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## CHAPTER 8

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# TEXT AND COMMENTARY

## *The Early Tradition*

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MICHAEL PUETT

A tendency exists to think of the development of a literary tradition in rather simplistic ways: in the early period authors write texts, and then later authors write commentaries to those earlier texts in order to explain what the earlier authors wrote. Such a narrative does not work particularly well for any literary tradition, but for few traditions are we as amply supplied as we are in the classical Chinese tradition with materials that allow us to paint a different picture.

## TEXT AND CONTEXT IN EARLY CHINESE LITERARY PRODUCTION

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A. K. Ramanujan once wrote: "No Hindu ever reads the *Mahābhārata* for the first time." His point was that one grows up in Hindu societies hearing stories from the *Mahābhārata*, listening to bits of the *Mahābhārata*, and watching scenes of the *Mahābhārata* being performed. So ubiquitous are these performances that, when turning to the text, one is always reading something one has already heard or read before.

If one were to make an analogy with early China, it would be not with a single great text but rather with a repertoire of ever-changing stories, anecdotes, and snippets of poetry. Literary production in classical China occurred against a background of a constantly circulating body of stories and poems. Stories concerning stock characters would be told and retold in shifting forms, so that one would endlessly be hearing different versions of them. One would, to paraphrase Ramanujan, never hear a story concerning Yao or Shun (both legendary sage emperors) for the first time.

The key to the use of these stories was to allude to them in particular contexts, changing some aspect of the stories in order to create a certain response or make a particular argument. Poems, too, would circulate as lines that would be quoted, referenced, alluded to, and altered from previous uses in order to elicit responses in different situations.

The concern with these tellings and retellings was not, therefore, with the intrinsic meaning of a story or of a poem in itself. The focus was rather on bringing particular portions of the stories or particular lines of the poems into new contexts, quoting them or alluding to them as might seem appropriate. Successful allusions would then become part of the web of associations of the stories or lines of poetry—associations that later references and allusions would then build upon and play with as well.

Early texts in classical China should be understood as in part coming out of these constant readings and rereadings of earlier materials. Many of the texts were based upon utilizations and readings of earlier materials, and themselves became part of this endless process of reading and rereading as well. Indeed, many of the texts that we now possess were themselves formed to a significant degree by these later readings. Our texts, in other words, were in part commentaries to earlier materials, and were in turn shaped into what we have come to know as texts by the commentarial tradition. This complex interplay of text and commentary defines much of the early literary tradition.

## THE ART OF QUOTING AND TELLING

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Let's begin with poetry. The collection that we have since come to know as *Shijing* 詩經 or the *Classic of Poetry* is a series of poems that came together over a number of centuries. The earliest stratum appears to consist of ritual hymns from the Western Zhou (ca. 1046–771 BCE) court; later strata include, for example, love poems in which natural imagery would be used to bring out certain emotional responses comparable to those of the human figures in the poem.

Quotations of the *Classic of Poetry* abound in early Chinese texts. Intriguingly, however, one rarely if ever encounters a full poem. Rather, one encounters particular lines, taken out of context of the full poem, quoted in often surprising and counterintuitive ways. When a particularly creative utilization of a set of lines would occur, that utilization would be remembered and built upon in later utilizations. Over time, each of these creative utilizations would become part of the range of associations of a given set of lines.

Putting this in strong terms, the interest was less in finding an inherent meaning in any particular poem and more in the ways that lines of poems could be quoted and utilized according to the contexts.

This same process occurred with stories as well. Certain figures—often historical or putatively historical figures—would be portrayed in various story cycles. In different situations, different versions of the stories would be told, and the interest of the stories would come out of the variations, that is, out of the particular ways in which a particular story would be told. In one version, Bo Yi and Shu Qi, retainers of the last Shang king, retreated into the mountains and starved to death after the Zhou conquest instead of supporting the new Zhou ruler. Knowing that they had acted properly, they died without rancor. In another version, they died filled with resentment, cursing Heaven for the injustices of the world.

Although the main figures are often putatively historical figures, these differing versions were told not as historical claims, in the sense of a debate about what actually happened in the past. On the contrary, the interest of the stories would lie precisely in the variations, in the meanings that could be played upon—whether, in the example above, we live in a moral or amoral cosmos—as the fragments of stories would be retold and altered in different situations.

## AUTHORS AND COMMENTATORS

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Given the nature of this circulation of poetic and story fragments, the focus was not on associating a poem or story with a particular author and then attempting to explicate the meaning of the work as a whole. The focus was rather on utilizing the various lines or shifting the story according to context. As we will see, this focus on utilization would become one of the key aspects of later interpretative and commentarial traditions.

