Scholarly Discourse in Chen Li’s (1810-1882) Letters

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the discussions on philology in the letters by Chinese scholar Chen Li (1810-1882). These letters, most of which were written to friends and colleagues in Chen Li’s native Guangzhou, are taken as representing a coherent discourse on the role of philology within education and humanistic research. Chen Li’s intellectual standpoint emerges through his discussions of fundamental texts such as Shijing and Shuo wen jie zi, and of contemporary “evidential research” and its adversary “Song-learning.” Chen Li repeatedly stresses the importance of philology for humanistic research, and the ways in which this exacting discipline is best taught to students. At the same time, Chen also cautions against the risk of the philological approach to the classical texts eclipsing other modes of inquiry, adversely entailing the neglect of the literary or philosophical aspects of these texts. In the context of disciplinary specialization and difficult social conditions, conflicts between auxiliary disciplines and intellectual currents should not, according to Chen, be allowed to threaten the continued transmission of a unified humanistic tradition. Although not free from contemporary epistemological assumptions, Chen Li’s attitude remains largely accommodating to the opposing schools in classical scholarship which dominated his time.

Keywords: Chen Li, philology, Shuo wen jie zi, 19th century Guangzhou, kaozheng.

Chen Li, His Letters and the Subject of Philology

Chen Li (zi: 1 Lanfu, 1810-1882) was one of the most important intellectuals of mid-19th century Guangzhou in South China. Having failed in the imperial examinations, he spent much of his professional life teaching in the academies that trained students for those examinations. Chen was a pivotal figure in several of the academies of Guangzhou, including the Xuehaitang – or Sea of Learning Hall – which had been founded by Ruan Yuan (1764-1849) earlier in the century. Most students took the civil service examination as their ultimate goal. Chen Li, on the other hand, had abandoned the aspiration for an official career and instead turned to humanistic scholarship. The teacher and many of his students had conflicting interests, although the situation varied according to the nature of the school. The situation in the Guangzhou academies, which Chen Li clearly preferred, was surely not as bad as that in the small state schools in the countryside, where he also briefly taught. “If I could get the gentry of this district to know how to read the classics and histories then I would already have achieved something,” wrote Chen Li about his disappointment with the climate in such a school, “but this is really not easy. If you are not talking about taking the official examination but encouraging people to study, then I am...
afraid there would be no one willing to listen to you."

Chen Li had a sense of mission, a will to transmit the scholarly tradition to the next generation of students. However, we see from his own words that this was not always a straightforward task. Chen Li’s will to save the learned tradition from disintegrating, exerted partly through teaching, also forms the background to the discussions on scholarship that we find in his letters. The latter have recently been collected in one volume, after having previously existed either merely in manuscript form or in incomplete posthumously published collections. Almost all the letters are undated, but on the basis of internal evidence (references to printing projects, books, etc), it can be estimated that most of the letters quoted in this study were written in the decades following mid-century.

The bulk of the academic topics discussed by Chen Li in his letters fall under the rubric of philology, or xiaoxue – literally “elementary learning” – which is also the field in which Chen Li conducted much of his research. This discipline, employing various methods to penetrate the meaning of ancient texts, was naturally very important in the intellectual debates of the mid to late Qing, given that the ultimate foundation for the “learning of the scholars,” (ruxue, sometimes translated as “Confucianism”), was the classical texts associated with the distant Zhou dynasty (1045-256 BC).

Several of the philological discussions found in Chen Li’s letters touch upon the Han dynasty work Shuo wen jie zi (Commenting on the simple characters, analyzing the compound characters). This book, written by Xu Shen (c. 55-c. 149 AD), was “the first comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters ever compiled.” The prominence of the Shuo wen in Chen Li’s letters is surely in part due to the fact that this work attracted the scholarly interest of quite a few of Chen’s friends, all of whom were active in Guangzhou. Several among the latter, namely Lin Botong (hao: Yueting, 1775-1845), Gui Wencan (zi: Haoting, 1823-1884), Li Yongchun (hao: Zhenbo, fl. 1873), Zheng Xianfu (zi: Xiaogu, 1801-1872) and Xu Hao (zi: Ziyuan, 1810-1879), wrote studies on Xu Shen’s work. In addition, a general interest in the Shuo wen extended beyond this group. From Chen Li’s letters, we learn that the Shuo wen scholarship being produced in Guangzhou was discussed also by people who did not themselves publish on the subject. For example, people such as Jin

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1 Names are indicated as follows: Courtesy name (zi) by zi, Literary name (hao) by hao and Posthumous name (shi) by shi. Alternative names of people are given only to the extent that they appear in the source text.

2 Chen Li ji (henceforth CLJ) vol. 1, 465.

3 They are now collected in volume one of CLJ.

4 According to Mai Yun (CLJ vol. 4, 3), the discussions on printing one of Chen Li’s works (Shuo wen shengbiao, on which see below), referred to in some of the letters central to this study, took place in 1853. Furthermore, when referring to his previous discussions with Zheng Xianfu on the Shuo wen jie zi (discussed below), Chen Li says (CLJ vol. 2, 221) that he never got to hear Zheng’s response to his theory, because: “Before long, the news of [Zheng Xianfu’s] death arrived,” which would date this letter to shortly before 1872.

5 Boltz, The Origin, 149.
Xiling (hao: Qitang, 1811-1892), Hou Du (zi: Ziqin, 1799-1855) and Gui Wenyao (zi: Zichun, Xingyuan, 1807-1854) occasionally helped Chen Li with printing, proofreading, collation and the like. Chen Li himself also assisted his friends. For example, there is a copy of a text by Xu Hao extant with Chen Li’s annotations.

