

On Xu Fuguan's Views on Reading --On the Reading Methods for Graduate Students of Humanities

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Abstract: As one of the representatives of modern neo-Confucianism, Xu Fuguan has made great academic achievements. Xu Fuguan raised many viewpoints on how to read, such as reading with interest and purpose. His viewpoints have obvious practical and instructive significance in the reading methods for graduate students of humanities.

Xu Fuguan was born in Xishui County, Hubei Province, in 1903, whose original name was Bingchang, and style name was Foguan. Xu Fuguan was one of the representatives of modern neo-Confucianism. He had social influence in Taiwan and Hong Kong as a political commentator. Xu Fuguan joined the army when he was young. He began his academic research with his teacher Xiong Shili in his middle age. His works are extensive, including *The History of the Chinese Theory of Human Nature*, *The History of Thought in the Western and Eastern Han Dynasties*, *A Collection of Articles of History of Chinese Thought*, *Explication of Kung-Sun Lung Tzu*, *On Confucian Political Thought and Democracy*, *Freedom and Human Rights*, *Chinese Art Spirit*, *Research on Shi Tao* and *A Collection of Articles of Chinese Literature*. Xu Fuguan devoted himself to study in the second half of his life. He wrote a lot of academic works and his own unique academic thought and style formed. Therefore, the study of Xu Fuguan's academic thought has obvious practical significance for young researchers, especially for graduate students of Humanities and Social Sciences.

I. Xu Fuguan's Views on Reading

(I) Interest + Purpose = Results

We should have a certain purpose in reading. According to Xu Fuguan, those who have interest in reading, but no a purpose, will have no gains. Those who have no a direction, a foothold or a clear purpose in reading are like wanderers. Take the relationship between people and money as an example. Xu took the idea that one will be empty-handed at last if he or she spends the money as soon as he or she gets it, though he or she used to have money. It is necessary to read with a purpose. Compared with those who read without a purpose, the one who opens a book with a purpose will gain more. He thought the people who can not find books worth reading are not really clever.

(II) Read the First-rate Works.

Xu Fuguan likened human mind to a knife. He said, "Your mind is like a knife." Reading such books like the ones on Western Philosophy is like sharpening a knife on a fine whetstone. In such a reading environment, Xu Fuguan formed the idea that he only read the first-rate books and the ones in his field. He preferred the quality of reading to the quantity of reading. Of course, there are exceptions.

He supported his view with his own examples. For example, he read Lu Xun's and Hajime Kawakami's works extremely carefully. He also read some books about economics and military science, but he thought, "Reading those books is a waste of time because they are not helpful to my research." He usually collected others' research results in Chinese classical literature before he got down to studying a problem in the field. He said, "Read the classical works after understanding others' research on it." Thus, he often could find out "there is a lot for us to do" through reading

the classical works in such a way. Therefore, Xu often advised students to “read more classical works”.

(III)The Importance of Making Extracts

It is a rule for scholars to make notes while reading. There are many forms of making notes while reading, such as writing something after reading and making extracts. Xu Fuguan held the idea that making notes can help to understand what you read deeper. You may think you have understood what you have read, but you may realize that “you have not really understood it” once you make some notes. “The time shortly after you read a book is usually the best time for you to digest it.” According to Xu Fuguan, “During the time shortly after reading a book, you may think about what you have just read naturally or half unconsciously in a way like ruminants’ ruminating food. It means that you are digesting what you have read. You may find new problems and suddenly find the way to solve them in a moment.”

(IV)Find out the Useful Parts from Books

It was Xu Fuguan’s teacher Xiong Shili who led him to academic research. When Xu Fuguan was young, Xiong Shili criticized him for the way he read. Xu said, “It was my teacher Xiong Shili who gave me the courage to devote myself to academic research.” Besides, in a broad sense, he considered the criticism from Xiong Shili as “one criticism that makes the dead come back to life for the young, the middle-aged and even the old people who are clever, but conceited, and who have not got into academic research.” However, it took Xu Fuguan years to think and he realized the importance of finding out the useful parts from books finally.

Xu Fuguan thought we should learn the good from a book and then criticize the bad of it. Reading a book is like eating some food. We digest the food and take in nutrition. He suggested that we should read carefully. It is not right to read books carelessly as he did when he was young because he always found “a lot that he disagreed with” at that time.

If you want to find out the good from a book, or the true meaning of a book, you should read it in detail, especially the essence. The questions you find after you read a book are the door to understand it. Naturally, you will continue to work hard.

