

Origins of the Main Classes in the First Chinese Bibliographic Classification

Hur-Li Lee

I am proposing a research paper for the 10th ISKO conference to examine one of the fundamental aspects of traditional Chinese bibliographic classification: the origins of its main classes. Chinese bibliographic classification maintained its own tradition for about two thousand years before western influence came to knock on China's door in the 19th century. This knowledge organization tradition has grabbed limited attention from western scholars. Although classification is an important branch in library and information science, its published literature in English has focused mostly on theory and practices emerging from the western traditions. In basic English texts introducing classification, frequently mentioned thinkers who have significantly influenced classification theory and schemes include Aristotle, Linnaeus, Francis Bacon, and Melvil Dewey (e.g., Broughton, 2004). The only Asian classification theorist known to English-speaking researchers and practitioners is Shiyali Ramamrita Ranganathan, who received his library science education in London, England, in the early 20th century. Little is known to date about bibliographic classification efforts outside western cultures. Awareness of this deficiency in the literature about classification has recently been heightened as more scholars write about the western, Christian, and male bias in commonly known classification schemes like the Dewey Decimal Classification (Olson, 2002).

Published works in English about traditional Chinese bibliographic classification are few and the most substantive are two journal articles published more than fifty years apart. The earlier of the two articles describes the historical developments of Chinese bibliographic classification through the first half of the 20th century (Tsien, 1952). In addition to the history, the second work provides a general discussion of the cultural values reflected in traditional

Chinese bibliographic classification (Jiang, 2007). This kind of sporadic and sketchy treatment of a 2000-year classification tradition in the literature leaves plenty to be desired. Even some of the most fundamental aspects of Chinese bibliographic classification remain enigmatic to scholars in the West.

In the proposed study, I will highlight one particular case, the main classes of the classification applied in the *Seven Epitomes* (*Qi lue*), the first classified library catalog, completed between 6-1 BCE, in China. This scheme had six main classes (see Figure 1). Since then a number of variations have developed: four-fold, five-fold, seven-fold, nine-fold, twelve-fold, etc. All of these, nevertheless, followed the same basic structure of the six-fold scheme in the *Seven Epitomes* with individual classes being merged or divided. Figure 1 gives a comparison of the classes in the *Seven Epitomes* and those in another scheme devised much later (the end of the 18th century), the *Si ku quan shu* “zong mu” (the catalog of a collection of books titled *Si ku quan shu*). Studying the origins of the main classes in a scheme that started a tradition will shed significant light on the entire tradition.

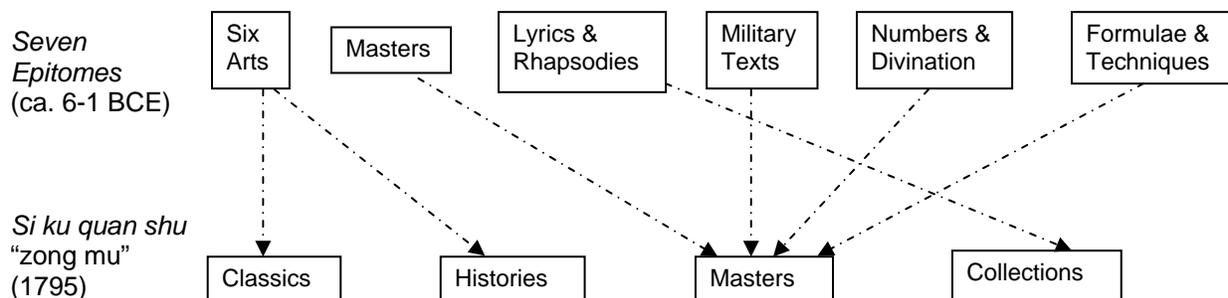


Figure 1: Comparison of two schemes in English. The classes in the first scheme are “Liu yi lue”, “Zhu zi lue”, “Shi fu lue”, “Bing shu lue”, “Shu shu lue”, and “Fang ji lue” (in pinyin); and the classes in the second scheme are “Jing”, “Shi”, “Zi”, and “Ji” (also in pinyin).

Among Chinese bibliographers, a consensus is that classicism (also known as Confucianism) is the school of thought underlying Chinese bibliographic classification. The

overarching principle for determining the classificatory structure, the main classes and their sequence, is said to be the perceived importance of a text or a group of texts in terms of their political and social functions according to the classicist point of view. For example, the Six Arts were the six classic texts that classicists considered the most important works for modeling government and personal conduct. These six texts and their commentaries thus formed the primary basis of the very first class in the classification of the *Seven Epitomes*. By the same token, “Numbers and Divination” and “Formulae and Techniques” (together encompassing several fields of science and technology) were at the end of the classificatory structure because classicists viewed them as the least significant of all (Tan, 2003).