**Chen Li on the Shuo wen**

Chen Li’s views on the *Shuo wen* and its author are found in a letter to Zheng Xianfu. Chen Li discusses the postscript that the latter has written to *Shuo wen yinjing yi zi* (Differences in wording in quotations of the classics in the *Shuo wen* [jie zi]), a book by Wu Yunzheng (fl. 1812). Zheng points out an inconsistency in the use of quotations from the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry) in the main body of the *Shuo wen* and what Xu Shen says about those quotations in his postface to the work. In the postface, Xu Shen states that all the references to the *Shijing* to be found in the dictionary are to the recension by Mao Gong, which at Chen Li’s time was the only complete version still extant. In the *Shuo wen* as we have it today, however, the *Shijing* quotes often differ from Mao Gong’s recension. Chen Li asserts that the quotes must have come from the other three recensions still in circulation in the Han period. He explains the differences between the postface and the main body of the text by citing the prolonged period of writing (100-121 AD) and limitations of the writing materials available in the Han:

> Having thought about this over and over again, [I believe that] when Mr. Xu wrote the postface, his book only featured quotes from the Mao recension. [...] During the twenty-two years [between finishing the draft in 100 AD and its publication in 121 AD (discrepancy due to calendrical differences)], his book must have been much revised, likely changing its old layout and adding different words from the other recensions. It is only that the three words “*Shijing’s* Mao recension” were left unchanged. Xu Chong’s [Xu Shen’s son] letter says: “Now [Xu] Shen is already ill, and he has ordered me, your servant, to bring it to the palace.” We must pardon [Xu Shen] for being distracted by his illness. The ancients used scrolls for writing that were very different from today’s pages which are easily replaceable. Therefore, [Xu Shen] kept the old postface.

6 These people are all mentioned in Chen Li’s letters. Chen also wrote a preface for Li Yongchun’s book. See Lin Mingbo, “Qingdai,” 54, 95, 115; Chen Yutang ed., Zhongguo, 752, 843; Yang Tingfu and Yang Tongfu ed., *Qingren*, vol. 2, 465; Miles, *The Sea of Learning*, 193, 220, 222; Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, 510 and Zhang Wei, *Qingdai*, 168-93. The latter refers to Xiaogu as Zheng Xianfu’s hao rather than his zi; Xianfu would be the zi which he used instead of his original name Cunzhu 存哲, which would have been avoided since the personal name of the Xianfeng emperor was Yizhu 玉濬 (sic).

7 See *CLJ*, vol. 1, 454-67; Chen Yutang ed., *Zhongguo*, 801, 981; Hummel, *Eminent Chinese*, 510. *CLJ*, vol. 1, 457 also mentions a person called Zishen 子深, a misprint of Zichen 子珍, the alternative zi of Gui Wenyao.

8 This being Xu Hao’s *Xiangxingwen shi*, located in Zhongshan library in Guangdong. See http://202.96.31.43/libAction.do?method=goToBaseDetailByNewgid&newgid=16177&class=kind [accessed 29 July 2009].

9 The 1812 (*ren shen*) edition of this work has a preface by Duan Yucai, and the 1825 (Daoguang 5) edition has a preface by Ruan Yuan. See Lin Mingbo, “Qingdai,” 82.

10 This is a modification of Miller’s (*Problems*, 294) translation. Original in Duan Yucai, *Shuo wen*, 784-87. This quote is on 787.

11 *CLJ*, vol. 1, 486.
Reading this one cannot help but notice the great effort Chen Li makes to exonerate both Xu Shen and his dictionary from any accusation of sloppiness, inconsistency or textual corruption, either in Xu Shen's lifetime or during the dictionary's transmission down to the Qing. In fact, any of these circumstances could have been invoked by a person in Chen Li's position as explanations for the variations in the Shijing quotes. Instead, Chen Li chooses to explain the differences in wording as the result of the limitations imposed by Xu Shen's illness and the writing tools he used, maintaining Xu Shen's complete editorial control over his text and his scholarly integrity while attributing the seemingly inaccurate formulation of the postface to force majeure.

It thus becomes obvious in what high esteem Chen Li held Xu Shen, having deliberated “over and over again” for a way to exonerate him from any suspicion of improper scholarly conduct. However, this explanation naturally entails a problem, which Chen Li addresses in the part of the letter preceding the above quote, involving the New Text – Old Text controversy.

The latter refers to the two competing schools of scholarship grouped around “New Text” (jinwen) and “Old Text” (guwen) versions of the classics respectively. The New Text – Old Text opposition had existed in some form since the Han dynasty, but had been given very different meanings in different times. In the Qing, the terms effectively divided the classical corpus into two groups of texts, each associated with a certain hermeneutics.

Because of his choices with regards to the texts used for reference in the Shuo wen, Xu Shen is and was generally considered to having been situated within the Old Text camp, although he remained quite flexible in his use of textual editions. In Chen Li’s time, “the three Shijing recensions” (san jia Shi) were held to be New Text versions, whereas the Mao recension was considered Old Text. However, in the Han period the Shijing was at the margins of the New Text – Old Text debate, and it was customary for Han dynasty scholars to draw from all the different versions, thus attempting to arrive at a good version by means of collation. There is no reason to assume that Xu Shen would be an exception, and it might not even be necessary to posit a contradiction between Xu Shen’s statement in the postface and his practice when quoting the Shijing in the dictionary. It is Chen Li’s letter that presumes a much stricter definition of the Mao recension. Chen Li does not mention this important difference between how the classics were read in the Han period and in his own time, although it could explain the formulation in the preface. More concerned with maintaining Xu Shen's status as a scholar living up to High Qing academic standards, Chen Li is more than willing to defend the latter by ascribing this supposed Old Text adherent at least some New Text sympathies.