Xu Fuguan’s methods of reading are closely related to his methods of doing academic research. As for the attitude to academic research and the methods of doing academic research, Xu Fuguan thought “Methods are about how to deal with materials, but how to use the methods depends on the researchers attitude”.

In summary, Xu Fuguan’s views on reading are a product of certain historical conditions, which are practical and instructive for students’ reading and academic research. The study on Xu Fuguan’s views on reading is helpful for us to deeply understand the meaning of his views on reading. If we can follow them in practice, they will be of great advantage for us to do academic research successfully.

II. The Reading Methods for Graduate Students of Humanities

Postgraduate training consists of two stages in China. In the first stage, they are required to earn enough credits and pass the foreign language degree test. In the second stage, they are required to prepare for and complete their graduation thesis. Besides, they have to hunt for a job during the preparation for their graduation thesis. Therefore, reading--an important link in postgraduate training, is ignored intentionally or unintentionally. And, with the development of electronic technology, there are a lot of e-books. Compared to reading paper books, some graduate students in humanities like reading e-books more. Of course, every man has his hobbyhorse. However, everyone has his own reading method and there are different ways to read different books according to He Lin. You’d better find the best and the most effective reading method for yourself.

In addition, there is a bad phenomenon. Graduate students only read the books related to the theses they are preparing for. They don’t like reading any books that have nothing to do with their papers. Their narrow reading field is not conducive to the formation of their good reading habits

and it is not conducive to their formation of a solid theoretical basis. They can not form a solid theoretical basis until they read the classical books related to their major and discipline. Maybe they can finish their graduation theses well if they carefully read the books related to the theses they are preparing for, but it is not helpful for them to form a solid theoretical basis. Can we build our own knowledge building with fragmented knowledge? The answer is no. The right way of reading for graduate students is expanding the vision of reading.

According to Xu Fuguan, it is necessary for the graduate students of humanities to find one or two main ways of reading, or reading rules, for themselves, during their postgraduate period so that they can form good reading habits. For example, Xu took making notes as his reading rule.

But the graduate students of humanities should also select different reading methods according to their own characteristics when they learn the reading methods from different scholars. For example, Su Shi, a famous Chinese literati in history, raised the reading method called “ba mian shou di”, which means one can deal with all the problems with what he has learned. In a reply letter to Wang Yang, his niece’s husband, who had written to Su Dongpo for reading methods, he introduced the so called “ba mian shou di” as follows:

“Young people should read a good book several times. The rich content of a good book is like an ocean of knowledge. The aspect that your mind points to is like a window, through which you can not see everything. So when you read a good book only once, what you can see is only the scenery that you see through the window. I hope that you can read the book with a clear purpose every time you read it. For example, if you want to explore the reasons for the rises and declines of dynasties in history and the roles played by great people, you can focus on this aspect, and do not think much about other aspects. Find another aspect and focus on it next time you read the book. You can also read the similar books in the same way. Though it is slow, once you get the essence after you read lots of books, you will be worried about nothing even when you are faced with the most difficult problems.”

I think Su Dongpo’s reading method is useful for us to read some classical works, such as The Analects of Confucius, The Great Learning and The Historical Records. But I do not think it is proper for us read the general literature. Therefore, it is necessary for graduate students of humanities to find one or two proper reading methods during their postgraduate period and they should hold on to it in the whole postgraduate period.

As for general literature, different reading methods should be adopted. I think intensive reading is suitable for classics, which are the foundation of a certain discipline. Of course, we should read the classics carefully. As for the less important or the general literature, we can just look through them. Thus, we can make our reading more effective and save time as well.

In conclusion, “students of arts and those of science and engineering have different tasks. They do not need to do experiments. Their main task is to read books.”, according to Li Zehou, a famous Chinese philosopher. Reading is not only a means for postgraduates of humanities to carry out scientific research, but also a purpose, a career and a life. Reading is closely related to learning, especially for the students of humanities. If a student can read with rigorous thought and scientific method, he or she can tell which books are superficial or which books have contradictory contents. He or she knows they are not worth reading. So, how can they be hoodwinked?

Therefore, graduate students of humanities should have their own reading rules during the postgraduate period and the rules should be implemented in their academic research. Only in this way, can we achieve the purpose of academic training for them. It is also helpful for them to lay a solid foundation for their future academic research. Their reading habits without interest, purpose or thinking deeply should be corrected under the guidance of their tutors as much as possible during their postgraduate period.

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