And it even became a key aspect of the development of a notion of an author.

Over the course of the fourth and third centuries BCE, a new vision of authorship began to emerge—one focused on great figures called sages. The view was that, in the midst of what was perceived to be a period of decline, the sages who in previous times would have become rulers and brought order to the world were no longer able to gain political power. Accordingly, they instead had to write texts in order to lay out their visions for how to order the world.

Mencius, a figure in the fourth century BCE, argued that Confucius had been the most significant of these sages who wrote in order to bring order to the world:

As the generations declined and the way became obscure, heterodox teachings and violent practices arose. There were instances of ministers killing their rulers and sons killing their fathers. Confucius was worried and created the *Spring and Autumn Annals* [*Chunqiu* 春秋]. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is an undertaking for a Son of Heaven. This is why Confucius said: “Those who understand me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; those who condemn me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.” (*Mengzi zhushu* 6.117)

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* would at first glance appear to be a dry, chronological listing of events that occurred in the minor state of Lu from 722 to 481 BCE. But the small state of Lu is where Confucius lived. And once the text was attributed to Confucius—the only work that Confucius was said to have written—the dry chronicle had to be interpreted to reveal the sage's intent in composing such a work.

But immediately this created a problem. If this is a great work, written by a great sage to bring order to the world, then how does one read it as such? And how does one relate what Confucius wrote to a subsequent world that would appear to be radically different?

The problem, of course, is related to the one we were discussing before: how to read and interpret earlier materials into new contexts. Now, however, the concern is with explicating these materials as the product of a great sage. Here one begins to see the idea that an author wrote a text that must be read and deciphered as a whole.

Intriguingly, many of the crucial mechanisms for making such an interpretation are already implicit in the *Mencius* quotation. One of the keys is to understand the context within which Confucius would have composed such a work, to understand Confucius's intention in composing the work, and to understand how the principles one can find in the work can and should be applied to other contexts.

Later commentarial traditions to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* were attempts to do precisely these things. One of the more influential of these was the *Gongyang* 公羊 commentary, which read the *Spring and Autumn Annals* as an attempt to lay out timeless principles of proper governance. Another, the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo Tradition*), involved arranging other stories related to the state of Lu in order to provide further context to Confucius's pithy statements in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

The result of this process is that, over the course of the fourth to second centuries BCE, a dry, pithy chronicle from the state of Lu came to be read as a great work of sagely complexity. Instead of a process of texts being written as texts, to which commentaries would later be affixed, we are instead seeing a process by which early self-defined commentaries defined the texts they were commenting upon.

Similar processes can be seen with the *Classic of Poetry*. Over the course of the Warring States (481–221 BCE) and early Han (206 BCE–220 CE), Confucius came to be seen as the figure who had assembled the *Classic of Poetry* by selecting exemplary poems and organizing them into a collection. And commentaries started being written to explicate the meanings of the poems selected by Confucius.

These commentarial traditions developed out of the earlier layers of associations that the lines of the poems had developed. For example, the Mao commentary from the Western Han (206 BCE–8 CE)—involving a reading of what would appear to be love poems in the “Guo feng” 國風 (“Airs of the States”) section as allegories of political relationships—developed out of a tradition of placing lines of the poems into new contexts and reading them accordingly. Now, however, the rereadings were being undertaken in the form of a commentary to a work that was in turn reread as a unified collection of poems put together by the sage Confucius.

## SAGELY TEXTS IN THE LATE WARRING STATES AND EARLY HAN

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Such a vision of a sage as an author or compiler of texts was to continue thereafter as a major force in textual production. Many figures would try to emulate Confucius in the role of either a great sagely author or compiler, while many others would try to stop the progressive growth of claims of sagacity.

As we have noted, Mencius claimed Confucius to have been a sage. And the disciples of Mencius would later claim that Mencius too was a sage, and that his ideas as well needed to be collected into a text.

Successive texts were written about, and eventually by, people who were claimed—or claimed themselves—to be sages. The result was the development of a form of competitive sageliness, in which texts would be written to be longer and more comprehensive—more sagely—than their predecessors.

The high point of this process occurred in the early imperial period (late third and second centuries BCE). The beginning of the imperial period witnessed claims by rulers to be creating states greater than any of their predecessors', and the same was the case with textual production. A clear example can be seen in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, a work of the second century BCE, the postface of which explicitly argues that the text is greater than and supersedes all previous texts. And Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE) postface to his *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*) appears implicitly to claim the work to be greater than the *Spring and Autumn Annals* of Confucius.

