

The Jōu Rǎn 周任 Sayings

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Abstract. Several texts quote Jōu Rǎn, as though from a collection of Jōu Rǎn sayings. No such collection figures in the Hàn Palace Library catalogue, or now exists. The sayings imply a roughly consistent ideology, and are quoted in more than one text. I here doubt that there ever existed a Jōu Rǎn sayings collection.

The Quotations

DJ 1/6:4. In Shū 18 (Pán-gǔng A 盤庚上), the Shāng ruler Pán-gǔng compares his disobedient people to a fire that can neither be approached nor put out. He then quotes Chǐ Rǎn 遲任¹ to the effect that with people we seek the old, but with tools the new. This threatens to replace his officers (his “tools”) if they do not obey. DJ 1/6:4 quotes (as from a Book of Shāng 商書) a saying comparing enmity to a fire on a plain, which cannot be approached or beaten out, and quotes, not Chǐ Rǎn, but Jōu Rǎn 周任, to the effect that a ruler is like a farmer with weeds; he cuts them and burns them to let the good grass spread. The sense is similar, and the grassfire is the same; coincidence is excluded. DJ has revised Shū 18, and altered the name of the person quoted.²

DJ 10/5:1 quotes Jōu Rǎn on private versus public interests, and adds a quote from Shī 256B, praising the kind of ruler to whom all submit. The DJ story is repeated in Kūngdǔ Jyā-yǔ 孔子家語 (KZJY) 41:8, followed by the same Shī quote.

LY 16:1 (c0285). In accusing two disciples of shirking their duty, “Confucius” quotes Jōu Rǎn, “Let those with strength step into line; let those without desist.” Again the threat to replace those in responsible positions if they do not perform properly.

KZJY 42:9 has a Jōu Rǎn saying in a passage otherwise based on Tán Gūng B67. KZJY tends to be secondary, and Tán Gūng may have originally contained the saying, which was eliminated in the Lǐ Jì version. That saying, 仁人無敵 “The benevolent man has no enemy” [cannot be opposed], is found earlier, and without attribution, in Mencius 1A5 (仁者無敵, c0320) and 4A7 (天下無敵, c0285). In Sywǎndǔ 18:5a (c0260) the version 仁人無敵於天下 describes the ideal Emperor 天子; in SZ 15:1 it is said of “Sūn and Wú” by the Chǔ general Lord Lín-wǔ (so also Hān Shī Wà-jwàn 3:36); it recurs in MC 7B3 as quoted by Mencius; MC 7B4 has 天下無敵焉, and the military text Wèi Lyáudǔ 3:10 has 天下無敵, without attribution. The specific Jōu Rǎn attribution is too late to warrant including it in the roster of probable Jōu Rǎn sayings.

¹The reading Rǎn (not Ràn) is indicated in Shū 18 for Chǐ Rǎn; I adopt it for Jōu Rǎn.

²Perhaps to evoke the Jōu, rather than the Shāng dynasty setting of Shū 18. This shift is probably the origin of the “Jōu Rǎn” persona as a statecraft authority in his own right.

Save for the last, these quotations are from Confucian sources (DJ, LY, repeated in KZJY), and are quoted by “Confucius” or a surrogate figure, the jywǎndǔ 君子.

Translation

The sayings are here given in order of their first explicit attribution to Jōu Rǎn.

Threat to Replace Noncompliant Officials

遲任有言曰，人惟求舊，器非求舊，惟新

1. In men, we seek the old; with tools, we seek not the old, but the new. (Shū 18)

Elimination of Harmful Elements in the Populace

周任有言曰，爲國家者見惡，如農夫之務去草焉，芟夷蘊崇之，絕其本根，勿使能殖，則善者信矣

2. One in charge of a state regards evil like a farmer removing weeds; he cuts them down, heaps them in piles [for burning], and cuts out their roots, lest they be able to sprout up again. Thus the good growth can spread. (DJ 1/6:4, following Shū quote)

The Public Interest is the Only Interest

周任有言曰，爲政者不賞私勞，不罰私怨

3. One in charge of government does not reward private toil, nor assign government penalties to private resentments. (DJ 10/5:1 > KZJY 41:8)

Threat to Replace Nonperforming Officials

周任有言曰，陳力就列，不能者止

4. Let those with strength step into line; let those without desist. (LY 16:1)

Ideology and Contemporary Context

The sayings are expedient in method (#1), intolerant of dissent (#2), unconcerned for private toil (#3), and demanding of performance (#4). The time range is slight, and so is the range of quoting texts: the Confucian DJ and LY. The seeming mismatch between expected and actual ideology is at first surprising. But there are non-Lǔ notes: (1) the prototype Shū 18, ostensibly about the move of the Shāng capital, may reflect resistance to the move of the Ngwè capital to Lyáng in 0364, and (2) the DJ in its last years relocated to Chí, where it made big-power noises in support of Chí ambitions.³

They may represent a tough Confucianism: a Confucianism without Confucius, and speaking in another voice (one crafted from a name in the Shū, and thus carrying an aura of known antiquity), and available to be quoted by “Confucius” when dealing with situations beyond the reach of Confucian populist expectations. They were probably invented by the DJ people, and did not come from a “Jōu Rǎn” school text. If so, we are here eyewitnessing the creation of a quotable ancient persona.

Works Cited

A Taeko Brooks. Heaven, Li, and the Formation of the *Zuozhuan*. OE v44 (2003) 51-100

³For the Chí phase of the DJ after c0317, see Brooks **Heaven** 86f. The DJ Jōu Rǎn quotes (tentatively dated to c0320 and c0324) are from a slightly earlier “transitional” period, when the ethical confidence of the earlier DJ was already beginning to be challenged by events.