

Metaphysical Violent Hermeneutic Misreading of Confucian Literary Theory

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Abstract This essay examines the Daoist metaphysical masters' hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian classics during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. Applying the concept of misreading as the theoretical guideline, we will first analyze the three important supporting columns of Confucian literary theory: the importance of virtue/morality, the authority of literary sages and the ontology of the classics, and then we will examine the metaphysical masters' subversion of the Confucian classics by misreading with their Daoist literary theory and concepts. In their hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian classics, the metaphysical masters in fact fused the original concepts of the Confucian classics with their contemporary Daoist hermeneutics, and the result of such a fusion is that the original meanings as the signified parted from the signifiers—the texts of the classics themselves—and were turned into repositories of contemporary Daoist meanings. In such a hermeneutic misreading, the Daoist theorists forced the Confucian theory and its ontology to gloomily withdraw from the cultural center, and gradually took the spotlight on the historical stage of the Wei and Jin Dynasties. In their open attitudes and flexible system, the metaphysical theorists constructed an age of enlightenment for the development of literary theory. With their hermeneutic misreading, the metaphysical literary theorists indeed broke through the world of Confucianism, won the right of expression, and voluntarily moved toward the self-fulfillment of their own system in the Wei and Jin Dynasties.

Keywords Misreading · Metaphysical theory · Taoism · Confucian literary theory · Ontology

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1 Introduction

Some contemporary theories of criticism assert that the only reliable reading of a text is misreading, that the only existence of a text given by the chain of responses it elicits, and that, as maliciously suggested by Todorov (quoting Lichtenberg, a propos of Jakob Boehme), a text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers bring the sense (Eco 1992, 24).

In the historical development of hermeneutics in China, “*jing* studies” 经学和 “metaphysical studies” 玄学 represented two most important schools. While the former focused on studies of Confucian classics and the later concentrated on studies of Daoist classics. At the end of East Han time (184–220 AD), the “*jing* studies” became more and more minute, trivial, overly idolized and mysteriously superstitious. This caused the decline of Confucian theories, and consequently Daoist doctrines of Laozi and Zhuangzi began to flourish in the Wei and Jin Dynasties (220–420 AD), and thus Daoist metaphysical studies became the main current then. During this time, the Daoist masters represented by He Yan 何晏 (ca. 195–249 AD) and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 AD), who, starting from their home base of Daoist ontology established by Laozi 老子 (ca. 571–471 BC) and Zhuangzi 庄子 (ca. 369–286 BC), initiated metaphysical misreading of Confucian classics. More specifically, on the one hand, Daoist scholars led by He Yan hermeneutically annotated Confucius’ *The Analects* with Daoist metaphysical concepts, thus disintegrated the original Confucian concepts, and integrated them into metaphysical doctrines, while, on the other hand, Wang Bi hermeneutically turned Confucius’ *The Book of Changes* 《周易》 into one of the three Daoist classics during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, (the other two are *Laozi* 《老子》 and *Zhuangzi* 《庄子》). This was the larger historical background that the Daoist metaphysical studies rose and came to the center of Chinese culture, and this is also the starting point of our hermeneutic discussion of Daoist metaphysical destructive misreading of Confucian classics.

Misreading has carried on the great task of constructing new culture by subverting the old. It helps develop human culture in either violent or tolerant ways of new radical thinking. There would be no new human ideas and no new cultural development without “misreading.” Looking back at the development of Chinese culture which has formed various classical literary theories, we can say what hermeneutics in Chinese culture contained was the true essence of misreading. This was obviously shown in the violent hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian classics by the Daoist metaphysical scholars during the historical period of the Wei and Jin Dynasties¹ (220–420 AD).

It is in this period that the metaphysical scholars tried to misread the Confucian classics with their pre-understanding of the hermeneutics of Daoist² culture and

¹ The spellings of proper nouns and Chinese words in this essay will follow the new style of Chinese Pinyin, except for those in direct quotations.

² We use Daoist and Daoism in philosophical and metaphysical terms rather than in religious terms in this paper.

theory. In their hermeneutics, the Confucian scholars were quite different from the Daoist metaphysical scholars in interpreting the Confucian classics. The Confucian scholars had been trying all their best to protect the original meanings of the Confucian classics and to keep the signifier and the signified permanently unified in order to safeguard their supreme logocentric status, but the metaphysical scholars purposely interpreted or rather subverted the original meanings of the Confucian classics and forced the signifier to part from the signified. Thus, we can say that the metaphysical scholars' subversion of the Confucian classics was fulfilled by their deliberate misreading of them. At a deeper level of the theory of hermeneutics, the ideological power of misreading was tremendous and shocking, and it was an extremely destructive violence in cultural development. It was exactly with this great power that the metaphysical scholars quite easily broke the "great unified spiritual world" meticulously and painstakingly constructed by the great Confucian scholars during the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), and they forcefully subverted the Confucian literary theory with their Daoist literary principles. This actually showed the phenomenon of the struggle for the authentic status of literary theories during the transformative period from the late Han Dynasty to the Wei and Jin Dynasties, and that ideological struggle was no less cruel than the bloody slaughters by the ambitious politicians in their fierce struggle for supreme power over the Chinese empire. Indeed, the Daoist literary theorists usurped the supreme Confucian literary status in literary theory and criticism precisely by misreading.

