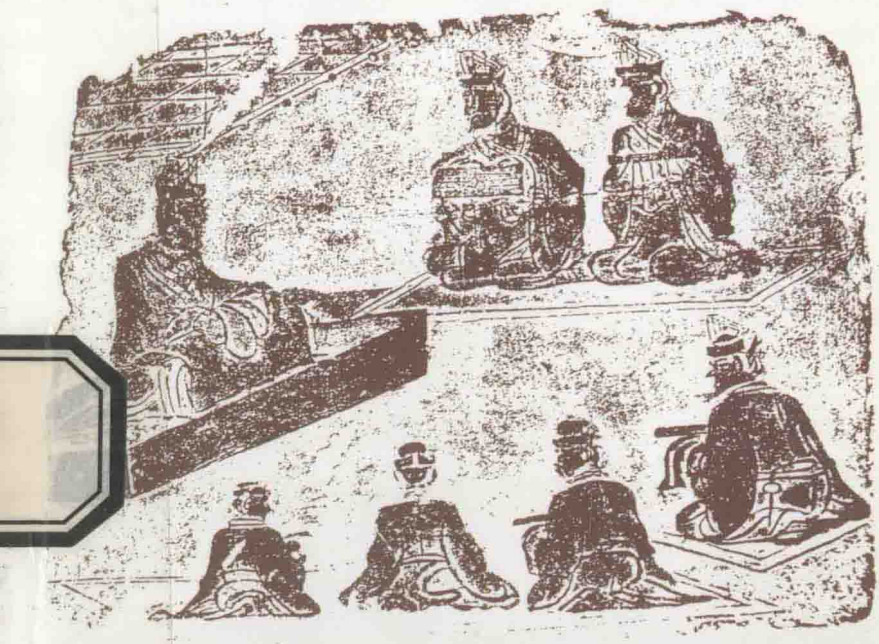
XU GAN

Balanced Discourses

A Bilingual Edition
English translation by John Makeham
Introductions by Dang Shengyuan and John Makeham

中国文史哲经典文库



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Home page:
http://www.flp.com.cn

Email address:
info@flp.com.cn
sales@flp.com.cn

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Professor D. C. Lau 劉殿爵 and Dr. F. C. Chen 陳方正 are chief editors, and Professor Ho Che Wah 何志華 is the executive editor of the CHANT database. Additional information about CHANT is available at its Website (www.chant.org).

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Acknowledgments

The work of translating and annotating Xu Gan's *Zhonglun* has occupied me, on and off, for many years. It is satisfying finally to be able to bring the task to a conclusion. It is also sobering to realize that Chinese text and facing English translation are now irretrievably open to public scrutiny. Many teachers and colleagues have generously guided me and given me invaluable feedback over the years. Rafe de Crespigny, K. H. J. Gardiner, Pierre Ryckmans, Chi-yun Chen, and Roger Ames read early versions of the translation and provided criticism and advice for improvement. Yoav Ariel generously sent me material on *Zhonglun* that he had been collecting in preparation for his own translation. The anonymous readers for Yale University Press, at various stages in the manuscript's evaluation, offered encouragement and corrections. Ning Chen kindly brought to my attention a number of inaccuracies in the translation. My manuscript editor at Yale University Press, Dan Heaton, has saved me from many infelicities of style and grammar. Not only has he professionally edited the English text, but he has also had to deal with a host of problems presented by a bilingual edition. Jim Peck, executive director of The Culture and Civilization of China series, has overseen publication at all stages and arranged for Professor Dang to write the introduction. My biggest debt is to Michael Nylan and Andrew Plaks for their painstaking corrections and detailed suggestions for revision. Without their constructive critical input I would have even greater cause to be walking in "fear and trembling."

Translator's Note on the Chinese Text

The Chinese text accompanying the translation is based on the text in Lau and Chen, *Concordance to Zhonglun*, or CHANT text. Punctuation and paragraph breaks at times differ from those adopted in the CHANT text, reflecting my interpretation of the Chinese text.

Round brackets ( ) signify deletions; square brackets 〔 〕 signify additions. This device is also used for emendations. An emendation of character 甲 to character 乙 is indicated by (甲)〔乙〕. For example:

(倦)〔倚〕[b] 立而思遠

Notes to the Chinese text give details of the authority for deletions, additions, and emendations. In all cases, the CHANT readings are reproduced in the citation text. I have noted all instances in which the readings I follow differ from those adopted in the CHANT text. In the above example, I have not followed the CHANT emendation, preferring the original reading. This is indicated in the corresponding note.

