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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Commentary and Exegesis in the Pre-Modern, Modern, and Contemporary Chinese Worlds: An Introduction

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Despite its centrality and its impact from a historical perspective, commentary is usually considered a tool for deciphering great works or as a faint trace of intellectual activity. Except for a few instances in the field of philosophy, it has been reduced to an ancillary status and denied that of a text *per se*. This introduction presents the framework in which the project of this special issue developed, the questions that were raised, and the key elements that characterise commentaries and that appeared through the project.

儘管註釋在歷史上發揮著關鍵作用，但通常僅被視為理解古典作品的輔助工具，或是反映古人學術活動的細微痕跡。除哲學領域的少量研究外，註釋作為獨立文本的學術價值一直未得到充分重視，更多地被輕視為輔助工具。引言將介紹本專刊的研究框架和探討的核心問題，並揭示註釋在此過程中展現的獨特特質以及學術意義。

Keywords: China, Japan, commentary, exegesis, reading, framework, introduction

關鍵詞： 中國，日本，詮釋，批註，讀法，規範，序言，引言

In her analysis of commentaries written by translators of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, which focuses more specifically on French translations of works by Shen Congwen 沈從文 (1902–1988) and Yu Hua 余華 (1960–),¹ Florence Zhang pinpoints that such notes keep track of the interpretative process that is at the core of any reading activity – and hence of any translation – although, she adds, some of these notes might appear misleading (Zhang 2018). In other words, because translating and reading consist in interpreting a chosen text, these activities may also all be crystallised in glosses, annotations, and commentaries. Also, the hermeneutic devices are expected to shed light on the meaning of the base text. If not, their appreciation and value will most probably be challenged. If Florence Zhang’s standpoint builds on Berman’s remarks on the exegetical dimension of translation according to Walter Benjamin (Berman 2008; Baudelaire 1923), it also mirrors broadly accepted views on commentary. However, if we were to look more carefully at Isabelle Rabut and Angel Pino’s translation of *Xiongdì* 兄弟 (Brothers) (Yu 2008), we would be struck by the volume and the form taken by the translators’ commentaries. The translation *per se* covers almost a thousand pages, followed by almost thirty pages of annotations in tiny characters. Some explanations, such as those related to the Great Cultural Revolution (Yu 2008, 992) are very long and detailed. Others are shorter, like this one on yellow wine (Yu 2008, 991):

Yellow wine is a kind of rice alcohol that is enjoyed after it has been heated. It can also be used for cooking purposes, to season certain dishes. The most famous of all is produced in Shaoxing, Zhejiang (a coastal province in southeast China, near Shanghai).

Le vin jaune est un alcool de riz qu’on déguste après l’avoir fait chauffer. Il est également utilisé en cuisine, pour assaisonner certains plats. Le plus réputé de tous est celui qu’on produit à Shaoxing dans le Zhejiang (province côtière du sud-est de la Chine, à proximité de Shanghai).²

The reader is provided with information on aspects of Chinese material culture, Chinese contemporary history, or even Chinese geography, that are much richer than is necessary to understand the novel. The translators’ notes to the French translation of *Brothers* by Yu Hua function as a detour and question the role, function, and form of commentaries in general.

Schools of interpretation of the so-called Confucian Classics appear from the Warring States period (476–221 BC) onwards (Van Zoeren 1991; Nylan 2001), develop during the imperial era, and give shape to hermeneutic traditions that will apply to various kinds of texts. Since the foundation of the Republic, traces of Chinese exegetical history (mostly schools and tools) appear here and there.

A few years ago, in 2019, the diversity in nature and form along with the richness of exegetical enterprises throughout Chinese history triggered the attention of a group of scholars who initially planned to meet in France in 2020. Because of the pandemic, the meeting was postponed. Members of the group presented and exchanged views on their work on three occasions: at the 2021 online EACS

¹ Both authors have been translated into French by Isabelle Rabut.

² All translations in this introduction are mine.

conference organised by Leipzig University, and in December 2022 and April 2023 at the University of Strasbourg. The *Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies* (JEACS) expressed interest in publishing the outcome of the conferences and workshops. At the time, a significant work dedicated to the definition of the poetics of literary critique by Florian Pennanech had just been published (Pennanech 2019). The group acknowledged the complexity of the topic in the realm of textual studies as much as it grew conscious of the specificities of the Chinese case. In order to broaden our understanding of commentaries and exegesis in China, it was decided to send a call for papers and propose a special issue on the topic.³

The aspects of commentaries that had attracted our attention were the following ones. First, commentaries are designated by a very precise set of words in Chinese – such as *zhu* 注 or *shu* 疏 for instance – with the help of which we might be able to circumscribe what we want to include as commentaries in terms of textual, formal, and semantic characteristics. Second, given that commentaries play a pragmatic role, they undertake one among different possible functions when appended to a text: can we confirm the intuition that commentaries are not marginal? Finally, how do we read commentaries? Does it depend on the style and/or nature of the base text? of commentary itself?

