Origins of the Main Classes in the First Chinese Bibliographic Classification

Abstract
The aim of the paper is to provide an improved understanding of the classification applied in the Seven Epitomes (Qi lüe), the first documented classified library catalogue in China (completed in the first century BCE). Chinese bibliographers have suggested that Liu Xin, the compiler of the catalogue, followed the Principle of Classicist Values, state of scholarship, literary warrant, and ideas of yin/yang and the Five Phases to devise the six-fold classification. By applying a multidimensional framework constructed for a large-scale research project, the author re-examined the origins of the six main classes in the catalogue within its own social, cultural, and political contexts. Issues highlighted for discussion include the concept of “discipline”, the limitation of the classification in relation to literary warrant, and the motives of intellectual control and social engineering.

Introduction
This paper will 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, approximately between the first century BCE and the early twentieth century CE before the influence of Western bibliography came to knock on China’s door. This knowledge organization tradition has attracted limited attention from classification theorists in the West. 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 twentieth 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; 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 twentieth century (Tsien, 1952). The second work, in addition to the history, provides a general discussion of the cultural values reflected in traditional Chinese bibliographic classification, mostly summarizing the views expressed by Chinese bibliographers (Jiang, 2007). This kind of sporadic and sketchy treatment of a two thousand-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 view of this deficiency, I have started a large-scale project to research traditional bibliographic classifications in imperial China.
For a more in-depth analysis, I will highlight one particular case in the study reported here—the main classes of the classification applied in the *Seven Epitomes* (*Qi lüe* 七略), the first classified library catalogue, completed between 6 and 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 eighteenth century), the *Si ku quan shu* “zong mu” 四庫全書總目 (the catalogue 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 tradition.

The study will begin with a brief introduction to the *Seven Epitomes*, followed by a review of the literature about the origins of the main classes in the *Seven Epitomes*. By applying a multi-dimensional framework, the next section expands the discussion by highlighting a number of issues not fully considered before.

### The *Seven Epitomes* and Its Classification

The *Seven Epitomes* is said to be compiled by a distinguished scholar Liu Xin 劉歆 (53 BCE–23 CE). As a by-product of a collation project commissioned by the Emperor, it was the catalogue of all collated books housed in the libraries of the Inner Court at the time. Although it is no longer extant, Chinese bibliographers believed that its majority entries (in a much abridged form) and its original classificatory structure have been preserved in the “Bibliographic Treatise” of the *History of Former Han Dynasty* (*Han shu* “yi wen zhi” 漢書藝文志, compiled about a hundred years later and referred to as the “Treatise” hereafter). Scholars estimate that there were more than six hundred annotated entries in the *Seven Epitomes* arranged according to a carefully designed classification.

The title of the catalogue seems to suggest that its classification consisted of seven epitomes (classes). However, the “Treatise” included only six classes (without “Ji lüe” or the Collective Epitome). Since the *Seven Epitomes* is no longer extant, scholars have not been able to come to a consensus about the nature and content of Ji lüe. One speculation that has been widely accepted is that Ji lüe was the collection of brief summaries now

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1. The Chinese terms for the classes in the first scheme are “Liu yi lüe” 六藝略, “Zhu zi lüe 諸子略”, “Shi fu lüe 詩賦略”, “Bing shu lüe 兵書略”, “Shu shu lüe 術數略”, and “Fang ji lüe 方技略”; and the classes in the second scheme are “Jing 經”, “Shi 史”, “Zi 子”, and “Ji 集”. The English translation of the six classes in the former is from Lewis (1999), and the English translation of the four classes in the latter is from Tarsala (2001).
2. In this paper, pinyin is used for romanizing Chinese names and titles.
seen at the end of each of the six main classes and their divisions. Nevertheless, no one disputes that the classification in the Seven Epitomes was a six-fold scheme.

There are six classes and divisions in the Seven Epitomes:

1. Liu yi lüè (Epitome of the Six Arts) consisted of nine divisions, including one for each of the Six Classics (Odes, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes, and Spring and Autumn Annals), Analects of Confucius, Book of Filial Piety, and philology.
2. Zhu zi lüè (Epitome of the Masters) consisted of ten divisions, including nine major affiliations of thought commonly known during the Warring States and an added affiliation of Novelists.
3. Shi fu lüè (Epitome of Lyrics and Rhapsodies) consisted of five divisions, including three styles of poetry and two other genres.
4. Bing shu lüè (Epitome of Military Texts) consisted of four divisions (tactics, terrain, yin/yang, and military skills).
5. Shu shu lüè (Epitome of Numbers and Divination) consisted of six divisions, including astronomy, chronology, five phases correlative elements, divination, miscellaneous fortune-telling, and geomancy).
6. Fang ji lüè (Epitome of Formulae and Techniques) consisted of four divisions, including medical classics, pharmacology, sexology, and longevity.