Besides this Principle of Classicist Value, Chinese scholars have suggested two other factors that influenced the divisions of the main classes in the *Seven Epitomes* and its various successors: state of scholarship and literary warrant. Jiang (2007) makes several main points of such theoretical discussions accessible to the English-speaking audience in a summary format. However, something seems to have been lost in translation, not only in Jiang’s work but also in the early introductory work by Tsien (1952). A major problem is epistemological. More precisely speaking, two concepts fundamental in western classification, “subject” and “discipline”, have no equivalence in ancient China. Applying these concepts in discussing Chinese bibliographic classification needs to be extra careful. For example, Tsien uses “Classics”, “History”, “Philosophy”, and “Belles-lettres” as the translation for the main classes of the four-fold scheme as seen in the *Si ku quan shu* “zong mu” and describes the later three as “almost identical” with the three main divisions in Bacon’s classification (i.e., “History”, “Poesy”, and “Philosophy”). The singular terms “History” and “Philosophy” (Jiang also uses “History”), as Tarsala (2001) points out, are especially misleading because they commonly refer to two western

disciplines. As a result, Tarsala theorizes that books were classified by document type, rather than subject, in Chinese classification; thus, the four classes of the *Si ku quan shu* “zong mu” in her translation are “Classics”, “Histories”, “Masters”, and “Collections”, representing four document types.

The chief goal of this conference paper is to re-examine the origins of the main classes in the *Seven Epitomes* within its own historical and social context. To achieve this goal, I will apply a carefully designed framework for analysis and interpretation to include the surviving fragments of the *Seven Epitomes* and a variety of sources that provide background information about personal, institutional, social, and political circumstances surrounding the creation of the *Seven Epitomes*. Constructed for a larger research project, the analytical and interpretive framework offers a multi-dimensional approach to better contextualizing data that is anticipated to have two benefits. First, such approach will be useful for identifying various intentions and considerations, explicit as well as hidden, in the design of the classification. Second, situating data in the original cultural context helps to avoid interpretive errors made by imposing an epistemology of a different culture in analysis.

The *Seven Epitomes* itself is no longer extant. However, a universal belief held by Chinese bibliographers is that the majority entries (in a much abridged form) and the original classificatory structure of the *Seven Epitomes* have been preserved in the “Bibliographic Treatise” of the *History of Han Dynasty* (*Han shu* “yi wen zhi”, referred to as the “Treatise” hereafter). This study will examine, as the primary source, an authoritative reconstruction of the *Seven Epitomes* that is mainly based on the “Treatise” and a few textual fragments from other sources (Yao, 1978). In addition to the primary source, I also intend to consult a sample of the literature in Chinese studies, mostly research on Chinese cultural and intellectual developments,

for the background in Former Han dynasty (206 BCE-25 CE) when the *Seven Epitomes* was created. This body of scholarship has expanded considerably in the past 20 to 30 years due to impressive progresses made in studying archeological discoveries accumulated since the late 19th century. Some authoritative works in both Chinese and English include Ge (2001), Lewis (1999, 2007), Nylan (2001), Shaughnessy (2006), Tsien (2004), Xu (2005), and Zuo (2004).

By focusing on the first documented classified catalog, this paper aims at an improved understanding of Chinese bibliographic classification—a tradition unfamiliar to classification researchers in the West. I will begin with a brief introduction to the *Seven Epitomes* and the tradition it instituted. Next, I will critically review the literature about the origins of the main classes in the *Seven Epitomes*. The following section expands the discussion by suggesting additional factors that the compiler of the *Seven Epitomes* might have used in formulating the main classes and that the existing literature has overlooked. Hopefully, this paper will stimulate more attention to non-western systems in the international classification research community.

Reference:

- Broughton, V. (2004). *Essential classification*. New York: Neal-Schuman.
- Ge, Z. (2001). *Zhongguo si xiang shi*. Shanghai: Fudandaxue chu ban she.
- Jiang, S. (2007). Into the source and history of Chinese culture: Knowledge classification in ancient China. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 42(1), 1-20.
- Lewis, M. E. (1999). *Writing and authority in early China*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lewis, M. E. (2007). *The early Chinese empires: Qin and Han*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Nylan, M. (2001). *The five "Confucian" classics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Olson, H. A. (2002). *Power to name: Locating the limits of subject representation in libraries*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Shaughnessy, E. L. (2006). *Rewriting early Chinese texts*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Tan, H. (2003). *Zhi shi fen lei: Yi wen xian fen lei wei zhong xin*. Nanjing: Dongnandaxue chu ban she.

- Tarsala, C. B. (2001). *What is an author in the Sikuquanshu?: Evidential research and authorship in late Qianlong Era China (1771-1795)*. Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Tsien, T.-H. (1952). A history of bibliographic classification in China. *Library Quarterly*, 22(4), 307-324.
- Tsien, T.-H. (2004). *Written on bamboo & silk: The beginnings of Chinese books & inscriptions* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Xu, X. (2005). *Liu Xiang ping zhuan; fu, Liu Xin ping zhuan*. Nanjing: Nanjingdaxue chu ban she.
- Yao, Z. (1978). *Qi lue yi wen*. In *Shu mu lei bian*. Taipei: Cheng wen chu ban she.
- Zuo, Y. (2004). *Cong si bu zhi xue dao qi ke zhi xue: Xue shu fen ke yu jin dai Zhongguo zhi shi xi tong zhi chuang jian*. Shanghai: Shanghai shu dian chu ban she.