Commentary appears in this tradition as well, but often within the form of a competitive sageliness. For example, one of the chapters of the *Huainanzi* opens by quoting the lines of an earlier text, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, about the absurdity of trying to provide a cosmogonic account of the universe. The *Huainanzi*, after quoting these lines, then provides a line-by-line commentary to them. And the commentary involves a lengthy cosmogonic account of the universe. The positioning, in other words, is not one of placing oneself in a subservient role to an earlier text that one is claiming simply to explicate. The goal is rather an extreme variant of the work of reading that we were mentioning above: the earlier passage is not only being read, used, and interpreted in a new context; it is, to use a strong wording, being misread to demonstrate the superiority of the latter text to the text it is ostensibly commenting upon.

## UNDERSTANDING THE SAGES

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This strong form of sagely competitiveness, and the strong forms of reading—and intentional misreading—that played out within such a textual production, reached its height in the mid-Western Han dynasty. By the end of the Western Han, however, a reaction

against such claims to sagacity and such attempts to write grandiose works developed, along with a concurrent reaction against the forms of imperial statecraft that had dominated the earlier Western Han.

This shift had two major implications. To begin with, we see a self-conscious attempt to bring an end to the great age of the sagely texts. At the end of the Western Han these texts (*Mengzi*, *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Huainanzi*) were classified under the rubric of Masters Texts (Denecke 2011) —a classification that both defined the category under which such texts were to be understood and, at least for some, marked the closing of the category as well.

Also by the end of the Western Han one sees another, and directly related, development; the texts associated with Confucius became defined as the Five Classics: the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Classic of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書), the *Records of Rituals* (*Liji* 禮記), and the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). The *Spring and Autumn Annals*, as we have seen, was the one text that Confucius was seen as having written, while the other four he was seen as having edited.

With this definition of the works of Confucius came a concurrent attempt to define Confucius as the greatest sage—greater, in other words, than the masters that had come after. Claims, whether implicit or explicit, to supersede Confucius came increasingly to be seen as hubristic. For many, the goal should rather be to understand the teachings of the greatest sage, and the discussion of such texts would then be positioned as one of subservience—simply trying to explicate the meanings of the great works of the past.

The kind of commentarial work needed to explicate these texts associated with Confucius became a significant source of textual production over the ensuing two centuries of the Eastern Han (25–220). Throughout these commentaries, the sense was that Confucius was a great sage and that he had written or edited the works in question in order to pass on deeper meaning. The goal of the commentaries was to lay out that deeper meaning.

A telling example of how strong this sense of subordinating oneself to earlier sages became can be seen by looking at a major exception: Wang Chong 王充 (27–after 100 CE). Wang Chong very much opposed the growing cultural prohibition against claims to sagacity. Wang Chong argued on the contrary that sages were still rising, and that they were continuing to write sagely texts. It is quite clear, indeed, that Wang Chong saw himself as such a sage, writing a great text, the *Lun heng* (*Balanced Discourses*) to rectify the errors of the day. But his arguments fell on deaf ears: claims to sagacity in this sense no longer held the cultural resonance they once did.

As the writing of commentaries on the contrary became an increasingly strong intellectual focus, the materials from the past were seen as texts that were written or organized by sages, and one of the key goals was thus to place oneself in a subsidiary position vis-à-vis these earlier texts and simply to help explicate the words of the great sages. But then, of course, the question became how to define the texts to be commented upon and what strategies should be employed to interpret them. The problems were particularly acute for the Five Classics, which were being used in part for governing an empire—hardly problems the texts would appear overtly to be speaking to.



One method of interpretation that developed was to claim that esoteric teachings had been handed down in the tradition that would explain the larger meanings behind the classics. According to one body of such material, called the apocryphal (*chenwei* 讖緯) texts, the classics organized by Confucius provided an exoteric teaching, while the *chenwei* texts claimed to be in possession of an esoteric teaching. The claim here was that Confucius was a profound figure who wrote or edited complex works that needed to be explicated through highly sophisticated hermeneutics.

## INTERPRETING WITHOUT SAGES

But even the claim that a sophisticated hermeneutics was required to unlock the profound thoughts of a mysterious sage from the past was hotly debated. Indeed, an entire strain of Eastern Han commentarial writings developed that attempted to avoid an overly complex hermeneutics, as this would potentially put too much power in the hands of the interpreter.