In the so-called uncivilized period of the pre-Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), the *ding* 鼎³ symbolized the power of the country. The Xia 夏 (2200–1700 BC), Shang 商 (1700–1100 BC), and Zhou 周 (1100–256 BC) Dynasties regarded the *ding* as the emblem of their empires. It is well known in Chinese history that King Zhuang of Chu 楚庄王 (613–591 BC) once defiantly questioned the size and weight of the nine *ding*, coveting the power of the Zhou Empire. If we regard Confucian literary theory as a metaphorical *ding*, then the three supporting legs of this spiritual *ding* are the importance of morality, the authority of the Sage, and the ontology of *jing* 经—the Confucian classics in literary interpretation and criticism. This is reflected in the summary of the three most important principles of the literary theory system in Liu Xie's 刘勰 (ca. 465–520 AD) introduction to his famous *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*: "On *Dao*, the Source," "Evidence from the Sage," and "the Classics as Literary Sources" (Shi trans. 1983, 8, 13, 17).

2 Morality (德): The Most Important of the Three Legs of the Metaphorical *Ding* 鼎

Confucian literary theorists have always based their literary criticism and principles of hermeneutics on morality when interpreting literary and artistic works. This can be proved by Confucius' esthetic and ethical judgment of the music of *Shao* and

³ *Ding* 鼎 originally was a cooking vessel. Later it was used to cook food for religious ceremonies and became a ritual symbol of power for dukes and emperors. Dukes could have only seven *ding*, and the emperor could have nine *ding*.

Wu.⁴ Book III of *The Analects* states: “The Master said of the *shao* that it was both perfectly beautiful and perfectly good, and of the *wu* that it was perfectly beautiful, but not perfectly good” (Lau trans. 1992, 27). In Confucian theory, “good” is a moral and rational standard to judge whether a literary work is excellent or not. In the moral standard of the Confucian literary theory, the music of *Wu* is inferior to the music of *Shao* simply because *Wu* never reached to the moral standard of perfect “good.” Confucian literary theory always followed the logical order of “Dao (道),” “morality (德),” “benevolence (仁),” and “artistic skills (艺)” in interpreting and criticizing literary and artistic works. Starting with Dao and morality/virtue, Confucian literary theory judges the values of literary and artistic works according to what Book VII of *The Analects* advocates: “Seek for the Way; hold fast to virtue; live a moral life; and enjoy the pleasures derived from the pursuit of the polite arts” (Ku trans. 1978, 61). As the guiding principle of Chinese ancient literary theory, Dao was identified with Ren (仁 benevolence) in Confucian literary theory. This is further confirmed by Mencius who clearly claims: “Confucius said, ‘Dao shows just two ways: being benevolent and being not benevolent.’”⁵ Here the “two ways” defined by Dao are Ren and not Ren; hence Ren is clearly identified with Dao. But it is more precise to say that the deeper connotation of the Confucian Dao is the rational and moral system of the combination of Ren (benevolence), virtue, rituality, and filial piety. Thus the Dao that the Confucian literary theorists held in highest esteem is the “Human Dao” which is distinctively different from the “Heavenly Dao,” which is the metaphysical literary theorists’ most highly esteemed and purely transcendental Way of Nature. The “Human Dao” is the spiritual ontology of the Confucian literary theory as Confucius claims: “A gentleman devotes his attention to the fundamental principles of life. When the foundation is laid, the Way grows. Filial piety and fraternal submission are the roots of all benevolent actions” (Ku trans. 1978, 39). The driving force of the spiritual ontology is tremendously strong; therefore, the main body of the Confucian literary theory always guides literary criticism and hermeneutics with rational morality. This is exactly the reason why Liu Xie first advocates “On Dao, the Source” to promote his literary theory in the “Preface” to *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. In the field of ancient Chinese literary theory, most of the literary theorists were never really independent because the main body of their literary theory and criticism could neither control nor escape from the dominant power of the spiritual ontology. This is exactly why they have always relied on morality with a kind of religious zeal, and even willingly sacrificed their own lives for it, as Confucius firmly taught them: “In the morning hears the Way; in the evening, die content” (Waley trans. 1938/1964, 103). This is exactly why the main current of Confucian literary theory always offers interpretation and criticism of literary works according to rational morality in their dominant hermeneutics. This is also a kind of violence in Confucian poetics and

⁴ *Shao* 《韶》 is a famous piece of ancient music for ritual ceremony; *Wu* 《武》 is a piece of music for military ceremony.

⁵ “孔子曰：道二，仁与不仁而已矣。” Iren Bloom’s translation of it is: “Confucius said, ‘There are just two ways: being human and being inhuman.’” *Mencius*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe (New York: Cumbia University Press), 75. Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this essay are our own, especially when published translations are not available to us.

literary criticism. Yet, the metaphysical scholars dissolved all these precisely by their deliberate misreading of the Confucian classics during the historical period of the Wei and Jin Dynasties.