A footnote callout appended to a character or passage of text that is not marked by brackets indicates that the reading I have followed is not one recorded in the CHANT text. For example:

志者、學之師[d] 也

In this example, as is indicated in the corresponding note, I have followed the alternative reading of 帥. In all cases where I have followed an alternative reading or emendation, the translation is based on that alternative reading or emendation. The corresponding note gives details and the authority for the preferred alternative reading or emendation.

Introduction by Dang Shengyuan

Zhonglun (*Balanced Discourses*; hereafter *Discourses*) was written by Xu Gan (170–217) at the end of the Eastern Han (25–220) dynasty. *Discourses* is a work of political commentary, the aim of which is "to expound normative principles, trace their sources in the classical teachings, and attribute these principles to the way of the sages and worthies."[1] Xu is thus classified under Confucian thinkers in the "philosophers" division of all bibliographical lists of the standard histories, except for that of *Songshi*, where he is listed among miscellaneous writers.

Xu Gan (style Weichang) was a native of Ju prefecture in Beihai county (the eastern part of the today's Lechang county in Shandong). As one of the Seven Masters of the Jianan reign period (196–220) he was a celebrated literary figure and thinker during the period of transition from the Han to the Wei. A gifted youth, he developed a deep love of learning. He was painstaking in his studies and skilled at reflective thought. While still very young, he read a wide range of books and was exceptionally familiar with the Confucian classics. He was able to recite at length and had a natural talent for writing. He also had exceptional literary talents.

After the rebel general Dong Zhuo (d. 192) staged his rebellion in 190, Xu Gan left his residence in Linzi and went into hiding on the Jiaodong peninsula in Shandong.[2] Later he returned to Linzi and resumed his life there in retirement and isolation. He continued to study and reflect, frequently declining requests from commandery and prefectural officials to take up office.[3] In the Jianan reign period he served under the famous general Cao Cao (155–220) in positions on the staff of minister of works and was later appointed as instructor to the Leader of Court Gentlemen for Miscellaneous Purposes.[4] In 214 he was appointed as instructor of Linzi District. After this he retired, pleading illness. When later he was offered the post of magistrate of Shang'ai District, he again declined on the

grounds of ill health. Before this, he had served in several of Cao Cao's military campaigns and had frequented the sporting and banquet activities at Ye (alt. Yezhong), the future Wei capital. Moreover, he composed poetry and rhyme-prose to commemorate these experiences. Together with fellow "Jianan Masters" Ying Yang, Chen Lin, Liu Zhen, and Wang Can, he died in the pestilence of 217.

In the last years of the Eastern Han, according to the author of the preface to *Discourses*, "the canons of the state had broken down and fallen into disuse. The younger male members of families who held official positions formed cliques that were aligned to powerful families. They formed social connections with these families and supported them so that they might make a name for themselves, and they vied to better one another in the attainment of ranks and titles." On these grounds, Xu Gan "cut off his contacts with others to guard his own integrity, having nothing to do with them, and derived his pleasures solely from the Six Classics." When he retired from office after serving Cao Cao, he became even more committed to "hiding himself away in a back street, nurturing his true aim, and keeping his genuineness intact. Leading a plain, simple existence, he initiated no unnecessary action.... He nourished his floodlike vital energy and practiced the arts of longevity."[5] He also began to write *Discourses*.

Because Xu Gan neither attached importance to office and emoluments nor indulged in worldly honors, devoting himself instead to the pleasures of reading and writing, he "commanded a reputation in Qingzhou" making him quite an influential figure amongst scholar-literati.[6] In the year following Xu Gan's death, 218, Cao Pi wrote the following evaluation of him: "When one takes a close look at ancient and modern men of letters, most of them did not closely monitor the details of their own behavior. Few of them would have been able to stand tall on the strength of their moral integrity. Weichang was unique in possessing the qualities of cultural refinement (*wen*) and unadorned simplicity (*zhi*). He was indifferent to worldly success and had few desires. He had the same sense

of commitment as Xu You.[7] Indeed he can be called a well-balanced gentleman. He wrote *Discourses* in twenty chapters, establishing a school of thought in its own right. The form and content of his literary style are classical and elegant—well worth passing on to posterity. This gentleman will endure!"[8] Moreover, in his commentary to *Sanguozhi*, Pei Songzhi (372–451) cites a similar evaluation from *Xianxian xingzhuang* (Accounts of the Deeds of Former Worthies): "(Xu) Gan's embodiment of the way was pure and mysterious (*qing xuan*), and his cultivation of the six types of virtuous conduct was complete. Discerning in his understanding and broadly informed in his learning, he was an accomplished essay writer. He neither attached importance to office and emoluments nor indulged in worldly honors."[9]

