learning,’ properly defined, seeks no particular goal but Goodness itself.”⁴² Yang Xiong’s vision of the way to divine sagehood starts from a transformation for which

³⁹ *Hou Han shu* 3, p. 159. ⁴⁰ *Han shu* 漢書 25B p. 1260. ⁴¹ See *Fayan* 4, p. 12.

⁴² Nylan, “Han Classicists,” p. 149.

he uses a metaphor borrowed from alchemy: casting alchemical gold from base metals is like casting men in the proper mould.⁴³ The use of this particular metaphor shows that alchemy was commonly referred to, and that at least its designation, if not its practice, was part of the “general culture.” In fact, the general notion of the “good life” comprised, together with wealth and high rank, longevity which was achieved in great part through alchemy.

In chapter 12, Yang Xiong states that what is wrong with the “technicians” is that they do not allow for man: “Those who can penetrate Heaven, Earth and Man are called *ru*. Those who penetrate Heaven and Earth, but not Man, are called technicians *ji* 伎.”⁴⁴ On these grounds, Yang Xiong then proceeds to debunk the general aspiration of his contemporaries to become immortals 仙. About a century later, Wang Fu 王符 (ca. 88–166) would launch an all-out attack against magicians of all sorts, and belief in the spirits:

(Women) take up studying incantations, as well as beating drums and dancing in service to the spirits, in order to deceive the masses and delude peasants and their wives and daughters. The households of the weak and sick, worried and confused, are all easily made fearful (of angry spirits). ... Ignorant of the sorceresses’ deception, they blame themselves instead for having been tardy in serving the spirits. These are extreme examples of bewitching nonsense.⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that, after the fall of Han, opinions about the *fangshi* emanating from the *ru* were slightly more balanced. Fan Ye, in his introduction to the biographies of *fangshi* in *Hou Han shu*, writes:

During the Han dynasty, especially from the time of Emperor Wu, there was great favor shown the esoteric techniques and arts. Hardly a single man of letters (*shi* 士) who had in his embrace some “Way” (*dao* 道) or “Art” (*yi* 藝) failed to follow the current trend and arrive at court, carrying his manuals and clapping his hands. Later, Wang Mang was given to manipulative use of the portents of fate, and Emperor Guangwu held an abiding belief in the art of prophecy. The time was right for the (*fang*)*shi* to rush forward, and indeed they galloped forth and bored into the very center of the court, each fighting for the chance to discuss his particu-

⁴³ See *Fayan* 1, pp. 1–2.

⁴⁴ *Fayan* 12, p. 39.

⁴⁵ *Qianfu lun* 潛夫論 12, pp. 52–53; trans. Margaret J. Pearson, *Wang Fu and the Comments of a Recluse: A Study with Translations* (Tempe: Arizona State University, 1989), p. 43.

lar arts. ... Given this situation, the erudites and most esteemed scholars (*tongru shuosheng*) became outraged at the treachery and heterodoxy (*bujing* 不經) of the *fangshi*. Incensed with indignation, they memorialized the throne, asserting that the texts should be gathered and cast out.⁴⁶

However, what is worth observing is that Fan Ye himself does not condemn utterly and completely the “esoteric arts,” but only the “deceptive and vulgarizing” part in them:

In the study of the esoteric arts, the typical failing is in deception and vulgarization. ... Anyone who computes with perfection and yet does not deceive or vulgarize is deeply rooted in the esoteric systems.

Fan Ye cites Zhang Heng as an example of one who “computes with perfection and yet does not deceive or vulgarize.” It should be noted that Zhang Heng, while being frequently associated with *guxue* scholarship, is cited by Fan Ye as an example of one who is “deeply rooted in the esoteric systems”: so much for the common representation of the “rationalist” *guxue* type . . .

Whom exactly did the Han literati designate as *suru* “vulgar ru”? Did the rift between *jinwen* 今文 and *guwen* 古文 scholars have anything to do with it? Michael Nylan has shown fairly convincingly that there was no such “rift” between *jinxue* and *guxue*, conceived of as two entrenched camps.⁴⁷ She has also made the point that a number of Han thinkers working on the classical tradition are often skeptical, seldom derivative,⁴⁸ so much so that people like Yang Xiong, Wang Chong, and Ying Shao 應劭 were accused of having “created 作” new teachings, rather than merely transmitted 述, the old teachings. The line, then, should be drawn, not so much between “partisans” of *jinwen* and *guwen* types of classical studies, as between “creators” and “transmitters.” While “transmitters” were committed to the technique of “commentaries by chapters and verses” (*zhangju* 章句) transmitted from masters to disciples by way of “lineage models” (*shifa* 師法 or *jiafa* 家法), following

⁴⁶ *Hou Han shu* 82A, p. 2705; trans. Kenneth S. DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners, and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of Fang-shih* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1983), p. 45.