One telling alternative approach was attempted by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), one of the leading commentators of the Eastern Han period. Zheng Xuan based his commentarial practice not on discovering the esoteric meanings hidden in a text by a sage but rather on reconstructing a past moment. For Zheng Xuan, the Western Zhou was the period in which rituals were done properly. Confucius, for Zheng Xuan, was a great sage, but he was also a sage who lived after the age of greatness. Confucius's goal, according to Zheng Xuan, was to preserve as much as possible the Western Zhou. As such, the five classics edited and (in the one case) written by Confucius were particularly important. But they do not offer a complete picture of the Western Zhou. Any other text that might be useful for filling in details could therefore be used.

Guiding Zheng Xuan's hermeneutics, then, was a claim that the Western Zhou was a unified system, and that texts after the decline contained clues of what that system had been. The goal of the commentator was thus to work through the textual corpus to find remnants of the Zhou system. If these remnants could be put together successfully, then the result would be a reconstruction of the Western Zhou. In other words, Zheng Xuan was concerned not with uncovering the intentions of a sage but in reconstructing an era, and his commentarial work consisted not in developing a complex hermeneutic to interpret the earlier texts but rather in simply putting together the fragments of material we possess, with minimal analysis.

An even more extreme example can be seen in the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (*The Scripture of Great Peace*). Although a composite text, the portion of the text that will concern us here probably dates to the Eastern Han. The portion consists of a dialogue between a Celestial Master and his disciples. The Celestial Master, sent by Heaven, explains that all of the previous sages of human history were in fact also sent by Heaven. The teachings

they were offering, therefore, were Heaven-sent and correct. But they were misunderstood and misapplied by humans, and over time these misunderstandings had accumulated. This accumulation of mistakes has now reached the point that the entire world is in danger of collapse. The solution offered by the Celestial Master is not to send yet another sage to offer yet more revealed teachings, as this would simply lead to the same problem again. On the contrary, the Celestial Master calls on his disciples to simply take every piece of writing from the past and put it all together. Since each would contain remnants of the same revelation, the resulting document, once properly collated, would contain one single sagely statement:

If the sages of higher antiquity missed something, the sages of middle antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of middle antiquity missed something, the sages of lower antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of lower antiquity missed something, the sages of higher antiquity may have obtained it. If one arranges these by category so they thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement. (Wang 1992: 132.352)

Completely gone, therefore, is any claim that one is confronting a text written by a great human sage, or that any kind of complex hermeneutic would be needed to tease out the complex meanings of the earlier text. On the contrary, the texts contain remnants of one single (repeatedly given) revelation, and the goal is simply to put the remnants together, with no interpretation.

Or a final variation can be seen in the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to the *Laozi* 老子. The *Xiang'er* commentary was probably written during the second century of the common era. The text was either composed in or at least later appropriated by the Celestial Masters, a millenarian movement that emerged in the second half of the Eastern Han.

According to the *Xiang'er* commentary, the *Laozi* was not written by a human sage at all. It was rather written by a deity named Laozi. Laozi, in fact, was the Way itself. But the Way would periodically take human form to offer revelations. And the text of the *Laozi* was one of these revelations.

The *Xiang'er* commentary was written to explicate the proper way to read the revelation. One of the key mistakes, according to the *Xiang'er* commentary, is that people have mistakenly read the text as having been written by a human sage, and as having been written in a complex form that required a sophisticated hermeneutic to understand. On the contrary, the *Xiang'er* argues, the *Laozi* is in fact offering a very clear set of guidelines written in very straightforward prose, and the commentary presents itself as simply laying out the obvious meaning of this revelation. The human author is denied altogether, as is any kind of complex interpretation or hermeneutic.

For all of their differences, all these approaches involved attempts to relegate wisdom to the past (instead of seeing sages as continuing to appear), to subordinate oneself to such a past, and to at least claim that one is not interpreting the past in a complex way that might entail too much power on the part of the interpreter.

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE MYSTERIOUS LEARNING

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If one of the dominant pushes of the Eastern Han commentarial tradition consisted in trying to claim the commentator to be subordinate to the text under consideration, a dramatic shift occurred with the development of *xuanxue* 玄學 (“mysterious learning” or “arcane learning”), a new commentarial practice that emerged in the third century.