The unsigned preface to *Discourses* relates that Xu Gan's "natural inclination was such that he constantly wanted to reduce that of which the age had a surplus and increase that in which the ordinary people of the day were deficient. He saw men of letters follow one another in the contemporary fad of writing *belles lettres*, but there was never one among them who elucidated the fundamental import of the classics to disseminate the teachings of the way; or who sought the sages' point of balance to dispel the confusion of popular contemporary *mores*. For this reason, he abandoned the literary genres of the ode (*shi*), rhyme-prose (*fu*), eulogy (*song*), inscription (*ming*), and encomium (*zan*), and wrote the book *Balanced Discourses* in twenty chapters." He thus decided no longer to practice writing in the fashionable literary genres but to live in seclusion, far removed from the hubbub of the mundane world, to devote his energies to writing *Discourses* so that he might "seek the sages' point of balance."[10] *Discourses* is the sole extant philosophical book written by any of the Seven Masters of the Jianan period.

Discourses is divided into two fascicles (*juan*) of ten chapters (*pian*) each (or twelve chapters in the second fascicle if we include the two incomplete reconstructed chapters, "Reinstitute the Three-Year Mourning Period" and "Regulate the Al-

lotment of Corvée Laborers"). Generally speaking the first fascicle is concerned with moral cultivation and the second with statecraft and strategies for achieving political order. The form and content of the book's literary style are classical and elegant. The book frequently takes the teachings of the former kings, Confucius, and Mencius as models and gives expression to the precepts of "inner sageliness and outer kingliness."[11] The book may indeed be described as the successful realization of Xu Gan's aim of "elucidating the fundamental import of the classics to disseminate the teachings of the way, as he sought the sages' point of balance to dispel the confusion of popular contemporary *mores*."[12]

In titling the book *Balanced Discourses*, Xu Gan gave expression to the emphasis that he placed on the concept of balance in Confucian thought and values. There are many passages in which he elaborates on the meaning of balance. In "Rewards and Punishments," for example, he writes: "The former kings sought to clarify the bearing of individual circumstances, and to be balanced when they weighed up their judgments, thereby always maintaining a sense of appropriate measure." This shows that balance means "maintaining a sense of appropriate measure." In "Valuing Words," Xu Gan selects the two stories of Cangwu Bing and Wei Sheng to illustrate this: "In the past, Cangwu Bing took a wife, but because she was beautiful, he gave her to his elder brother. It would have been better not to have deferred to him at all than to have been deferential in this manner. Wei Sheng arranged to meet his wife at the edge of a river. When the water suddenly rose, he would not leave and so drowned. It would have been better not to have kept his word to her at all than to have done so in this manner." For Xu Gan the mistake these men made was to carry matters to an extreme, losing proper measure, thus resulting in them abandoning the principle of balance. For Xun Gan balance was both a conceptual value and a methodological principle to be employed in the process of thinking and recognition. This concept was clearly influenced by such ideas as *appropriateness* (*shi yi*) and *being in due measure* (*you du*),

which are featured in *Huangdi neijing* and *Huainanzi*. The concept also contains rudimentary dialectical elements.