12 Chen Li returns to this problem in CLJ, vol. 2, 221.
13 The terms jinwen and guwen can also refer to different scripts; jinwen being clerical script current in the Han and guwen various pre-Han script forms. See Nylan, “The Chin wen.”
14 See Miller, Problems, 61; Boltz, The Origin, 150-51; Zhou Zumo, Wenxue ji, 717.
15 See Ma Ruichen (1777/1782-1853), liyan:1a in his Mao Shi, vol. 3, 249; Ruan Yuan, Shisan jing, vol. 1, 266.
17 See Mai Yun’s preface (CLJ, vol. 4, 3-5).
From the letter we learn that not only does Chen Li have great respect for Xu Shen, he is also apparently willing to play down the importance of the opposition between the Old Text and New Text classics for Xu Shen's scholarship. But we should not from this conclude that Chen Li is thereby avoiding the error of construing the intellectual climate of the Han dynasty according to the Old Text-New Text opposition of his own time. In fact, even though he is willing to show Xu Shen moving between the Old Text and New Text classics, Chen nevertheless makes a clear separation of the Old Text classics and New Text classics into two distinct corpora. Furthermore, as he tacitly assumes that this separation existed also in the Han period, he is unmistakably arguing from the viewpoint of Qing dynasty Han-learning, a trend in Qing thinking that had risen to prominence in the 18th century. Qing dynasty Han learning was oriented towards textual criticism and had an inclination towards older texts, often dating from the distant Han dynasty at the beginning of the imperial era.

For Chen in this letter, the Mao recension is a fixed text, whereas for Xu Shen it can still be modified in the light of good scholarly judgment. This letter indicates, therefore, that although Chen Li distances himself somewhat from the Old Text-New Text opposition, he still discusses the classics from the same Qing dynasty premises, viz. that the classical texts, exemplified by the different recensions of the Shijing, can and should be divided into two groups according to their wording. Since Chen Li is, as we will see, often discussed as a synthesizer of Han and Song-learning, this obviously late imperial Han-learning approach to the Shijing is important to bear in mind.

The Importance of Philology

The Importance of Philology with Regards to the Shuo Wen

If Chen Li's views on the Shuo wen and its author are expressed primarily in this letter to Zheng Xianfu, his views on how this work should be studied are spread out in other letters. The bulk of the latter are addressed to Xu Hao, a fellow Cantonese who as noted also published on the Shuo wen. Most of the discussions in these letters involve Chen Li's own contribution to Shuo wen scholarship, a book called Shuo wen shengbiao (Sound tables for the Shuo wen [jie zi]), the first draft of which was finished before Chen turned thirty but never published in his lifetime. Since Shuo wen shengbiao is involved in many of Chen Li's letters on philology, this text is a good starting point for our review of the latter's discussions of Shuo wen scholarship and, by extension, philology in general. Just as Xu Shen's Shuo wen itself is one of the focal points for the Chinese philological tradition, so are Chen Li's views on this work important for his discussions on philology in general.

Under circumstances such as those outlined above, with the Shuo wen receiving the attention of many of Chen Li's acquaintances, Chen Li felt the need to justify his own scholarly contribution vis-à-vis that of his peers, which is what he does in the preface to Shuo wen shengbiao. Essentially, this book is a rearrangement of the Shuo wen entries according to the phonetic components of the characters and the latter's ancient readings as reconstructed by Duan Yucai (1735-1815) in seventeen rhyme groups. Each character is given in seal script form followed by Xu Shen's gloss.
(sometimes abbreviated) and a syllabic spelling (fanqie) of its sound.\(^{17}\) Compared to the work of Duan Yucai, Chen Li’s text—which is not one of his major works—looks very meager. Chen Li knew this, justifying the writing of the book in the preface.

As he explains in the preface, Chen Li found theoretical support in the method of inferring meaning through sound (\(\text{yin sheng qiu yi}^{1}\)), rephrased “elucidating the intention through sound” (\(\text{yin sheng ming yi}^{2}\)) by Chen) popular in the Qing:

If one would change [the structure of the \(\text{Shuo wen}\)] and divide the categories according to sound—and rely on sound to elucidate meaning—one could give support to Xu [Shen’s] book. So in my spare time I organized the text into sound categories grouping phonetic compounds [xingsheng].\(^{18}\)

Chen then goes on to explain that he had relied on Duan Yucai’s rhymes, and that he only later had read that Dai Zhen (1724-1777) had once urged Duan to write a book which like this one “handles the characters according to sound.” Chen Li continues:

I also heard that Yao Wentian [\(\text{shi: Wenxi}, 1758-1827\)], Zhang Huiyan [\(\text{zi: Gaowen}, 1761-1802\)] and Qian Tang [also called: Gaiting, 1735-1790] all had written on this, so I began searching for their books. I could not get hold of Qian’s book [\(\text{Shuo wen shengzi}\) (Linked sounds of \(\text{Shuo wen}\) [\(\text{jie zil}\)]), twenty \(\text{juan}\)]. Yao had in his book [\(\text{Shuo wen shengzi}\) (Linked sounds of \(\text{Shuo wen}\) [\(\text{jie zil}\)]), fourteen \(\text{juan}\), no relation to Qian’s book] changed the [original] seal script to clerical script, and Zhang had written his book [\(\text{Shuo wen xiesheng pu}\) (Lists of phonetic compounds in the \(\text{Shuo wen}\) [\(\text{jie zil}\)]) in order to work on the ancient rhymes, thus having intentions different from mine.\(^{19}\)

This way Chen’s work—which admittedly “may not be a masterpiece”—in his view occupies its own niche and fills a function for students of philology, in that it offers a quick way to identify words belonging to the same rhyme.

As mentioned above, the lengthiest and most elaborate discussion on philology to be found among Chen Li’s letters is in his correspondence with Xu Hao. Although Xu Hao wrote less than Chen Li, he did produce studies on the classics and \(\text{Shuo wen jie zi}\), including a sub-commentary (\(\text{jian}\)) on Duan Yucai’s annotated edition of this work and a text entitled \(\text{Xiangxingwen shi}\) (Explanation of iconic graphs, preface by the author dated 1846 [Daoguang 26]).\(^{20}\) The latter text and its relation to \(\text{Shuo wen shengbiao}\) were the starting point of Chen Li’s discussions with Xu Hao.

The first thing to stand out from Chen Li’s discussions with Xu Hao is the former’s great concern with pedagogy in relation to scholarship. That this aspect is especially pronounced in this context is surely in part the result of the discussion being focused on two minor philological works. In the very first letter, Chen Li makes

\(^{18}\) CLJ, vol. 1, 125.

