

Division of Knowledge in the Siku Catalog

The motivating question behind my DPhil thesis is: to what extent, if at all, is the use of modern categories of dividing knowledge (e.g. philosophy, theology/religion, literature etc) appropriate in the Chinese intellectual environment? If it is appropriate, then in what ways is it so i.e. what are the distinct methodological benefits derived from using a method of classifying knowledge that finds little, if any, direct correspondence to the organizing method(s) developed in China? And in what ways, is there a limitation, mis-construal, or distortion in understanding Chinese thought in a taxonomical system that is not native to its environment?

Such questions have casted doubt onto Euro-American Sinology from at least the mid-60s but have not been successfully answered mostly because they have not been seriously tackled – academic focus has primarily shifted elsewhere.¹ But in recent years, there has been a growing realization that the fundamental methodological approach of Euro-American Sinologists is to some extent or in some ways limited or even flawed and new methods of research and conceptualization of the object of study are slowly yet steadily emerging.² The present DPhil project finds

1 In 1964, for example, Frederick Mote, Professor of Chinese Studies at Princeton University at the time, warned that “Western ‘disciplines’ [should be seen as] ... no more than particular intellectual constructs which seem to be meaningful to us at this point in our own history.” In a similar vein, William Skinner (Cornell; Stanford) cautioned his peers that “those disciplines ... developed not only *in* the Western world but as studies *of* the Western institutions ... remain essentially rooted in the particular societies.” In a more critical tone, Pierre Ryckmans in 1984, arguing in favor of the “holistic character” of Chinese civilization, condemned all “narrowly specialized approaches to grope in the dark and miss the target.” The DPhil thesis does not necessarily espouse the positions above but takes them very seriously as a point of methodological contemplation. All quotes from: Coughlan, Chia-Mei Jane. *The Study of China in Universities: A Comparative Case Study of Australia and the United Kingdom*. Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008.

2 In *On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)*, Robert Campany challenges the suitability of the term *religion* in the Chinese context arguing that not only is a linguistic equivalent not found but also the mode of conceptualization employed to describe ‘religions’ in China leads to a skewed set of questions. In *Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate*, Carine Deerfot provides a very balanced account of the positions that have emerged in Sinology along with their implicit methodological standpoints. In *Lost Soul: Confucianism in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*, John Makeham channels time and again the suspicion and critique of Chinese intellectuals in the viability of studying Chinese thought as compartmentalized by Western disciplines, “the viability of a sharp philosophical/religious distinction” (p.309). In *Vanishing Into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition* and in *The Discovery of Chinese Logic*, Barry Allen and Joachim Kurtz argue respectively for the need to develop new methods in studying Chinese thought. The list above does not by any means pretend to be an exhaustive one but merely to give an illustration of this trend of thought within Sinology.

motivational inspiration behind such modes of (re)-thinking of Sinology both as a field of study and as method.

The questions raised above are indeed bold in purpose as they are grand in scope and do not easily lend themselves suitable for the pursuit of a DPhil project – they are fine merely as initial points of inspiration. Narrowing the field of research, I intend to study the *The Annotated Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library* (《四庫全書總目提要》; henceforth *The Catalog*) as completed in 1782 under the rule of Emperor Qianlong (乾隆). Therefore, my DPhil thesis proceeds from the following question: from a purely theoretical perspective what is the structure of thought underpinning the division of knowledge in *The Catalog*? What are the criteria and the underlying 'philosophical' values defining the taxonomy of *The Catalog*? Why – from a theoretical point of view – did the compilers use such-and-such division i.e. what were the recognized as well as the latent conceptual advantages of the scheme employed? And why, in light of the several changes, alterations, and departures from previous compilation schemes in Chinese history, did the editors choose such taxonomy?