He Yan 何晏 (ca. 195–249 AD) is a well-known challenger to the logocentric Confucianism in his subversion of the Confucian classics. Book II of *The Analects* states that Confucius metaphorically regards “morality/virtue” as the guiding North Star supported and surrounded by all other stars. The North Star symbolizes the supreme status of the highest principle of Confucian literary theory: “The Master said, ‘The rule of virtue can be compared to the Pole Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars simply by remaining in its place’” (Lau trans. 1992, 3). He Yan’s interpretation of this statement is ingenious: “He who has virtue is doing nothing, like the north polar star which never alters; yet it is surrounded and supported by all other stars” (He 1979, 16). This is indeed a wonderfully witty and interesting misreading of Confucius’ statement. In his hermeneutic interpretation, He Yan subverted the original meaning of the Confucian “morality/virtue” with his Daoist literary theory of “nothing” and merged the utilitarian principle of “morality” worshipped by the Confucian literary theorists into the Daoist mysterious and transcendental *wuwei* (无为)—“doing nothing against nature,” and forced the Confucian theory to mingle with the Daoist metaphysical doctrine. Thus, morality as the signifier of the Confucian theory was dissolved, and its original meaning, the signified was transformed. Indeed, as the north polar star that was supported and surrounded by all other stars, the signifier of morality in Confucian theory, the highest principle of Confucian literary standard, the Confucian ontology of esthetics and ethics, was transformed into the metaphysical Daoist ontology of *wuwei*. This transformation was fulfilled in the fusion of the horizons of Confucian theory and Daoist theory. In this fusion of horizons, the metaphysical masters’ subverting misreading is a great shock to the Confucian scholars. At the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the great Confucian scholar, Kong Yingda 孔颖达 (574–648 AD) was shockingly puzzled in his hermeneutics: “As for governmental administration, it is not really doing ‘nothing’” (Kong 1980, 21). True, how could it be “doing nothing” when dealing with governmental administration? In his annotative hermeneutics, the puzzled Kong Yingda then hesitatingly went to He Yan’s misreading of the signifier of “morality” from the point of view of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s metaphysical Daoism: “As governmental administration is completely based on morality, doing is like nothing” (Kong 1980, 21). No doubt, this is Kong Yingda’s hesitation and adjustability; yet, Kong Yingda was a great Confucian master at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), and he finally withdrew his hermeneutics from Laozi and Zhuangzi and returned to the Confucian hermeneutics to interpret the classical texts: “As governmental administration is based on morality, everything will be nurtured with benevolence; everyone is adjusted and corrected with righteousness and justice; rituality and music are established on harmony and peace. This is actual ruling, not really doing nothing” (Kong 1980, 21). No matter what, in the absolute dominance of the doctrines of the Confucian classics in the Tang Dynasty, Kong Yingda, as a great Confucian scholar of the classics, once hesitated while facing the subverting misreading of the classics by the great metaphysical masters in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. For a great master of hermeneutics, this hesitation, even for just a moment in his mind, still showed his spiritual puzzlement and lingering.

Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249 AD) was considered as a marvelous wizard in subverting misreading of Confucian classics by He Yan. Wang Bi was a short-lived genius in the Wei and Jin period, and the excellence and thoroughness of his subverting misreading of the Confucian classics attracted tremendous attention, and he won great respect and worship from later theoretical scholars. All the Confucian literary theorists advocated morality in their hermeneutics and annotations of the Confucian classics, but the North Song Dynasty (960–1127 AD) hermeneutic annotator, Xing Bing 邢昺 (932–1010 AD), once recorded Wang Bi's subverting misreading of morality in *The Annotation of the Puzzles of The Analects* like this: "Dao, nothing to call it, nothing it does not govern, is the cause of all. Yet, it is called Dao; it has no sound, no shape and no image. If it is Dao, no one can frame it; what one can do only is to worship it and admiringly advocate it" (Wang Bi 1980, 624). As mentioned earlier, the connotation of Dao by the Confucian scholars is identified with morality/virtue and benevolence, but Wang Bi's hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian Dao has nothing of the original meaning; rather, it is completely transformed into the idea of Daoist metaphysical ontology of Laozi:

Tao does not act/yet it is the root of all action
 Tao does not move/yet it is the source of all creation
 If princes and kings could hold it/everyone under them would naturally turn
 within
 Should a doubt or old desire rise up/the Nameless Simplicity would push it
 down
 The Nameless Simplicity frees the heart of desire and reveals its inner silence
 When there is silence/one finds peace
 When there is silence/one finds the anchor of the universe within himself.
 (Star trans 2001, 50)

It can be said that under Wang Bi's hermeneutical misreading, the horizon of the original Confucian classics was fused with the horizon of the Daoist way of thinking, and the Daoist hermeneutics took the cultural center stage during the Wei and Jin Dynasties. In this fusion, the signified, the original meaning of the Confucian morality/virtue was completely subverted, and its logocentric qualities were simply replaced by the essential meaning of the metaphysical Daoist literary theory. In this unique cultural environment of the Wei and Jin Dynasties, the signifier—Dao was apparently still the same Dao, but under the appearance of the Dao of the Confucian literary theory, what we could see and experience is only the true nature of metaphysical "nothing"—*wuwei* in the Daoist ontology by Laozi and Zhuangzi.