\(^{19}\) CLJ, vol. 1, 125. On the three cited works, see Lin Mingbo, “Qingdai,” 173, 174, 180.

clear that he has been writing on phonology in order to teach children. Further on, he continues:

When I teach the boys I use your method: I begin with characters like ri ᡪ [sun] and yue ᡫ [moon]. To explain ri, I merely gloss it as a circle [ling ] and say that it is round in shape [...]. When glossing yue, I just say that it resembles the moon and is bent in shape. If I were to record the original text of Xu [Shen's] book, I would have to add explanatory comments, so it is better to summarize it succinctly and clearly [like this].

When Chen Li hears that Xu Hao wants to integrate his Xiangxingwen shi with the commentary on Duan Yucai's Shuo wen edition, he does not object but remarks that "the original work can be used as the basis for teaching children, which is really what the ancients referred to as philology [xiaoxue]," referring to the classical definition of xiaoxue as the elementary schooling of children given both in the Hanshu (Book of Han) and in Xu Shen's postface to the Shuo wen.

Faithful to the spirit of High Qing Han-learning, Chen Li thus resurrects the meaning that xiaoxue had in antiquity, before it had become a specialized linguistic discipline in the hands of the kaozheng ("evidential research") masters of the 18th century, in a way taking their own form of argumentation and using it against them.

This argument connects the discussions on philology and teaching with another characteristic of the discourse in Chen Li's letters, including those to Xu Hao, namely the coexistence of topics and research methods associated with two different schools of thought. The first school of thought engaged by Chen Li is the "Han learning" or kaozhengxue of the 18th century, a movement ultimately inspired by a will to bring the work of Han dynasty scholars into focus, with the second school being the "learning of the Way" of the Song, notably as represented by Zhu Xi (1130-1200). The coexistence within one discourse of opposing schools of thought has been labeled Chen Li's will to reconcile Han- and Song-learning, both of the latter being terms used by Chen Li in the letters. Although Chen Li's de-emphasis of the tasks of philology in this letter are in accordance with the views he expresses in other letters on the topic of Han- and Song-learning, what we are actually faced with here remains a mere respect for rigorous yet broad scholarship, which Chen believes to be in decline and wants to remedy by promoting pedagogical textbooks of philology.

Chen Li also refers to a letter by Xu Hao saying that in a hundred-odd years scholars will no longer make the distinction between Han- and Song-learning, and that by then people will only be exposed to these schools of learning in small bits and pieces. Chen Li believes that this problem is already discernible, referring to friends.

21 CLJ, vol. 1, 454.
22 CLJ, vol. 1, 460.
24 See Ban Gu, Hanshu, vol. 6, 30:1720 and Malmqvist, “Xu Shen’s Postface,” 49. The use of the Shuo wen for basic education was prevalent among Chen Li’s friends, e.g. Gui Wencan. See Lin Mingbo, "Qingdai," 54.
25 See for example Li Xubai, “Chen Li.”
in the lower Yangzi region witnessing the non-existence of classical scholarship there and to his own experience in Guangzhou, where the old generation has all but passed away and there are few to continue the tradition. “If one examines the origin of this matter,” writes Chen Li as he discusses the causes and possible remedies of this problem,

one sees that it is not completely the harm brought about by contemporary prose [i.e. prose in the eight legged-essay style prevalent in official examinations]; it is also as Master Zhu [Xi] says, that people simply lack philology. Since we do not have the power to remedy this, we do not aim for fame and blowing our own trumpets. All we have is the labor of writing books to illuminate philology in order to teach students, to make their entry [into philology] easier. Then maybe the [number of] students would gradually increase, and there would be hope. Is it not because of lacking work in philology that there even are epigones of Master Zhu – who himself wrote in such a well-researched manner and had such a broad knowledge of myriad books – that enter into empty and ignorant [discussions]?26

Chen Li’s criticism of later followers of Song-learning in this passage looks very much like the standard kaozheng repudiation of Ming philosophy, as Chen clearly demarcates the latecomers from Zhu Xi.

The Importance of Philology with Regards to Scholarship in General

Chen’s argument that philology is both an exacting and essential discipline also echoes in discussions on philology found in correspondence with other people. In a letter to his protégé Zhao Qiyong (zi: Zishao, 1826-1865),27 Chen Li discusses phonology – an area in which he also had much authority – and its importance for xiaoxue. Referring to the study of medieval rhyme dictionaries, Zhao had expressed interest to “organize the thirty-six initials,” prompting Chen Li to give his views on the method and importance of studying these dictionaries and the reasons for writing his Qieyun kao (Examination of [the Sui dynasty rhyme dictionary] Qieyun). Chen Li explains his approach:

When I examined the Qieyun [The cutting of rhymes], I did not neglect a single character. This is the way to conduct any specialized study [...] I had to write this book [Qieyun kao] because philology is originally about knowing characters. But is it admissible to say that one knows characters if one can recognize them visually but not be able to read them out loud? To only speak of “read like” [duruo and duru] and not know syllabic spelling is like knowing seal script but not the regular script.28

Here Chen Li is confidently speaking both of how and why one studies phonology, which is, in his view, a fundamental discipline deserving of meticulous study. For Chen Li, not mastering the tools of phonology – like the system of fanqie spellings –

26 CLJ, vol. 1, 455.
27 Miles, The Sea, 231.
28 CLJ, vol. 1, 176-77. For Duruo and duru, see Coblin, A Handbook, 12.
is ridiculous because it is an easier and more evolved form of phonetic notation compared to earlier sound glosses, just as the ordinary regular script is both more convenient and further developed than the antiquated seal script.

Chen Li obviously felt that writing the Qieyun kao was hard work; in another letter to Zhao, he says that he has temporarily stopped working on it in favor of editing a book called Zhuzi quanxue yu (Sayings of Master Zhu [Xi] urging people to study),29 “because I was sick of it.”30 Apparently, Chen Li felt that studying the Song master Zhu Xi offered a good distraction from the labors of phonology, generally considered quite far from the endeavors of Song-learning.