By asking these questions from a purely theoretical and conceptual point of view, the DPhil thesis deviates substantially from existing literature: the bulk of studies on *The Catalog* (both from Euro-American Sinologists as well as Chinese and Japanese scholars) focuses primarily, if not exclusively, on the historical development of *The Catalog* or the socio-political conditions affecting the favored taxonomical system. Therefore, studies explaining the similarities and differences between the Qing dynasty *Catalog* and previous ones (especially that of the Sui on which it draws heavily) abound. Furthermore, research has focused on explaining the mechanisms through which concerns over political and academic orthodoxy or how the gaining influence of philological study (漢學) over philosophical/metaphysical study (理學) have impacted the compilation of *The Catalog*.³ Helpful and meaningful as these studies are, attempts at explaining the division employed

3 For a very historically comprehensive and rigorous study of *The Catalog* look at Sima Chaojun 司馬朝軍. *Siku*

from a purely cognitive and 'philosophical' plane are – at best – scarce, fragmented, and short.⁴ My DPhil thesis aims to fill this void.

Before sketching an answer on the *how* my DPhil thesis intends to respond to the questions pertaining to *The Catalog*, I would first like to provide some foundational information as well as explain the reasons for choosing it as the most appropriate object of study. *The Catalog* is a collection of 3,471 books with critical abstracts and extensive bibliographic and scholarly notes. In 1772, Emperor Qianlong appointed Ji Yun (纪昀; 1724-1805) and Lu Xixiong (陆锡熊; 1734-92) as editors-in-chief – the project required ten years to complete. It is divided into four major Branches (部): (a) the Classics (經), (b) the Histories (史), (c) the Masters (子), and (d) the Anthologies (集) and each category is further subdivided into Categories (類) and Sub-Categories (屬). Heavy focus is placed on Confucian orthodoxy with special emphasis on the classical texts – books not fitting a range of doctrinal or political criteria were marginalized (Buddhist and Daoist literature; less prominent schools of thoughts etc) or actively excluded (anti-Manchu works; literature written in the vernacular etc). Despite the fact that *The Catalog* is influenced by particular socio-political concerns, it still remains an interesting body of work to study from a theoretical perspective for the following three main reasons: (1) it is temporally the latest expression of Chinese classification systems before the adoption of Western taxonomical schemes; therefore it has access to almost the entirety of the classical tradition. (2) It is the most mature, sophisticated, and refined taxonomical system in pre-modern Chinese thought; therefore it has the greatest degree of complexity. (3) It is compiled during the early Qing dynasty, a rapidly growing area of interest among scholars, especially in academic circles of Greater China, interested in reconceptualizing Chinese thought on both native and non-native categories; therefore the DPhil does not exist in a vacuum but rather

Quanshu Zongmu Yanjiu 《四庫全書總目》研究 (Research on The Annotated Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library). Beijing: Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 2004.

⁴ In fact, to the best of my knowledge there is absolutely no scholarly work in either Chinese, English, Japanese or French that attempts to undertake a study of *The Catalog* as proposed here.

makes part of a broader resurgence of interest in the ways in which late dynastic scholarship can revitalize interpretations and conceptualizations of Chinese thought.⁵

The methodological toolkit that I intend to employ for the DPhil thesis can be divided into two categories: (1) use of secondary research (for further information please refer to the preliminary Relevant Literature section), i.e. an examination of the ways in which scholarship in English, Chinese, Japanese, and French has approached *The Catalog*. The main motivation is to exploit the fine scholarship that has focused on the historical, socio-political, and philological dimensions of *The Catalog*, serving as a backdrop for the DPhil thesis. The main parting point, from an *a priori* methodological and cognitive point of view, will manifest itself in the ways in which the understanding and evaluation of the taxonomy of *The Catalog* is undertaken. For example, in the short section dedicated to evaluating *The Catalog* in Sima Chaojun's *Research*, he complains about “a relative disorder, and lack of a fixed principle” (相當紊亂，沒有一定規格) (p. 165). Furthermore, even in Endymion Wilkinson's highly objective and self-conscious *Chinese History: A New Manual*, he notes that categorization is often not the “obvious one.”⁶ Because virtually all studies that aim (in a patched and *en passant* manner) to uncover the criteria and values of *The Catalog* ultimately employ a similar modern outlook and because there are very few studies that even aim tangentially to achieve this, the DPhil thesis will use secondary literature as a general grounding in the socio-historical conditions giving rise to the creation of *The Catalog*. (2) Use of primary materials which can be further sub-divided into three parts: (a) the Overview (總敘) sections of *The Catalog*; (b) the evaluations and explanations of contemporaneous or slightly later Chinese scholars; and (c) the totality of the structure and taxonomy of *The Catalog*. The Overview sections of each Branch provide a listing of all the included texts as well as justifications and

5 The specialized reader will be well aware of this trend in Chinese studies (from history to literature and sociology to philosophy) but I would like to provide a more informal account of this increasing trend from experience at Peking University: in private conversations professors Zhang Kai (鄭開; director of graduate studies) and Lu Yin (陆胤) as well as several PhD candidates have repeatedly confirmed the increasing interest in contemporary philosophical departments both in the Mainland and Taiwan *viz-a-viz* the intellectual environment of the early Qing.