Against a background of political corruption and moral depravity at the end of the Eastern Han period, Xu Gan wrote *Discourses* to remedy the ills of his day. The various arguments and opinions raised in the book are all directed at contemporary social realities. Their political goal was to achieve order and stability. The desire expressed in the book to reestablish Confucian political ideals and ethical models is similarly motivated by the practical need to remove corrupt political practices and to remedy the degenerate state of social mores. For example, land annexation and slave ownership were two acute social problems in the Eastern Han period. They had set off a series of political crises and were also the fundamental cause of social instability. Addressing these issues, Xu Gan called for restrictions on the land annexation and excessive slave ownership practices of high-ranking and "noble" families. He argued that annexation and theft of land was responsible for the inequitable distribution of wealth in society and the impoverished state of many scholar-literati. His proposal to limit the number of slaves that "nobles" could own was directed at enriching the state and alleviating social disparities so as to effect political order throughout the realm. His proposal is furthermore related to his insistence that "the people are of foremost importance (*ren wei gui*)," a central tenet of the theory of "the people as the foundation of the nation (*minben*)." Having expressed the view that "of all the creatures in the world that live by breathing, none has greater awareness than man," Xu Gan believed that slaves, born as humans, must therefore be extended the principle of "spreading loving concern (*bo ai*)."[13] Thus in "Regulate the Allotment of Corvée Laborers" we read: "Although slaves are base in rank, they nevertheless possess the five constant virtues. Originally they were the good people of emperors and kings, but they have been entered into the household registers of small men as their personal slaves. Forlorn and destitute, they have lost their homes and yet have no one to tell of their plight. Have they not been wronged?"[14]

In order to bring a chaotic world to order and to remedy social crisis, Xu Gan advocated that government encourage learning, hold ritual in esteem, and be strict and impartial in meting out rewards and punishments. He maintained that if political order were to be effected throughout the realm, then the rites and laws of the sage kings must be followed, and that according to these rites and laws "the noble held positions that were always honored, while the lowly held positions that were hierarchically ranked. The gentleman and the small man each served in a different office." Only by upholding these distinctions could there be "no transgression by those below encroaching upon the authority of those above them, and so corvée labor and the strength derived from wealth were able to be supplied in sufficiency."[15] This sort of mindset, reflecting a staunch belief in Confucian political principles and social ideals, often was the guiding ideology when Xu Gan sought to analyze and solve social problems.

Xu Gan attached great importance to the role of rewards and punishments in governing a state, even elevating them to the lofty status of "fundamental tenets of government." Thus in "Rewards and Punishments" we read: "If rewards and punishments are not made clear, this will not only affect how well ordered the people are, it could even lead to the destruction of the state and the death of the ruler. Can one afford not to be careful?" Although it is natural for people to fear punishments and to take pleasure in rewards, rewards and punishments must be judiciously applied. In the same chapter Xu Gan states: "Nor can rewards and punishments be too light or too heavy. If rewards are too light, then the people will not be encouraged to do good; while, if punishments are too light, then the people will not be afraid. If rewards are too heavy, then people will benefit gratuitously; while, if punishments are too heavy, then people will be forced into a hopeless situation." Similarly, rewards and punishments should be neither too numerous nor too few because "if they are too numerous, then many people will receive them, while if too few, then many people will be left out." In neither case

would their purpose be served. The correct way to apply them is "to be balanced [in weighing up] judgments, thereby always main-taining a sense of appropriate measure." This is a further example of Xu's advocacy of the principle of "the way of balance."

The Eastern Han was the beginning of a period of extreme darkness and corruption, leading some scholar-literati to regard politics with disdain. Some individuals came to adopt pessimistic and nihilistic attitudes toward society and history, developing decadent and hedonistic outlooks on life, such that they abandoned their individual social duties and also their responsibility as scholar-literati to provide social criticism. Xu Gan, however, was different. In addition to addressing contemporary social realities by advancing his own political propositions, he also placed emphasis on the need for scholar-literati to fire their ambitions and to have the courage to forge ahead. A concentrated expression of this thinking is the chapter "Titles and Emoluments" in which he proposes that individual scholar-literati should actively seek titles and emoluments on the strength of their virtue and meritorious service. Thus the philosophical concepts and political proposals that Xu Gan elucidates in *Discourses* are in fact representative of the critical social consciousness of a group of positive-minded scholar-literati whose family backgrounds were of the commoner class. These concepts and proposals also represent the political demands made by this group for social and political standing. Because the hereditary elite families monopolized the avenues to office, commoners who sought to gain office and official promotion faced an arduous task. Accordingly, some of the anguish that welled from the deep recesses of Xu Gan's mind is apparent in *Discourses*. In "Titles and Emoluments" he writes:

> Hence a good farmer does not worry that the borders of his fields are not maintained, but rather that the winds and rains will not be in proper measure. Similarly, the gentleman does not worry that the way and its power