In another letter, this time to Gui Wencan, Chen Li once again stresses the hardships of phonological studies (along with historical geography and musical theory, on which he had also written). He then goes on to propose a division of labor in order to overcome the difficulties of mastering these disciplines. This statement is directly prompted by the hardships of phonology: 31

What is nowadays commonly referred to as the study of the classics and philology still have practitioners, but people with a substantial knowledge [of these subjects] are few. If you would specialize in [the study of] ceremony, myself in music, Zou Boqi [zi: Tefu, 1819-1869] in calendrical astronomy and Zhao Qiying in geography, then these substantial fields of learning would perhaps not die out, and later scholars would have something to learn from. If all our colleagues would specialize in one discipline each it would be even better, but we must only avoid what Master Zhu [Xi] calls “dispelling learning.”32

Philology, like other fields of learning, is thus so difficult that it is advisable to relinquish mastery of other disciplines if one aspires to truly study it. It is interesting to note, though, that Chen Li proposes music as his own specialty, leaving philology untouched. Moreover, Chen Li’s final statement in this quote, referring to Zhu Xi, anticipates an important twist in the argument, in which Zhu Xi is invoked to contain philology.

The Dangers of Philology

The Dangers of Philology in the Letters to Xu Hao

Even as Chen Li stresses the importance of philology and the need for good textbooks for introducing new students, he makes clear that this emphasis can also go too far and make philology overbearing, leaving no room for other modes of study. An attitude critical of philology is also apparent in Chen Li’s letters to Xu Hao, where it creates a tension between the will to encourage philological studies and the need to contain them. In one letter to Xu Hao, Chen Li shows that his will to redefine the

29 Chen Li left no book with this title.
30 CLJ, vol. 1, 472.
31 Phonology is also discussed in CLJ, vol. 1, 476-77, 484.
32 CLJ, vol. 1, 430. “Dispelling learning” is used by Zhu Xi (Zhuzi, vol. 8, 121: 2927) with reference to people of his day escaping the difficult commitment to learning. In Dongshu dushu ji (CLJ, vol. 2, 296), Chen Li quotes this chapter of Zhuzi yulei but not this part.
role of philology with reference to its origins in antiquity involves putting the achievements of the kaozheng movement – the apex of Qing philology – into some perspective:

Elementary learning \([xiao\text{xue}]\) was what the ancients would study before the age of fifteen \(sui\). Before fifteen \(sui\) they had already understood elementary learning, thus they entered into adult learning \([daxue]\) at fifteen. In three years they mastered one art, and in thirty years they had mastered all the six arts. For a hundred years scholars have worked in philology \([xiao\text{xue}\]\), surpassing the scholars of the Tang and Song. However, the books they have written are often profound and broad and can only speak to people who already know \([\text{the subject}]\). An average person does not have the talent to understand them; he would put the book down without having finished one \(juan\). I often say that when recent scholars discuss philology, they really could go on until they are old without exhausting \([\text{the subject}]\); this is not what the ancients labeled elementary learning. When the learning of the scholars of the Han flourished, Ban Gu \([zi: Mengjian, 32-92 AD]\) still thought it to be because of \([\text{the desire for}]\) rank and wealth. Nowadays people who seek rank and wealth no longer rely on \([\text{learning}]\), and for someone who has a little resolve and goes on to read these kinds of books also labor without getting past the threshold. This is why this field of scholarship is not prospering and is now in gradual decline, despite having been clarified and promoted with the help of the many masters of the Qianlong \([1735-1796]\) and Jiaqing periods \([1796-1820]\). \([\ldots]\) If more people get introduced \([\text{to} xiao\text{xue}\]\), then this Way would start to flourish by the day; those able to pursue advanced study would go on to become complete scholars, and those unable to do so would still get a general knowledge of it. Thus we would not end up with ignorance, and scholarly learning would be refined. Therefore, profound and broad books are actually not as good as elementary textbooks with regards to what they can achieve, and I especially regret that for a hundred years there has been no one to write these kinds of books.33

Without criticizing the philology of the 18th century directly, Chen Li stresses that its achievements are void if they are of no use in introducing new students to scholarship. This is a proposition that only makes sense if philology is seen as essentially an auxiliary discipline, subsumed by the broader “learning of the scholars.” Chen Li here tacitly adheres to a view equating philosophy (i.e. the study of the Way) with the study of the classics supported by philology, but at the same time he softens it by introducing accessibility, alongside philosophical insight, as an essential criterion for judging the merits of scholarship.

In addition, this criticism is fuelled by the lack of institutional support that Chen Li recognizes in his day. Philological knowledge is not valued in the official examinations, making teaching in the academies the only career path open to a specialized philologist, although in competition with proponents of other disciplines. The way out of this impasse would, according to Chen Li, go through the establishment of a hierarchy of learning encompassing all disciplines. With the relationships between the disciplines defined, the latter could draw strength from each other rather than

33 CLJ, vol. 1, 458. In this passage, Chen Li uses xiao\text{xue} in both its ancient and modern sense, that is why I have chosen to translate it differently at these two places.
competing for predominance. Such a hierarchy would also have to recognize the importance of pedagogy in order to protect the highly specialized branches of learning from decline in this time of unfavorable social conditions.

**The Dangers of Philology in Other Letters**

Chen Li’s wariness towards excessive reliance on philology is not limited to his correspondence with Xu Hao but is discernible in other letters as well.