⁴⁷ See Michael Nylan, “The *Chin-wen/Ku-wen* Controversy in Han Times,” *TP* 80 (1994), pp. 82–144. For a somewhat different approach to the question, see Hans van Ess, *Politik und Gelehrsamkeit in der Zeit der Han: Die Alttext/Neutext-Kontroverse* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1993), and idem, “The Old Text/New Text Controversy: Has the 20th Century Got It Wrong?” *TP* 80 (1994), pp. 145–69.

⁴⁸ See Nylan “Han Classicists.”

Nathan Sivin's translation,⁴⁹ "creators" often appeared as "free lance" literati who expressed themselves in essays, often in dialogue form. One of the fiercest critics of *zhangju* was Wang Chong, who voiced an idea which had become common place by his time: "The sages (of antiquity) created, the worthies (of today) comment."⁵⁰

As we have seen above, Wang Chong draws a social distinction between a high culture, based on the classics, and a low culture, based on "light literature and popular annals." But at the same time, he also claims to be an authentic literatus on the grounds of his style of writing, which is clear and plain, as opposed to those *suru* who express themselves only in "subtle words" and hidden meanings:

Wang Chong's writings are lucid and easy to understand. (But) there are those who pretend that the words of a good debater must be profound and the compositions of the able writer obscure. The style of classic literature and the sayings of worthies and sages are grand and majestic, beautiful and refined, and difficult to grasp at first. The scholars who read them understand them only with the necessary commentaries. (They think that) the genius of the sages and worthies being so wonderful, their expressions cannot be the same as those of ordinary people (*su* 俗). Gems, they say, are concealed in stones and pearls in clams. Only gem polishers and pearl experts can find them. These things cannot be seen because they are hidden and thus substantial disquisitions must be profound and deep, and hard to fathom. (Now Wang Chong's) 'Censures on Morals' are intended to rouse the people and so the meaning is perspicuous and the style quite plain. But (the critics will say) why must the *Lunheng* be like this too? Is the talent of the author so shallow that it was absolutely impossible to hide anything?⁵¹

In another passage, we read:

In explaining the Five Classics, the literati frequently miss the true meaning. Former literati could not distinguish fundamentals from superficialities and in vain produced empty explanations. Later literati (of the contemporary period) believe the words of these former masters; they follow the past teachings and conform to the old dogmas, learning thoroughly the words and sayings of these past masters. If, by pursuing the teachings of a particular master, they make a name for themselves, then they hasten to become teach-

⁴⁹ See Lloyd and Sivin, *Way and the Word*, p. 56.

⁵⁰ *Lunheng* 83, p. 281.

⁵¹ *Lunheng* 84, p. 284; trans. Forke, *Lun Heng* 1, pp. 70-71.

ers themselves. And then, by taking advantage of an opportune moment, they are able to secure office very early in their careers. Yet, frantically competing for advancement, they have no time to concentrate and apply their minds to the examination and verification of essentials. Thus empty theories are transmitted without end while the truth remains suppressed and invisible.⁵²

My contention now would be, if not to make a convincing demonstration, to provide a few elements to show that, at least by Later Han, even this distinction between “creators” and “transmitters” did not always hold, since “transmitters” did not automatically stick strictly to the lineage model. As Michael Loewe has pointed out, there was, by Later Han, a distinct feeling of the failure of the *ru* ethic,⁵³ and concomitantly of the modes of interpretation of classical texts that had been current in Former Han.

An illustration of this may be found in He Xiu’s 何休 (129–182 AD) preface to his *Chunqiu Gongyang jiegou* 春秋公羊解詁.⁵⁴ In criticizing his predecessors, he remarks that “at times they added mockery and sarcasm, cited other canons but mistook their sentence readings, and made up something where there was nothing.” He goes on to say that literati versed in *zhangju* were pointed at as being *suru* by those who adhered to *guxue* scholarship. He Xiu seems to see a way out by abandoning the lineage model altogether, and by claiming to follow not the mainstream *jinxue* derived from Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, but a more original (and presumably more authentic) tradition of Gongyang interpretation derived from Huwu sheng 胡毋生.