Related Literature
Researchers of the Seven Epitomes face two obstacles. First, the catalogue was lost long ago. Some scholars estimate that the catalogue disappeared between the late ninth century and the first half of the tenth century, basing their assertion on the fact that the Seven Epitomes was not listed in any extant bibliographies compiled in Northern Song 北宋 Dynasty (960–1127) and after. Being part of the History of Former Han Dynasty, the “Treatise” has been able to survive. Today researchers of the Seven Epitomes must use the “Treatise” as the basis for analysis, supplementing it with fragments quoted in other sources. Studies focusing on the “Treatise” alone without referencing the Seven Epitomes are also useful for understanding the latter.

The second difficulty in studying the classification of the Seven Epitomes is the extended time lag between the catalogue’s creation and any discussions of its fundamental design principles. To date there are no known writings by the compiler, Liu Xin, articulating the principles or ideas behind it. Besides, bibliography was not a significant field of study until Qing 清 Dynasty (1644–1912), so substantive discussions of bibliographic or classificatory principles only emerged hundreds of years after the compilation of the Seven Epitomes. Researchers thus need to be mindful of this time lag when reading the literature on the Seven Epitomes.

According to a long-held belief, the dominating factor in determining the six main classes and their sequence in the Seven Epitomes is Ru 儒 classicism (also known as Confucianism). We may call it the Principle of the Classicist Values. It is said that Liu Xin, like other classicist scholars, considered the Six Classics to be the canons for modeling government and personal conduct and thus devised the foremost class the Epitome

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3. The Six Classics, sometimes referred to as the Six Arts, are later known as the Five Classics, for the Music was lost long ago.
4. Several nineteenth-century scholars reconstructed the Seven Epitomes based on the “Treatise” and fragments from other sources. Among those versions, the one compiled by Yao Zhenzong (1978) is most authoritative.
of the Six Arts to include these six texts and their interpretations and commentaries. 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 classifi-
catory structure because classicists viewed them as the least signifi cant of all branches of
knowledge (Tan, 2003).

As suggested by Chinese scholars, the second factor that infl uenced the divisions of
the main classes in the Seven Epitomes was the state of scholarship (Zuo, 2004). It was
stated in the imperial decree ordering the undertaking of the collation project in six broad
categories—exactly the same as the six classes in the Seven Epitomes. For some, this
statement proves that the six-fold categorization was not a creation of Liu Xin; rather,
it refl ected the common divisions of scholarship in Former Han. It also means that the
scheme in the Seven Epitomes was both a bibliographic classifi cation and a classifi cation
of knowledge.

In comparing the main classes in the Seven Epitomes and its successors, the issue of
literary warrant, somewhat related to the state of scholarship, comes up frequently. A
popular view asserts that Liu Xin considered literary warrant in balancing the number of
texts in each of the six classes. In particular, the Seven Epitomes had no “History” class
(see Figure 1) because there were comparatively few texts of history available at the time.
Military texts were numerous during Han times due to frequent military confl icts that last-
ed for hundreds of years before then; thus a separate class for these works was justifi ed.
This view has been challenged (Wang, 1998). See the “Important Issues for Discussion”
section for more discussion.

Another camp maintains that Liu Xin was under the infl uence of the theories of yin 陰
and yang 陽 and the Five Phases (wu xing 五行), popular in Han times, in creating the six
classes (Zhang, 1994). In this belief, it is said that the classifi cation of the Seven Epitomes
was an attempt to return texts to a uniﬁ ed whole with the Six Classics as the origins of all
other written texts (Lewis, 1999). Some of the scholars holding this view are convinced
that Liu Xin forged the text of the Zhou li 周禮, the second part of the Book of Rites (one
of the Six Classics), taking the same philosophical approach in which the ideal state ad-
ministration consisted of six oﬃ ces, with one of them being the Chief Minister (tai zai 太宰)
to lead the rest.5 The fact that the six categories were specifi cally mentioned in the
imperial decree cited above makes it unlikely that Liu Xin invented the six classes.

Methodology
In my large-scale research project on bibliographic classifi cations in imperial China, I
have established an analytical framework as an attempt to bring new insight into this area
of study, which will be continuously reﬁ ned throughout the project. This framework is
composed of (1) the text of a classifi cation (the reconstructed version in the case of the
Seven Epitomes); (2) the biographical information about the classifi cationist; (3) the his-
tory of the government, especially the makeup of its bureaucracy and ideology (because
many targeted bibliographies were commissioned by the throne); (4) the intellectual his-
tory; and (5) the technological conditions at the time. Such analytical and interpretive
framework offers a multi-dimensional approach to better contextualizing data that is an-
ticipated to have two benefi ts in this historical research. First, it will be useful for identi-

5. The dispute about whether the Zhou li was a forgery created by Liu Xin has lasted for more than a century.
Today judging from recent archeological discoveries, scholars generally do not support the accusation.
fying 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.