In a letter to Gui Wencan he discusses commentaries on the *Shijing*. What is at stake is the meaning of a classical text, why it is difficult to say where *xiaoxue* (philology) ends and *jingxue* (the study of the classics) begins. In Chen Li’s time, *jingxue* could not do without *xiaoxue* in its establishment of the correct meaning of the classics, thus the two are necessarily entangled in Chen Li’s discussion. In fact, Chen Li actually bundles the two together with the aim of criticizing what he sees as the exaggerated importance invested in them both. Chen Li explains the harm brought on the poetic nature of the *Shijing* by the reader’s attention being drawn to the detailed sub-commentary that is often included in contemporary editions:

Recently I have been reading Zheng [Xuan’s (127-200 AD)] explanatory notes [jian] on the *bian ya* section of the *Shijing*; it is truly as [Zheng Xuan] says, that [the *Shijing* shows us] the origin of misfortune and fortune, the sprouting and withering away of sorrow and happiness this clearly, [making it] capable of acting as a model for posterity. It is with a sigh that I see how people recently do not pay attention to this as they read the commentaries. The more they read, the more they examine, the more useless are [their efforts] – even though [people making such efforts] are many, of what use could they be? This is also because the explanatory notes and the sub-commentary [shu] have been printed together. (The reader [thus] focuses on the sub-commentary, and ignores the explanatory notes.) If the explanatory notes and sub-commentary were printed on different lines it would not come to this. Recently Mr. Zhou from Mudu has printed a recension with the explanatory notes; this is really an excellent edition.34 During the hundreds of years since Master Zhu [Xi], the people explaining the *Classic of Poetry* have not [in fact] been explaining poetry; all they have been doing is discussing the meaning of a classic text. (In recent times, people explaining the *Classic of Poetry* have only discussed philological matters.) They say they honor Han-learning, but where can you see them paying attention to the origin of misfortune and fortune, the sprouting of sorrow and happiness?35

Chen Li here speaks out against overemphasizing philological issues in the context of the *Shijing* and thereby forgetting that this text is a living piece of literature. He discards recent scholarship and gropes back towards Zheng Xuan’s and Zhu Xi’s views on the *Shijing*. Michael Loewe writes about Zheng, who is paraphrased by Chen Li in the letter, that he sought to show the rise and decline of the Zhou through the establishment of *bian ya* (and *bian feng*) as categories of poems describing the

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34 Kong Deling (“Mao Shi,” 74) lists two editions by Zhou in Mudu (Guangxian, Jiangsu), one from 1804 and one from 1816.

35 CLJ, vol. 1, 433.
later decadent Zhou. According to Loewe, Zhu Xi was negative towards interpreting the poems politically, stressing their lyrical character instead. Although Zhu Xi’s views and those of Zheng Xuan might seem contradictory in part, they are in Chen Li’s letter both contrasted with the one-sided and dry criticism of later ages. Interestingly, Chen Li advocates the Shijing’s lyrical immediacy against the contemporary proponents of Han-learning while basing himself on Zheng Xuan, who was a scholar of the Han. Here too we see Chen Li subverting the standpoint of his adversaries by making better use of their own methods.

Furthermore, this letter confirms once more that Chen Li, who was obviously no opponent of philological study per se, still sought to restrain its influence by establishing an academic balance of power. In another letter to Gui Wencan, Chen Li also criticizes the bias towards philological matters that he perceived among his contemporaries:

You will not find a scholar in this world who is not responsible for its misfortunes. If saying it like this is wrong, then let us say that people usually emphasize explanatory glosses [xun xiu] and do not explore the sense or pay attention to political action.

Just as in the case of the Shijing, Chen Li here is concerned that focusing too much on philology leads to the neglect of the original intent of the text at hand, be it the expression of emotions or the principles and methods of politics. Chen Li, despite being one of the most important philologists of his time, makes efforts to fend off philology’s attempts to colonize the other humanistic disciplines. Since the “learning of the scholars” of Chen Li’s day had become increasingly text-based, philological methods could be applied in most disciplines. In Chen Li’s view, therefore, as long as the role of philology is not clearly defined, there would always be the risk of its universal application entailing the neglect of other modes of inquiry.

Concluding Remarks

The Organization of Learning

In conclusion, we can firstly note that Chen Li discusses philology from various starting points, the most important of which is Xu Shen’s Shuo wen jie zi. Seen from Chen Li’s standpoint, this must primarily be because of this book’s importance as a bridge between the ancient definition of philology (xiaoxue) as “elementary learning” and its later role as a specialized research discipline. From a social standpoint, the great attention given to the Shuo wen in Chen Li’s letters appears as a natural consequence of the interest in this work manifest among Chen Li’s friends and colleagues in Guangzhou. If we treat Chen Li’s discourse on xiaoxue in these letters

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37 See also CLJ, vol. 2, 119 for a related discussion.
38 See also CLJ, vol. 2, 668.
39 CLJ, vol. 1, 439.
40 See also Zhu Xi’s similar statement (Huian, vol. 23, 74: 14a), quoted by Chen Li (CLJ, vol. 2, 296; “sub-commentary” [shu] is absent in the original).
as a structurally coherent text, the *Shuo wen* is, for Chen Li, the starting point for an argument encompassing philology in general and its place within the “learning of the scholars.” Reconstructing this argument, we see that Chen Li organizes learning in part conventionally according to the nature of the object of study – e.g. *jingxue* as studies centered on the classics – but most importantly according to the methods applied in the study of that object. In addition to the statements on *jingxue* quoted above, Chen Li also on one occasion gives a straight-forward definition of the term that stresses this aspect:

> What is called the study of the classics is valuing to read [the material] from beginning to end, think about it, organize it, connect it, and explain it. If you feel that you cannot do otherwise – criticize and discuss it. If you feel that you definitely cannot do otherwise – refute it. Only seek that which is beneficial to you and useful to the world, and that which contributes to [the knowledge of] the ancients and benefits posterity. This is what I call the study of the classics. [If you find something] beneficial and useful, put it aside for the time being. If something is impossible to understand, leave it out. This is what I call the study of the classics.41

Following this methodological distinction of disciplines, the *Shijing* can be studied both as a “classic” (*jing*) – in the very demanding way outlined above – and as “poetry” (*shi*). Likewise, philosophical enquiry is neither exalted nor discredited as such; its value depends on the methods and attitudes with which it is undertaken. Chen Li can praise Zhu Xi repeatedly while still criticizing some of his followers, because he considers the former to have had broad and profound knowledge of texts, whereas the latter supposedly did not. Accordingly, philology or *xiaoxue* is commendable as long as it is practiced with the right aims in mind: the accretion of useful knowledge and the uninterrupted transmission of that knowledge to following generations.42