6 Wilkinson, Endymion. *Chinese History: A New Manual*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012. p. 952.

explanations for the selections – they provide great insight into the justifications and concerns of Ji Yun and Lu Xixiong, the editors-in-chief, and in many ways also reflect the specific socio-political views of Emperor Qianlong. The overviews will work as gateway into understanding the theoretical motivations behind the compilers' choices. Beyond the revealed, explicit justifications of the aims, purposes, and structure of *The Catalog*, the understanding and evaluations of contemporaneous or slightly later scholars is also telling. Among them I have already identified a series of key thinkers and positions. Foremost, perhaps, is Zhang Xuecheng's (章学诚; 1738-1801)⁷ concise evaluation of 'differentiating knowledge/fields of study and tracing their origins' (辨章學術, 考鏡源流) as the main function of *The Catalog*. Other scholars who provided explanations and evaluations of *The Catalog* are: Ruan Yuan (阮元; 1764-1849), Zhu Jia (朱珪; 1731-1806), Liu Quanzhi (劉權之; 1739-1819), Hong Liangji (洪亮吉; 1746-1809), and Li Ciming (李慈銘; 1830-95) among others.⁸ The point of using these scholars' evaluations and interpretations of the uses, benefits, and limitations of *The Catalog* is to better understand the dominant concerns, points of agreement and disagreement of the academic elite of the time.

However useful the above sources can be, the main trunk of the thesis will be a comprehensive analysis of the structure of *The Catalog* and its components. In *The Discovery of Chinese Logic*, Joachim Kurtz argues for the need of a “de-modernized” Sinology that aims to “understand the implicit and explicit criteria of validity, veracity, credibility, coherence, relevance, applicability and so forth ... in these fields [education, law, *canonical studies*, historiography etc] ... and record and define the terms, or metalanguages of each of these realms; trace [their] sources” and examine their use among “discrete discursive fields” (stress added). He equates such a method with a need “to reverse the conventional perspective and try to reconstitute concrete modes of

7 Fu, Rongxian 輔榮賢. “Chuantong Muluxue de Hexin Lilun” 傳統目錄學的核心理論 (The Core Theory of Traditional Bibliography). *Xueshu Luntan* Vol. 6 1996: 25-27.

8 Zhang Chuanfeng 張傳峰. *Siku Quanshu Zongmu Xueshu Sixiang Yanjiu* 《四庫全書總目》學術思想研究 (Research on the Academic Thought of The Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library). Shanghai: Xueshu Chuabanshe, 2007. pp. 42-53.

knowledge production and their underlying rules 'from the ground up.'"⁹ Moving one step further in the domain of Sinological methods, Allen – asking “[o]ne has to wonder, though, whether it is really lower standards or different priorities, different standards?” – proposes a methodological toolbox that has a hybrid quality that aims to combine emic (native) and etic (non-native) categories in the field of study.¹⁰ Methodologically, the DPhil thesis aims to do exactly this: to understand the implicit and explicit criteria of *The Catalogue* 'from the ground up' but at the same time use concepts and modes of argumentation and analysis germane to Western Analytic Philosophy and relevant to the object of inquiry. Studying Chinese thought is not only possible if conducted exclusively in traditional Chinese terms nor is it only valuable if interpreted through modern Western categories – the first (most likely) leads to mere repetition and the second (quite likely) leads to misrepresentation.¹¹ Furthermore, the DPhil thesis departs from the existing literature aiming to offer not only an identification and explanation of the explicit and implicit organizing principles identified but also an evaluation. Much of the literature that engages in evaluative efforts – because of the lack of a deep understanding of the principles – naively falls into the trap of labeling the division of *The Catalog* as obscure, incongruous, or non-sensical without understanding that such evaluation is the result of applying a purely etic set of concerns and standards.¹² An evaluation that consciously aims to avoid such a trap will hopefully also be able to answer the question of why (abstracting from socio-historical particulars) was such-and-such structure chosen?