3 The Authority of the Sage: The Second Leg of the *Ding* 鼎 of Confucian Literary Theory

The Confucian literary theorists always sought for the right of expression and placed it under the protective umbrella of the Sage, and they always awesomely tried to dominate literary phenomena with the authority of the Sage even in violent language expressions. This was also the historical reason why Liu Xie's literary

theory system tightly clung to the Confucian literary theory by contributing the section “Evidence from the Sage” to his *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. Indeed, Liu Xie had an excellent and accurate summary of the sage doctrine of Confucian literary theory:

The creative man is called a sage; the man who transmits, an understanding scholar. To cultivate human nature and emotions is the great mission of the great Sage. “The literary form of the teaching of the Master is available to us”; —we have the sentiments of the Sage expressed in writing. (Shih trans. 1983, 13)

Here the author⁶ is the compiler and editor of the six classics—Confucius. To construct the awesome idol of the Sage was always the permanent formula in the history of Confucian literary theory; Book XVI of *The Analects* states: “There are three things that a gentleman fears: he fears the will of Heaven, he fears great men, he fears the words of the Divine Sages” (Waley trans. 1938/1964, 206). The Confucian literary theorists channeled their criticism and judgment of the esthetic and ethical values of literary works with their awe-inspired attitude toward Confucius’ sayings. In forming the idols of Yao 尧 (ca. 2447–2307 BC), Shun 舜 (ca. 2255–2037 BC), Yu 禹 (2200–2101 BC), Zhou Gong 周公 (ca. 1100 BC–?), and Confucius in the history of Chinese literary theory and philosophy, Confucius finally won the sacred status of the black-robed Sage by compiling and editing the six classics. In the Middle Ages of the West, carrying the spiritual bloody cross on their backs, the red-robed archbishops often obeyed and followed the decrees of the Bible to preach among the masses, generally explored and criticized literature and arts with Biblical doctrines, while in the “Middle Ages” of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) in China, the Confucian scholars, under the protection of the phantom of the crownless emperor Confucius, preached the doctrines of the six classics to the people infatuated with literature, arts, and philosophy. This is exactly shown in Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 (179–104 BC) literary theory in *Chun Qiu Fan Lu*: “To correct the times of the morning and the night, one looks for the North Star; to correct one’s conduct and clarify one’s doubt, one looks for the Sage, as all the Sage’s teaching is the standard for the world under heaven” (1985, 792). No matter whether from Yao to Shun, to Confucius, the sage worshipping attitude in Confucian literary theory and philosophy was exactly like Cao Cao’s 曹操 (155–220 AD) “ordering all dukes and earls with the usurped authority of the emperor,” and this was indeed a kind of language violence of the Confucian theory and literary criticism. Even the later great literary theorist Lin Changyi 林昌彝 (1803–?) chanted in his *Hai Tian Qin Si Lu*:

The influence of poetics is broad and widely spread.... That is why in his teaching, the Sage especially emphasized poetics. The later generations were far from the Sage, and they attempted to imitate the original poetics, yet their poetic systems were quite different from the original with a great deal of varieties. The capable could diligently acquire enough Confucian knowledge,

⁶ Shih’s translation does not clearly show Confucius as the author and editor of the six classics..

recognize its essence, and industriously strive to accord with the aims of the exemplary sayings of the ancient sages.” (1988, 34)

What honesty or stubbornness this is! In a word, as the formula of the Sage’s absolute authority in Confucian literary theory, either in awe of the sayings of the Sage or in accordance with the aims of the exemplary sayings of the ancient sages, it simply required that literary criticism on any literary works follow the absolute decree of the Sage; no matter whether the Sage was Yao, Shun or Confucius.

Nevertheless, the metaphysical masters forced the meaning of the signified to change and subverted the worshiped sage idol of the Confucian literary theory. In annotating Book XIV of *The Analects*, He Yan interpreted Confucius’ saying “If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps by Heaven” (Lau trans. 1992, 143) like this: “The Sage accorded his virtue with Heaven and Earth, thus saying only Heaven knows him” (1979, 129). In this way, He Yan forced the sage idol worship in the Confucian literary phenomena into the Daoist metaphysical ontology in his hermeneutics and completely dissolved the Sage idol into the mysterious and metaphysical world of “Heaven and Earth.” In his interpretation of Book XVII of *The Analects*, Wang Bi even channeled the violence of his misreading directly to Confucius and made the Sage idol of Confucius as a Daoist:

Confucius was extremely intelligent with tremendous inspirations, having a keen insight into the deep essence of matters, carefully selecting places to stay, regarding cultural education and spiritual reformation as his standard of judgment and teaching; therefore, he would not enter the worlds of any troublemakers. The Sage far foresaw the inner nature of things and handled changes miraculously and wonderfully like a divinity. Even a chaotic and corrupted world could not corrupt his pure integrity, nor any evils could harm his true nature; therefore, the Sage could avoid any harm without physically hiding himself, as he saw things far surpassing their physical appearances. (1980, 632)

In Wang Bi’s hermeneutic misreading, the image of the solemnly worshiped sage, Confucius, was made into someone who was practicing Daoism. That was not the real Confucius in any sense, but the pure and noble Daoist sage who was esteemed and promoted by Laozi in Chapter 15 of *The Dao De Jing*: “Once upon a time/people who knew the Way/were subtle, spiritual, mysterious, penetrating,/unfathomable” (Le Guin trans. 1998, 20). “Confucius” as the signifier was still the same signifier, but the signified—the original characteristics of Confucius was substituted by the Daoist characteristics of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Here it is not difficult to discover an interesting cultural phenomenon in the hermeneutics of the classics reflected in both Confucian and metaphysical studies. The fusion of the horizon of Confucian literary theory with that of the Daoist theory was accomplished in the metaphysical scholars’ misreading of the Sage idol by separating the signifier from the signified painstakingly constructed by the Confucian scholars. The result was that the old signifier, Confucius, was fused with a new signified, a new meaning of a new image framed with the Daoist doctrine of Laozi and Zhuangzi. The violent hermeneutics of Wang Bi’s misreading

was spectacular and stunning. We believe that any scholars who really understand Wang Bi's hermeneutic misreading will see that his real purpose was to substitute the original signified meaning of the signifier, the sage idol of Confucius, with Daoist ideal doctrine. By so doing, he succeeded in turning the solemnly worshiped Sage idol, Confucius, into an ideal Daoist image defined by Laozi who clearly claims: "The Sage acts without action and teaches without talking." (Star trans. 2001, 15).

While Wang Bi's violent misreading pointed to Confucius, Guo Xiang 郭象 (252?–312 AD) surpassed Wang Bi and directed his misreading to Yao (尧). It is worth noticing that Guo Xiang's metaphysical interpretation of the Sage—Yao, is fulfilled by introducing the original meaning of the Confucian classics into the Daoist hermeneutics, and in such hermeneutics, he annotated the text of *Zhuangzi* with Confucian doctrine. During the Wei and Jin period, the metaphysical literary theory and philosophy took over the cultural center by driving the Confucian literary theory and philosophy to the margins. But it is in such a unique cultural phenomenon that what Guo Xiang did was even wittier simply because he ingeniously and effectively blended Confucian concepts into the mainstream of Daoist hermeneutics. In his annotation of "Free and Easy Wandering" of *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang commented:

The founder of this world under Heaven would leave the empire to the future ruler. Although the world under Heaven belonged to the founder Yao, Yao himself did not regard the world as his own. So he would fain pass the empire to the capable one so as to enjoy wandering freely into the limitless, selfless and inner world by ignoring the ten thousand things in his possession in the external world. (Guo 1875/1985, 14)

The misreading of the metaphysical scholars contained extreme violence, and their subversion of the Confucian classics de-idolized the sage image of Confucius or Yao. By so doing, they broke through the invisible walls of the margined "other," and triumphantly march toward the cultural center. Nevertheless, they were smart enough to understand that Confucianism could never be completely wiped out of Chinese culture; therefore, what they could do was to infuse the Confucian horizon with the Daoist horizon. Yet, in the hermeneutics of the Daoist metaphysical scholars, either in the interpretation of the Confucian classics with Daoist doctrine or in the interpretation of the Daoist classics with the Confucian concepts, the fusion of the Confucian and metaphysical horizons was fulfilled by integrating the sage idol image of Confucius into the metaphysical ontology of mysterious and limitless of *wuwei* (无为)—"doing nothing against nature." In terms of esthetics and ethics, this fusion voluntarily opened up a new path for literary theories and poetics. The Confucian literary principles of "the original morality," "the authority of the Sage," and "the classics as literary sources" trace back to Xunzi 荀子(313–238 BC). "Confucian Effects" of *Xunzi* states: "The Sage is the key to the Dao; the Dao under heaven is embodied in the Sage; all successful rulings of the hundred kings owe to the Sage's doctrine, which is rooted in *The Book of Odes*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, and *The Book of Music* which were edited and compiled by the Sage" (Xunzi 1875/1985, 302). The classics were the home base for the Confucian

scholars to survive and the home garden for the Confucian literary theory to grow, yet the metaphysical scholars subverted them with their destructive misreading in their hermeneutics; thus in this unique cultural phenomenon of the Wei and Jin period, like wandering ghosts, the Confucian literary theory and philosophy were searching for their lost home in the culturally marginal periphery. Only by understanding this point, can one really understand why Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881–1936) highly praised the great metaphysical master, Ji Kang 嵇康 (ca. 223–ca. 263), in his “The Wei-Jin Style and the Relationship between Literary Writing and Medicine and Liquor” and why Ji Kang radically belittled the Confucian literary theory and philosophy in his “Questioning the Natural Inclination of Learning”:

If a bright hall is now considered as a third-class room, chanting poems as ghost’s talking, the six Confucian classics as weeds and dirt, benevolence and virtue as stinky rottenness, if reading books makes one dim-sighted, if respectful bowing makes one hunchbacked, if wearing inherited ritual gowns makes one cramped, if talking about rituals makes one’s teeth uneven and bad, then abandon them all and start everything new. Thus, even if we untiringly study, it is still not enough. Even if we do not want to study, it is not a long dark night, as the six Confucian classics are not the sun. (1962, 262)

The six classics were the ontology or the logocentric base of the Confucian literary theory, philosophy, and right of expression. Ji Kang’s radical criticism, “the six classics are not the sun,” boldly stripped off their divine veil. Surely, in Ji Kang’s criticism the disintegrated was the Sage idol created in the main body of the Confucian literary theory, philosophy, and right of expression.

4 The Classics as Ontology: The Third Leg of the *Ding* 鼎 of the Confucian Literary Theory

In literary criticism, hermeneutics derives from a literary theory rooted in ontology, thus the main body of the hermeneutics must faithfully rely on ontology to establish its theoretical system. The Daoist literary theory and philosophy found their theoretical system on the metaphysical bedrock of the cosmos in transcendental nature, making the abstract Dao as the ontology in interpreting and evaluating any literary phenomenon, while the Confucian literary theory and philosophy based all their judgment and evaluation of literary phenomenon on the ontology of the Confucian classics that framed the cultural environment of the ancient Chinese world. Specifically “the classics” refer to the six classics of Confucian theory and philosophy, and they include *The Book of Odes*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Music*, and *The Book of Spring and Autumn* which were equivalent to the Bible in the West. The academic world regarded the texts of the Confucian classics as *jing* (经) which had been the base of all the Confucian esthetic and ethical systems; thus, as a whole entity, the *jing* was the ontology, the home base for Confucian ideology. In history, the exploration and research of the Confucian classics formed the “*jing* studies.” For this point, Liu Xie

had a clear summary in the section called “The Classics as Literary Sources” in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*:

By *ching* [*jing*] we mean an expression of the absolute *Tao* or principle, that great teaching which is unalterable. Therefore, the *ching* faithfully reflect heaven and earth, spirits and gods. They help to articulate the order of things and to set up the rules governing human affairs. In them is found both the secret of nature and spirit and the very bone and marrow of fine literature. (Shih trans. 1983, 31)

Clearly Liu Xie was a Confucian literary theorist, and the *Dao* he had greatly promoted was distinctly different from the *Dao* of Laozi and Zhuangzi, which was the focus of Zhang Longxi’s study in his book, *The Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West*. Zhang Longxi placed *Dao*, the origin and destination of metaphysical literary theory, in the position of metaphysical ontology and discussed it equally with the ontology of the Western classical literary theory—*Logos*. Zhang’s study was perhaps limited by his thematic scope, so he did not mention the ontology of the *jing*, the classics in the Confucian literary theory. We believe that only by comparing both the ontological *Dao* and *jing* equally with the Western ontological “*Logos*,” can we really grasp the trend of the development of the Chinese classical literary theories. It can be argued that the most fundamental conflict between the Confucian literary theory and the Daoist literary theory is the conflict between the ontology of the Confucian *jing* studies and the ontology of the metaphysical *Dao* studies, and it is also the opposition of the *jing* to the *Dao* itself. Yet, in their misreading of the Confucian classics, the metaphysical masters subverted the ontology of Confucian classics and blended it into the Daoist metaphysical ontology in their hermeneutics. In forcing the merge of the ontological meanings, the metaphysical scholars deliberately misread or interpreted the ontological *jing* with Daoist doctrines. But what were the connotations of the *jing* all about? They were the values and judgment of the whole moral system of “benevolence,” “virtue,” “rituality,” and “filial piety” in Confucian theory and philosophy. On the scale of Confucian literary esthetics and ethics, the “art of *jing*,” as the rationally moral judgment of values, was the scale weight; while, on the other end, literary and artistic works were only passively weighed and evaluated by it. Only those that had been weighed and evaluated as good ones could be considered as ideal Confucian literary works that could effectively educate people. That was exactly what Liu Mian 柳冕 (730–804 AD) had summarized in his “Masters Xie and Du on Prime Ministers Fang and Du”:

The real art of change is to change people’s heart with skillful teaching that makes people do things voluntarily without conscious perception of the teaching. That is why the art of *jing* rather than the *jing* scholars themselves should be greatly advocated. Advocating the art of *jing* makes education and cultural cultivation attractive and wonderful; if education and cultural cultivation are attractive, they will make learning and writing flourish, and the flourish of fine writings helps the imperial reign of the country thrive: these have been carried out only by the wise kings. (Liu 1983, 5354)