**Han-, Song- and Qing-Learning**

The terms of Han and Song-learning are also occasionally used in Chen Li’s letters to organize learning, but they are not in position to dominate the discourse and are used sparsely. With the passing of time, these terms have for us become uncomfortably ambiguous, referring both to the learning produced by the scholars of the Han and Song respectively and to intellectual movements during the late imperial period that either themselves identified with those periods or have been grouped together with them by contemporary adversaries or later historians. In his letters, Chen Li uses these terms almost exclusively in the former sense, referring to the learning of earlier dynasties. Only once in these letters does he speak of representatives of Han-learning in the latter sense as people who “honor Han-learning,” seemingly only because they themselves use this appellation.43 Given Chen Li’s own restraint in using these terms, there is no reason for us to let them dominate our analysis of his thought, at

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41 *CLJ*, vol. 1, 179.
42 Also discussed in Qian Mu, *Qian Binsi*, 796-97.
43 See *CLJ*, vol. 2, 119 for “Han-learning” (*Hanxue*) with reference to 18th century scholarship.
least not as it appears in these letters.

If one wants to relate Chen Li’s thought to Qing learning in general, the most obvious connection is that to Ruan Yuan. Ruan’s influence was very strong in Guangzhou and Chen Li often expressed admiration for him. Ruan Yuan’s view of xunguxue, a sub-discipline of xiaoxue that roughly corresponded to the modern discipline of semantics, as the necessary basis for philosophy also accords with Chen Li’s. On the other hand, this view was also shared by other important figures in the Qing. Going beyond Ruan, Chen Li had strong affinity for Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), one of the most important intellectuals of the early Qing whose work was of great importance for the later kaozheng movement. Chen Li mentions both Gu Yanwu and his work in the letters. Furthermore, the influence of Gu’s thought on Chen Li is also manifest in the letters. Chen Li’s emphasis on a hierarchy of learning with philology at its base resonates with Gu Yanwu’s thought. Gu had seen the study of principle (li) – i.e. philosophical inquiry – as inseparable from the study of the classics, equating the two as the pinnacle of learning. Chen Li’s positing of xiaoxue as indispensable but auxiliary to the higher echelon of learning derives its strength from firmly placing the study of the classics at that higher echelon. That is, Chen Li’s argument presupposes Gu Yanwu’s view, famously laid out by the latter:

I believe that the term “study of principle” (lixue) originates with the people of the Song. What was called “study of principle” by antiquity was the study of the classics (jingxue), which takes decades to master. [...] What is nowadays called “study of principle” is in fact Chan [Buddhist] learning.

Comparing this statement with Chen Li’s reasoning with regards to philology as outlined above, we see how it follows that of Gu; both reconnect the issues of their day with the situation in antiquity, thereby circumventing the immediate past. For Gu, this immediate past would be the “school of mind” (xinxue) current in the Ming, which in the Qing was frequently associated with Chan Buddhism; for Chen, the allegedly excessively professionalized philology of the 18th century. Through this argumentation, philology is firmly tied to the study of the classics, which in itself constitutes philosophy. Thus, philology and the study of the classics are denied absolute disciplinary independence, and the unity of learning is maintained.

44 E.g. CLJ, vol. 2, 745.
45 Zhou Zumo, Yuyan, 405.
46 On Ruan Yuan, see Wu Genyou, “Shilun.” Chen Li also held xunguxue in high esteem (CLJ, vol. 2, 215).
47 For example, Wang Niansun (1744-1832), “Xu” (Preface), in Duan Yucai, Shuo wen, xu:1b, 1.
48 For Chen’s affinity for Gu, see Wang Huirong, Chen Li, 30. On Gu Yanwu, see Hummel, Eminent Chinese, 421–26.
49 Mentions of Gu Yanwu include CLJ, vol. 1, 138. Furthermore, Chen’s Dongshu dushu ji (CLJ, vol. 2) was inspired by Gu Yanwu’s Rizhi lu (Daily records of knowledge). See CLJ, vol. 1, 174 (letter dated to 1864 [Tongzhi 3] by Qian Mu, Qian Binsi, 796).
50 Gu Yanwu, Gu Tinglin, 59.
51 Chen Li also agreed with Gu Yanwu’s characterization of Ming “study of principle” as Chan Buddhism. See CLJ, vol. 1, 165.
Reconnecting to Gu Yanwu might have appeared as a way for Chen Li to distance himself a bit from the kaozheng masters of the immediately preceding generations. In some cases, such as the discussions on xiaoxue as “elementary learning” and the ways to read the Shijing, Chen Li is quite successful in distancing himself from his contemporaries. On other occasions, as when Chen attempts to position Xu Shen on the New Text-Old Text axis, he seems stuck in the prejudices of his own time.

However, Chen Li’s insistence on the need for specialization among the disciplines acknowledges the complexity of fields such as philology. At the same time, it obviously also has a correlation with the above quote by Gu Yanwu, which stresses the difficulty of mastering jingxue. Hence, Chen Li does in no way try to nullify the achievements of the 18th century High Qing philologists who brought the discipline to where it stood in his day.

Furthermore, Chen’s frequent invocations of Zhu Xi to counterbalance the pressure of the expanding discipline of philology might also be seen as reconnecting to Gu Yanwu. After all, the latter was considered by the Han-learning adherent Jiang Fan (1761-1831) to have “taken Master Zhu [Xi] as a model.” In the letters, Chen’s Han–Song synthesis thus appears more as a will to uphold a few scholars from various ages as models. In addition to Gu Yanwu from the late Ming and early Qing and Zhu Xi from the Song, Chen Li also greatly admired Zheng Xuan of the Han. The favorable treatment of Xu Shen in Chen Li’s letters would perhaps warrant adding this other Han intellectual too to the list of Chen Li’s model scholars.