9 Kurtz, Joachim. *The Discovery of Chinese Logic*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. p. 363-4.

10 Allen, Barry. *Vanishing Into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2015.

11 This claim may sound rather striking but perhaps the following illustration will appease some of the reader's concerns. In Western Sinology asking whether Mohists are utilitarians and then trying to specify whether they are of a Millian or Benthamite sort seems as interesting and valuable questions. The reverse, however, *is Mill or Bentham a Mohist and of what kind?* appears odd. To ask *justifiably* the first type of question and not the second requires a robust, comprehensive, and coherent explanation of the unilateral applicability of terms, which to the best of the author's knowledge has not been produced. In other words, a great deal of Western Sinology rests on the assumption that such questions are *a priori* justified.

12 By no means should one assume that etic standards are only employed by Western scholars. For example: Zhang Chuanfeng 張傳峰. *Siku Quanshu Zongmu Xueshu Sixiang Yanjiu* 《四庫全書總目》學術思想研究 (Research on the Academic Thought of The Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library). Shanghai: Xueshu Chuabanshe, 2007. pp. 304-310. Also look at: Chen Shangjun (陳尚君) and Zhang Jinyao (張金耀). *Siku Tiyao Jindu* 四庫提要精讀 (Close Reading of The Siku Catalog). Shanghai: Fudan UP, 2008. pp. 19-21.

In other words, why was it sensible for the early Qing scholars to arrange *The Catalog* in the way they did; what were the theoretical benefits of such a division? After having a solid grounding in explicit and implicit criteria from a hybrid internal-external position, the DPhil thesis will also provide an evaluation of the limitations and shortcomings of the division.

Beyond the content related questions regarding the DPhil thesis, I would like to address the issue of feasibility within the natural space of a DPhil programme at Oxford i.e. is the proposal feasible? It is for the following three reasons: (1) conceptually, as has already been implied, the project, if carried out properly, can bear interesting and novel understanding of Chinese thought. Benjamin Elman states that “the classification of knowledge in the eighteenth century can reveal the manner in which types of learning were perceived and the nature and structure of the concepts used.”¹³ And in combination with Kurtz' assessment, a better understanding of the division of knowledge can inform us not only about the concepts it classifies but also of the implicit values and notions of the classification process itself. (2) Practically – *how to handle the massive amount of information contained within The Catalog?* – the electronic scanned version of *The Catalog* (ESiku) along with the large secondary literature covering, explaining, and presenting the contents of *The Catalog* make its contents dramatically easier to navigate than ever before. (3) Academically, my training in formal Western Philosophy at Yale University, combined with my broad exposure and deep understanding of Classical Chinese as harnessed by my Masters Program at Peking University, along with my proven record of original thought,¹⁴ place me in a position to feel positive about the feasibility of the DPhil thesis proposal.

Having developed a rigorous set of tools in (and strong passion for) Analytic Philosophy from Yale University, the mode of inquiry of the DPhil thesis will primarily be philosophical.

13 Elman, Benjamin A. *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China*. Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies (Harvard UP), 1984. p. 163.

14 Gandolfo, Stefano. “The Positionless Middle Way: Philosophical Deflationism in Madhyamaka.” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2014): 1-22.

However, given the warranted philological work that will be necessary – an approach that my Masters Program at Peking University has versed me well in – and the nature of the questions asked, pursuing the DPhil under the auspices of the Oriental Studies Department at Oxford seems as the best fit. The reason I am applying to Oxford is to work with Professor Dirk Meyer who as a member of both the Philosophy and Oriental Studies Departments and as a scholar with deep understanding of the progression of Chinese thought would be an ideal guide in my studies.

I would be honored and thrilled to pursue this project under the roof of the Oriental Studies Department. It would be an enriching continuation of my intensive philosophy studies at Yale University and of my philosophical and philological research and coursework at Peking University these past three years. I would be most delighted and grateful to become part of the Oriental Studies Department's vibrant community of scholars and hope you will grant me admission to the program.

Word Count: 2320

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