Another method applied to dealing with historical texts in this study is known as triangulation of sources—identifying more than one account or explanation of the same event in multiple and preferably independent sources. Due to the age and current state of the Seven Epitomes, this method is especially necessary for achieving a rigorous analysis.

Important Issues for Discussion

As this research is ongoing, I will bring up for discussion the following issues that are of crucial importance in classification theory. The first issue to address is the concept of “discipline”. In Han China when the Seven Epitomes was compiled, the Chinese perceived and studied the world in ways very different from those structured according to disciplines as known today. Tarsala (2001) points out this problem in the previous English translation of the four classes in the Si ku quan shu “zong mu” (Figure 1). To avoid this type of misunderstanding, she proposes to use “Histories” and “Masters” to replace “History” and “Philosophy”, the latter two commonly referring to two disciplines in the West. In the above “Related Literature” section, I mentioned Wang’s disagreement on the role of literary warrant in the omission of a “History” class in the Seven Epitomes (Wang, 1998). He enumerates many texts scattered in various classes in the Seven Epitomes that were writings of history, enough to justify a separate class to accommodate them. The reason for not having a history class, he argues, is that history as a field of study was in its infancy in Former Han, and Liu Xin followed the scholarly landscape understood in pre-Han times to devise his classification. Quite interestingly, both Tarsala and Wang challenge the concept of discipline; the former suggests to rid of it from the study of Chinese bibliography and the latter defines it as what the ancient Chinese conceived of. This issue is at the heart of bibliographic classification and warrants additional scrutiny.

While literary warrant has been discussed, bibliographers mostly associate it with the balance among the classes. We must make it clear that the Seven Epitomes was not a comprehensive record of all writings available at the time; its coverage limited the scope of its classification. In fact, the books included in the Seven Epitomes were only those in the imperial libraries of the Inner Court that were part of the collation project. Collections in other government agencies were not part of the collation project at all and thus were left out of the Seven Epitomes. Writings on laws and elementary mathematics, for example, were excluded because they were the responsibility of other government agencies (Gu, 1989; Liu, 1982). Therefore, the claim that Liu Xin intended to treat all texts in the Seven Epitomes as a unity seems problematic and calls for further investigation.6

To understand the classification of the Seven Epitomes, it is also necessary to elaborate on the motives of intellectual control and social engineering. Han was the first dynasty that was able to rule China with a powerful and long-lasting central government. Its emperors believed in intellectual control. But the earlier emperors in the first sixty years or so were supporters of Daoism (as well as Legalism to some extent). Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141–87 BCE) started a new policy to fiercely promote classicism as the state-sanctioned

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6. Writings about laws were very important government documents. There are historical records showing that law texts were among several major categories in another earlier collation project. Thus, Liu Xin, being a central government official and renowned scholar, could not be ignorant of their existence.
ideology. Approximately one hundred years later, then Emperor Cheng 成 (r. 32–7 BCE) commissioned a collation project as part of its effort to establish intellectual authority dominated by classicism (Lewis, 1999; Nylan, 2001). In the process of collation, the participating scholars, Liu Xin included, and subject experts sorted through texts written on bamboo and wooden slats, many having fallen out of order, deciphered fading characters, and compared various versions. They then created a finalized version of each text, some of them new anthologies that have become the books as we currently know. The adoption of the classicist values by Liu Xin in reformulating texts and creating the catalogue and its classification was not simply to reflect the cultural values as they naturally occurred or developed. Clearly the ruling class played a strong hand in shaping the values.

**Conclusion**

Several issues emerged in re-examining the origins of the main classes in the *Seven Epitomes* by applying the aforementioned multi-dimensional framework for analysis. First, the classificationist’s conceptualization of “a field of study” in the original context is central to a better understanding of the classification itself. This is especially critical if the bibliographic classification in question is closely associated with classification of knowledge. Second, literary warrant translated into real limitations for the *Seven Epitomes* in terms of its coverage of written texts. It is advisable for researchers to keep in mind such limitations in their study of the overall classificatory structure of the catalogue. Third, the political overtones in the *Seven Epitomes* stemmed from the fact that the catalogue was a by-product of a government-sponsored collation project. Placing it in its original context, the analysis helped to illuminate the catalogue’s political and social functions that are as important as those of a utilitarian nature.

The above discussions gave early indication of the effectiveness of the proposed analytical framework. In the literature on Chinese bibliographic classifications, the lack of such framework has lead to erroneous interpretations, and even unwarranted opinions stating that Chinese bibliographic classification was underdeveloped. The observations made in this paper are not meant to be final. In the ongoing research project, we will continue to study the theoretical basis of the *Seven Epitomes* and a number of its successors within the framework.

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