But in their hermeneutic misreading, the metaphysical scholars forced the meaning of the rational morality of the *jing* to give its place to the Daoist natural ontology by fusing the horizon of Confucianism with that of Daoism. Book I of *The Analects* stated, “The gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom. Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man’s character” (Lau trans. 1992, 3). But the classic annotator, Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545 AD) of the Southern Liang period (502–557 AD) recorded Wang Bi’s hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian literary theory in *Decoding the Puzzles of The Analects* like this: “Natural love is filial piety, and extending love to others and animals is benevolence.” (Wang Bi 1980, 621). Filial piety was the root of Confucian love whose base was benevolence, and that was identified with the Human Dao, but Wang Bi disintegrated the Confucian love and integrated it into Daoist “nature” in his hermeneutic misreading. Thus the meaning of the ontology of Confucian love and benevolence was given away to nature, and the value weight of morality of the Confucian literary theory became weightless, as its original meaning was alloyed with Daoist ontology of “nature” by Wang Bi.

By the hermeneutic misreading of the Confucian classics from an ontological point of view, the metaphysical scholars such as Wang Bi and He Yan had successfully made the *ding* 鼎 of the Confucian literary theory and philosophy collapse and subverted their established system by disintegrating their original ontological concepts. In terms of the ethical meaning of a literary theory, is there anything else that can be more effective and convincing than to make the literary theory collapse by sabotaging its transcendental noumenon? In his violent hermeneutics, Guo Xiang reached the peak by disintegrating the Confucian literary theory of the six classics and integrating them into his annotation of *Zhuangzi*. In doing so, he has deprived all the original meanings of the *jing* from the ontological noumenon and finally forced them into phenomenon, and the result is that the *jing* lost the ontological position. *Zhuangzi* clearly placed the doctrine of the six Confucian classics in the field of phenomenon: “The six classics are the old worn-out paths of the former kings—they are not the thing which walked the path. What you [Confucius] are expounding are simply these paths. Paths are made by shoes [feet] that walk them, they are by no means the shoes themselves” (Watson trans. 1968, 166). In his hermeneutic annotation of *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang claimed, “The origin of the thing is the true nature of it” (1875/1985, 48). In considering the two opposing worlds of noumenon and phenomenon, the *Zhuangzi* school in the Daoist theory system displayed the two binary oppositions: *suo yi ji* (所以迹 “the origin of the thing”), and *ji* (迹 “the trace-mark of the thing”). If we apply Kant’s theory to use “beauty” to mediate “truth” and “good” to reflect the two binary oppositions of “noumenon” and “phenomenon,” we will find that *suo yi ji* refers to the “noumenon”/“truth” that can be understood with the pure metaphysical reason of things while *ji* means the “phenomenon”/“good” that derives from the practical reason of things. For this point, the *Zhuangzi* school’s way of thinking in “Knowledge Wandered North” of *Zhuangzi* was like this: “That which treats things as things is not limited by things. Things have their limits—the so-called limits of things. The unlimited moves to the realm of limits; the limited moves to the unlimited realm” (Watson trans. 1968, 241-2). In the view of the school of

Zhuangzi, *suo yi ji* belonged to the category of abstract ontology; it had no concrete shape or form and showed itself through *ji*—the world of phenomenon. All was as Guo Xiang expressed in his hermeneutics of *Zhuangzi*: “That which causes the formation and development of things is the true nature of things, which is nothing” (1875/1985, 62). It is worth noticing that *suo yi ji*, which is metaphysically “nothing,” makes things show themselves as physical beings in the world of phenomenon. Seeing this point, we can understand why *wu zi wu* (物自物) defined by Guo Xiang echoes the theory of the “thing in itself” defined by Kant.⁷ This indicates that although the literary theories of both the East and the West show cultural differences in esthetic methods, values and judgment, they always reveal the universal truths in terms of philosophical ontology.

Daoist literary theory regards the six Confucian classics as the old *ji*—the trace marks or paths of the former kings, but this actually does not promote them to the world of noumenon; rather, it places them in the world of phenomenon: “As for the six classics, they are the old trace marks of the former kings....” (Watson trans. 1968, 166). Coming to consider this point, we actually confront an extremely important problem in literary theory studies: namely, the texts of the “six Confucian classics” are only the ethical appearance—*ji*, the trace marks made out by the former kings in the world of phenomenon, not the transcendental noumenon—*suo yi ji*—the thing in itself, the base of ontology. But it is necessary to point out that in Confucian theory, the essence of the *jing* is in the category of ontology, as the texts of the Confucian classics are considered the highest esthetic and ethical principles that define the meanings of literary phenomenon. But in misreading the Confucian literary theory, the metaphysical literary theorists tried to subvert the Confucian ontological system by depriving the ontological essence of the *jing* from noumenon to force it into the world of phenomenon. They were able to do so because the *jing* as a whole was in the category of ontology on the one hand while on the other hand, the *jing* also specifically referred to the texts of the six Confucian classics themselves.