This shift was related to a larger shift in the culture of the time. We often think of the Han dynasty as a great empire, and the fall of the Han as a shift into a period of disunity. But this was not the view at the time. The ensuing Wei dynasty (220–265) was a powerful empire that dominated the north China plain. There was every expectation in the Wei court that it could be every bit as great an empire as the Han. The fact that we know, from historical hindsight, that the Wei would not be as large or as long-lasting an empire as the Han should not lead us to misinterpret the sensibility at the time.

Such optimism was evident in the reading practices at the time as well. Although some figures certainly continued to take a subordinate position to the earlier textual corpus, presenting themselves as simply attempting to understand the texts of earlier sages, one sees during the Wei dynasty a resurgence of strong claims of sagehood. Whereas for much of the previous century there had been a powerful stricture against proclaiming oneself to be a sage, such claims become more and more frequent in the early Wei.

But the vision of sagehood that flourished at this time was not one of a sage writing mysterious texts that would have to be decoded by later figures. On the contrary, sages came to be defined as figures who were able to respond to situations perfectly. True sagacity was something that could not be communicated through writing. The model was thus not of a Confucius, for example, writing the *Spring and Autumn Annals* but rather of the Confucius one sees in the *Analects*—a great sage responding perfectly to his disciples, quoting lines of the *Poetry* to affect the mood of those around him. A world of sages would be one that replicated such interactions—a world that, in a sense, replicated what existed before the period when sages had to resort to writing texts. If Wang Chong was looking back nostalgically to an age when sages would write great texts, the “mysterious learning” scholars were looking back to an age when one could, in particular situations, respond perfectly, without the need for writing at all.

One text devoted in part to providing anecdotes concerning such figures was the fifth-century compilation *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (*A New Account of Tales of the World*). The story told there about Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249)—one of the most influential commentators of the era—is revealing of the norms of the time. In the anecdote, a certain Pei Hui 裴徽 asks Wang Bi about Confucius and Laozi:

Generally speaking, nothingness (*wu* 無) is actually that which forms the basis of the ten thousand things. As such, the sage [Confucius] was unwilling to speak about it, yet Laozi elaborated on it without end. Why is this?

To which Wang Bi purportedly responded:

The sage embodied nothingness. Nothingness furthermore cannot be explicated. Thus, words necessarily reach to something (*you*). Laozi and Zhuangzi did not refrain from something; their constant explication is where they were insufficient. (Liu 1982: 4.199)

Sagehood, in essence, is embodiment.

But then what about texts? And what about commentaries?

Let us return to Wang Bi as an example. Nothingness is understood as that from which things emerge. Sages, by embodying nothingness, equally generate an order around themselves. Since any sage understands these processes, it is possible to see through whatever is written in order to understand the sagely meaning behind it.

Accordingly, gone is any claim that the commentator must be subservient to an earlier, greater text, and gone is any claim that the commentator needs to accept the grouping of texts organized by earlier figures. Instead of, for example, reading the Five Classics to understand the teachings of the great sage Confucius, one can, if one is a sage, organize the earlier textual tradition as would be, from the current sagely perspective, philosophically proper. With Wang Bi, for example, this entailed a concern with the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Laozi*, and the *Classic of Changes*. Each of these for Wang Bi revealed the workings of nothingness as embodied by Confucius. And the work of the commentator was essentially to lay out these sagely teachings to non-sages. But Wang Bi was not presenting himself as a lesser figure trying to understand earlier texts written by greater figures. On the contrary, Wang Bi becomes, in a sense, like Confucius himself—a great sage organizing materials from the past for non-sages.

## CONCLUSION

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We often assume that the development of literary traditions begins with a “classical” period in which authors write texts. The greatest of these texts then form the corpus on which later commentators work. The goal of the commentators is to explicate the complex meanings of the earlier texts.

But the early Chinese material points to a different trajectory. Early literary production in China should be understood in terms of an endless process of accretion, in which poetic lines were constantly being utilized in new and surprising ways and in which stories were constantly being altered and varied according to context. Although we are only getting a tiny portion of this process, even the tiny portion we can see demonstrates it clearly. The development of the tradition thus puts an incredible weight on utilization and active interpretation. Out of this active interpretation develops the notion of sages, who are able to utilize and alter to even greater degrees, and out of this in turn develops a complex debate about who is a sage, how one should interpret works by sages, and

whether one should be actively and overtly interpreting such works into new contexts or on the contrary claiming to simply subordinate oneself to these higher teachings.

In short, the texts of the classical period emerged together with the commentaries to them, and literary production in the early period developed in part out of contested visions of how to define text and commentary, author and interpreter. Looking in depth at how comparable processes played out in other manuscript traditions in Eurasia over the same time period would well repay the effort.

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