Huwu sheng (or Humu 胡毋 sheng, or Huwu Zidu 子都) was appointed under emperors Jing and Wu, together with Dong Zhongshu, as a *boshi* specializing in the Gongyang tradition of *Chunqiu*.⁵⁵ Significantly enough, the *Hou Han shu* version of the Gongyang family tree omits all reference to Dong Zhongshu, attributing Dong’s disciples from Ying-gong 嬴公 onwards to Huwu sheng.⁵⁶ One explanation might be that Huwu sheng’s only disciple was Gongsun Hong 公孫弘, whose spec-

⁵² *Lunheng* 80, p. 269; trans. John Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1994), pp. 115–16.

⁵³ See Loewe, *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy*, pp. 249–66.

⁵⁴ See Anne Cheng, *Etude sur le confucianisme Han: L’élaboration d’une tradition exégétique sur les Classiques* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1985), pp. 155–56.

⁵⁵ See *Shiji* 121, p. 3118: “As to the *Chunqiu*, the interpretation of Master Huwu Zidu was followed in Qi and Lu, that of Dong Zhongshu was followed in Zhao.” The biography of Huwu Zidu comes after that of Dong Zhongshu in *Shiji* 121; and *Hanshu* 56, 88.

⁵⁶ See *Hou Han shu* 79B p. 2577.

tacular rise was significant of the shift in imperial patronage between emperor Jing and emperor Wu. Gongsun Hong was appointed *boshi* under emperor Wu, and in 124 BC became the first *ru* scholar to rise from commoner status to a very exalted position by becoming one of the emperor's Three Lords, as well as being granted the title of marquis. There ensued a struggle between Dong Zhongshu and Gongsun Hong to secure the emperor's attention; eventually Gongsun managed to put Dong on the wayside. Gongsun Hong's dizzying ascension to success was so spectacular that numerous scholars tried to emulate his case. After 136 BC, a thorough grounding in the classical canon proved useful, if not essential, for advancement in the imperial bureaucracy.⁵⁷

By the end of the Han, Xu Gan's *Zhonglun* lamented that the "debased *ru*" (*biru* 鄙儒) preferred to devote themselves to matters of glossing and nomenclature (*wu ming* 物名) at the expense of the fundamental, essential import or "overall meaning" (*da yi* 大義) of the sage kings' teachings, which he considered to be the "actuality" of the classical canon and that which gave the written word its meaning:

In learning, the essential meaning [*dayi*] is of foremost importance, while nomenclature (*wu ming* 物名) is secondary. If the essential meaning has been elucidated, then the nomenclature will follow thereafter. The "broad learning" of the debased literati [*biru*], however, is devoted to nomenclature, meticulous in keeping account of utensils and weapons and painstaking in matters of *xun gu* [訓詁] glossing. Such scholars select chapters and verses [章句] for commentary yet are unable to draw together that which is fully revealed in the essential meaning and so capture the mind of the former kings.⁵⁸

In conclusion, while everyone has now come to agree that it is no longer permitted to talk of a "victory of Confucianism" in Han, it seems hardly more permissible to go to the other extreme by asserting that the Master's teaching found no echo whatsoever in that period, in spite of the predominance of a general culture that had little to do with Confucian values. One general trait of the Han period can be said to be the search for classification and identification and, as we have seen, the *ru* category also endeavored to draw the line, not only with other categories, but within its own group. Several questions arise

⁵⁷ See Anne Cheng, review of Sarah A. Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn, According to Tung Chung-shu*, in *EC* 23–24 (1998–99), pp. 353–66.

⁵⁸ Xu Gan 徐幹, *Zhonglun* (*Zhonglun jiaozhu* 中論校注), ed. Xu Xianglin 徐湘霖 [Chengdu: Ba-Shu shushe, 2000] 1, p. 13; trans. Makeham, *Name and Actuality*, p. 118.

at this point: was it possible to strive to become a true Confucian, as Yang Xiong would have it, while being at the same time a *ru*? In other words, were the values pursued by the “true *ru*” and the “vulgar *ru*” at all compatible? Was there not a radical divergence between the ideal of “inner sagehood 內聖” and the “outer institutional 外王” ideal? Was the effort to become a true *ru* to remain strictly individual (as was the case with Wang Chong), and was it therefore impossible to turn this quest into a factor of identification with a socially defined group? All these questions could provide the matter for another paper, but I prefer to conclude for the time being with what Ge Hong had to say for himself in the fourth century AD: “I have perfectly mastered the Five Classics and written a work of philosophy, just so that later ages would know that I was a *ru* of cultural accomplishment 文儒.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Baopuzi waipian* 50 (*zi xu* 自敘, “Author’s preface”), p. 204.