Chen Li also expresses his identification with individual scholars rather than schools of learning in the preface to his Dongshu dushu ji (Reading notes from the Eastern School). Here, he summarizes his own intellectual trajectory and discusses both Han and Song in general and individual scholars from those periods, such as Zhu Xi and Zheng Xuan. At one point Chen also goes beyond an open-minded eclecticism accommodating unrelated modes of thought, and comes close to an actual synthesis of “evidential research” and Song dynasty thinking that stresses methodological similarity:

As I read Master Zhu [Xi’s] books, I came to believe that the textual criticism [kaoju zhi xue, i.e. kaozhengxue, the learning of the 18th century High Qing] of our dynasty originated with Master Zhu, and that we should not slander him.54

This statement should be read against the background of the common view of Gu Yanwu’s thought as inspired by Zhu Xi. Both Jiang Fan and Chen Li knew the importance of Gu for the kaozheng movement, despite the latter’s great esteem of the Song dynasty thinker Zhu Xi. Jiang Fan had taken this as a reason to separate Gu from the kaozheng movement by setting Gu’s biography off from the main body of the text in his Guochao Hanxue shicheng ji (Record of the intellectual lineage of

53 Li Xubai (“Chen Li”, 81) and Qian Mu (Qian Binsi, 808) emphasize Chen Li’s affinity for Zheng Xuan.
Han-learning in our dynasty). On the other hand, the role of Gu Yanwu as a bridge between Song-learning and kaozhengxue would also lend Chen Li’s attempt to play down the differences between the two intellectual currents more credence.

New Texts and Old Texts
The Han-Song opposition is used to organize mainly early Qing thought. As the New Text movement grew out of the former during the final years of the 18th century, at the same time as kaozheng methods gained wider recognition, the New Text – Old Text opposition came to eclipse that between Han and Song. As seen from Chen Li’s comments on Shijing quotes in the Shuo wen, discussed above, Chen Li and his friends were accustomed to using the New Text-Old Text distinction when discussing different versions of the classics. However, Chen Li could allow coexistence of the two corpora. In the letters as a whole, questions relating to the New Text – Old Text controversy are discussed very sparsely. This could not have been due to lack of exposure or knowledge since Chen Li as a student had specialized in the Guliang commentary to the Chun qiu (Spring and autumn), a text associated with the New Text camp and central to the controversy. Chen Li actually discusses the Chun qiu in two consecutive letters to Gui Wencan, in which he shows an interest in both the Gongyang and Zuo zhuan commentaries to that work, associated with the New Text and Old Text schools respectively. Similarly, Chen Li dedicates one juan of his Dongshu dushu ji to the three Chun qiu commentaries, spending much time defending the Zuo zhuan while upholding that the commentaries all have both strong and weak points. Moreover, Chen Li’s comments on how to read the Shijing with “a deep affinity to the ‘art for art’s sake’ approach” also recalls New Text scholar Wei Yuan’s (1794-1856) opinion.

We can also try to position Chen Li in the letters on the New Text – Old Text axis based on his methodology of reading and discussing the ancient texts, rather than on overt references to heated debates among contemporary Old Text and New Text scholars. In the discussion on the Shijing quotes in the Shuo wen, for example, Chen Li appears to willingly play down the issue by ascribing Xu Shen some New Text sympathies, which in turn could be interpreted as leaning towards a New Text

55 Elman (Classicism, p. 126) holds this view, and also characterizes “New Text Confucianism” as the “offspring” of Han-learning.
56 See Miles, The Sea, 186; Liang Chi-ch’ao, Intellectual Trends, 88-91; Li Xuhai, “Chen Li,” 82.
58 Juin 10 (“Chunqiu san zhuan” [The three Spring and Autumn commentaries]) in Dongshu dushu ji, CLJ, vol. 2.
59 Liang Chi-ch’ao, Intellectual Trends, 90. Liang refers to Wei Yuan’s (Shi guwei, 166) opinion.
60 Elman (Classicism, 203) asserts that this expression already by the early 1800s had become “a code expression for New Text studies of the Former Han dynasty[.]”
61 Chen Li wrote in his diary (CLJ, vol. 2, 751): “The reason I do not dare to make doctrines to serve the state is that [even though] I can speak about them, I am in no position of power and cannot put them to practice.”
63 CLJ, vol. 2, 743.
position. However, his argument in this case is concerned uniquely with the wording of the *Shijing* quotes in the *Shuo wen*; there is no appeal to a greater meaning underlying relatively unimportant textual variants. This is contrary to what we would expect of a New Text scholar in the Qing, for whom identifying “great meaning in subtle words” (*weiyan dayi*) was a leading principle in the study of the classics.\(^{60}\) Chen Li's way of arguing could be interpreted as him remaining far from New Text approaches to the classics. On the other hand, Chen's philological method of “elucidating the intention through sound” with its appeal to the message's intended meaning, i.e. the speaker's thoughts, rather than lexical meaning (*yi*\(^1\)) could be interpreted as having New Text overtones. Furthermore, Chen's preoccupation with philology and his simultaneous wariness towards its excessive application seems to be hovering between 18\(^{th}\) century Old Text *kaozheng* research and theoretically inclined New Text scholarship. In sum, Chen Li does not seem to favor either the New Text or Old Text camp. The New Text–Old Text opposition simply does not appear to be an issue in his letters.

Perhaps there was relatively little interest in these questions among his friends—which would explain why they are not extensively discussed in the letters—or Chen Li himself simply did not feel strongly about this issue. Perhaps Chen Li, an educator and scholar but definitely not a statesman,\(^{61}\) stayed away from this issue because it was (or at least would be) tied up with factional politics.\(^{62}\) In a time of social instability, where a profound knowledge of the scholarly tradition did not necessarily entail social advancement, and where the tradition itself was showing signs of dividing into discrete disciplines, Chen Li's focus was, judging by these letters, primarily to ensure its transmission. After all, he once wrote in his diary:

> I now have one teacher and five friends. The books are my teacher. The red brush, the ink, the lamp, the wine and the desk are my friends.\(^{63}\)

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**GLOSSARY**

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<td>Zuo zhuan 左傳</td>
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