In his hermeneutic annotation of “Knowledge Wandered North” of *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang said, “The *suo yi ji* is the true nature, and the six Confucian classics are the *ji*, displaying the characteristics of the true nature. Nature is the origin of all the things in the world, and the *jing* define or delineate all world and human affairs” (1875/1985, 48). Guo Xiang believed that although as the text forms, the six classics were the *ji* in the world of phenomenon, they displayed the “nature” of the ontological *suo yi ji*. Here, Guo Xiang seemed to bridge the wide gap between the binary of *ji* and *suo yi ji*, but in his hermeneutic misreading, he finally dissolved the *ji* of the six classics into the ontological view of nature advocated in Daoist theory. Seeing this point, we can understand why Guo Xiang raised the banner of cultural violence of misreading in his hermeneutics and called on those scholars of literary and theory studies: “Regard Nature as the walking shoes [feet] and the six classics as the trace marks of the walking” (1875/1985, 48). In Guo Xiang’s misreading, the

⁷ According to Stephen Palmquist, the “thing in itself” [is] an *object* considered *transcendentally* apart from all the conditions under which a *subject* can gain *knowledge* of it. Hence the thing in itself is, by definition, unknowable. Sometimes used loosely as a synonym of *noumenon*. (Cf. *appearance*),” “Glossary of Kant’s Technical Terms.” Retrieved October 5, 2016 from <http://staffweb.hkbu.edu.hk/ppp/ksp1/KSPglos.html>.

ji of the six classics were interpreted as the ontological *suo yi ji* in Daoist theory, which manifested the true meaning of “nature.” In the ontological view of Daoist theory, *suo yi ji* was the Dao that “is the path to all wonder, the gate to the essence of everything” (Star trans. 2001, 14). Also, if the world of phenomenon derived from the world of noumenon—the thing in itself; then, “Man depends on the laws of Earth/Earth depends on the laws of Heaven/Heaven depends on the laws of Tao/But Tao depends on itself alone/Supremely free, self-so, it rests in its own nature” (Star trans. 2001, 38). About this point, Wang Xianqian (王先謙1842–1917 AD) expressed clearly in his annotation of “Knowledge Wondered North” of *Zhuangzi*: “That which makes all things appear in the world is Dao. All things with different shapes exist in the world of phenomenon, but Dao that never alters remains in the world of noumenon, yet phenomenon and noumenon are naturally connected without any gap” (Wang Xianqian 1980, 142). Thus, when Guo Xiang misread the six classics as *ji* and mingled it with “nature,” he must have reached a final conclusion on a higher theoretical level: “*The Book of Odes* and *The Book of Rites* are the old trace marks of the former kings. Only those who faithfully follow the exemplary principles of them should be allowed to interpret and practice them. Since some hypocritical Confucian followers have twisted and misinterpreted them for self-interest, they are not worth keeping anymore” (Guo 1875/1968, 73). As the trace marks “are not worth keeping anymore,” Confucian literary theory lost the right of expression in the hermeneutics of literary phenomenon at the ontological level. This was also the historical opportunity for Daoist literary theory and philosophy to come into the main stream of literary criticism during the Wei and Jin period.

Echoing Eco’s statement cited at the very beginning, now we would like to wrap up our discussion by borrowing Landa’s statements: “Misreading” is inevitable, but it should be understood as a way of exploring and building new coherence and meanings” (Landa 1998, 70). “Thus the meaning of the past text is ever in the making, as new interpretive contexts emerge. It is in this extended sense that any reading is misreading, since it necessarily goes beyond the historical horizon of the text and takes place in that hermeneutic locus Gadama called *horizontverschmelzung*” (Landa 1998, 68). Indeed, in the Daoist metaphysical scholars’ violent hermeneutic misreading discussed above, the metaphorical *ding* of Confucian classics had finally collapsed, and in the end, the Daoist metaphysical scholars had accomplished the fusion of both the Confucian and Daoist horizons, a kind of *horizontverschmelzung* as Gadama terms it, but such a fusion derived from cultural conflict did not really mean that Daoist literary theory had completely driven Confucian literary theory out of the cultural environment and created a pure metaphysical space for its own development exclusively. Rather, in their violent hermeneutic misreading, the metaphysical scholars had simply fulfilled their own literary theory by taking in Confucian literary theory as an alloying supplement. Even if there were no great pathos to the Confucian literary theory system when it was forced to the cultural margins in that specific historical and cultural environment, it would not be completely wiped out of Chinese culture. At most it was exiled from its old logocentric world and driven out of the cultural center by the metaphysical wizards’ violent hermeneutic misreading, and at least it was amazingly mingled into the new domain of the Daoist metaphysical world in that

post-Confucian era. Then new Chinese classical literary theories would spring out of the debris of the shattered Confucian world and voluntarily move toward their self-fulfillment while receiving nourishment from metaphysical theory after the Daoist metaphysical literary wizards successfully caused the historical pendulum to swing toward their own home base in the Wei and Jin Dynasties.

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