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BEFORE CONFUCIUS

Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics

Edward L. Shaughnessy

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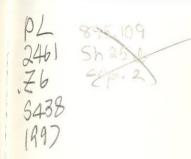
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ZEPS Kef.

To my parents

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Introduction

The Master said: "As for the rites of Xia, I can speak about them but [the state of] Ji is not sufficient to attest to them. As for the rites of Yin, I can speak about them but [the state of] Song is not sufficient to attest to them. This is because the literary documents are insufficient. If they were sufficient, then I would be able to attest to them." *Analects* 3/9

The Master said: "Zhou mirrored itself in the Two Dynasties. So manifold, indeed, in literature; I follow Zhou." *Analects* 3/14

The Master said: "I transmit but do not create. I am faithful to and delight in antiquity, presuming even to compare myself to our Old Peng."

Analects 7/1

For two thousand years or more, China's received wisdom held that Confucius established the classical canon by selecting, editing, and, in some cases, commenting upon the literary legacy of the Xia, Shang, and especially the Western Zhou dynasties. The preeminence within the Chinese intellectual tradition of the Zhouyi or Zhou Changes (also known as the Yijing or Classic of Changes), the Shangshu or Venerated Documents (also known as the Shujing or Classic of Documents), and the Shijing or Classic of Poetry is due in some measure apart from their own very considerable intrinsic virtues—to their presumed pedigree of having been created in the first place by the sages of the Three Dynasties of high antiquity and then subsequently having been transmitted by Confucius himself.

The first concerted assault on this received wisdom did not come until the dying days of China's imperial age, when nativist "New Text" scholars seeking a savior for China's traditions consolidated all of the creative effort in the single person of Confucius.¹ The great irony, of course, was that to gain a savior they had to sacrifice a good part of the tradition. It was not long before other scholars—infused with the iconoclastic spirit of the twentieth century saw fit to sacrifice Confucius himself, not only rebuking the "New Text" critics