What do We Mean by “Commentary”?

As suggested in the preliminary section of this introduction, many intellectual productions can be studied as if they were partly, if not intended as, commentaries. Translations, adaptations, rewritings, sequels carry an interpretation of and a point of view on a primary text. This dimension of “secondary literature” was methodically studied long ago by Gérard Genette (Genette 1982). Florian Pennanech broadens even further the scope of commentary by including critical texts and studies such as those written by the Goncourt brothers in 19th-century France or by famous intellectuals such as Georges Poulet (1902–1991), for example. However, when we first think of commentary in China, we need to identify what concepts exist in Chinese before we can set a frame for our work.

If we start from a contemporary perspective, two words come to mind, *zhuyie* 註解 or *zhushi* 註釋 on the one hand, and *piping* 批評 on the other. These concepts define two distinctive realms of activity, one explanatory, the other critical. *Piping* 批評 is not specific to modern times: Zhong Rong’s 鍾嶸 (?–518) *Shipin* 詩品 (Classification of Poets) is one among other early examples of the classification of works and authors at different levels of excellence (high, medium, and low) with a short description

³ I would like to thank the editorial committee of the JEACS for welcoming this project. The contributors to this project were (in alphabetical order): Marie Bizais-Lillig, Jessica Imbach, Evelyne Lesigne-Audoly, Olga Lomová, Evan Nicoll-Johnson, Michael Schimmelpfennig, Martin Svensson Ekström, Xiaofei Tian, and Michel Vieillard-Baron. The programme of the workshops in Strasbourg is still available <https://commentinasia.sciencesconf.org/> (url accessed on December 14th 2024). The project was funded by the GÉO (UR 1340, University of Strasbourg), the CRCAO (UMR 8155, CNRS, Collège de France, EPHE, Université Paris Cité), the GIS Asie, and the USIAS (University of Strasbourg). I would also like to thank all the reviewers who agreed to read submitted papers and whose contribution was essential to this selection.

of the style and appreciation of its qualities and drawbacks (Zhong 1994). However interesting this tradition may be, it is not the one under focus in this volume.⁴

Our starting point was a set of texts in the erudite tradition, similar to the footnote, analysed by Anthony Grafton in his study of Western scholarly culture (Grafton 1997). The words associated with this practice in English can be listed to get a better sense of its diversity: footnotes, glosses, *annotatio*, exegesis, hermeneutics, *argumentum*, explanations, rephrasing, philology, *apparatus criticus*. As for Chinese, the terminology linked to reading and accompanying the process of reading is complex as well.

In pre-modern China, commentary stands as an annotation to a base text under the term *zhu* 註, which is not very precise in terms of methods or content: a *zhu* annotation may indeed consist in glosses, explanations, citations, argumentation, or even narration. The spectrum covered by the *zhu* annotation is so broad that it can combine different parts, including glosses and interpretation for example, or amount to a quotation from another text whose link with the base text is not elucidated, such as in Li Shan's 李善 (630–689) commentary on the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selection of Refined Texts) or Liu Xiaobiao's 劉孝標 (465–521) commentary on the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (New stories from worldly talks).⁵ Alternatively, *zhuyin* 註音 defines an annotation that deals only with phonetic issues, such as those by Lu Deming 陸德明 (ca. 556–630) recorded in many editions of the Confucian Classics. *Gu* 詁 or *xungu* 訓詁 are, on the other hand, glosses, providing definitions or equivalent words (synonyms, so to speak) to explain the meaning of the words present in the base text. Hermeneutic annotations devoted to the Confucian Classics are often called *jian* 箋, although the term might even be more specific and designate commentaries by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) on the Classics. A commentary appears like a school of interpretation, a tradition, so to speak, when it is called *zhuan* 傳. Starting with Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), some literati direct the interpretative process by adding a *zizhu* 自註 (self annotation) to a text written by themselves.⁶ *Shu* 疏 (subcommentary) is characterised by the fact that it is not a commentary directly related to a base text, but one that presents itself as an additional exegetical stratum: *shu* subcommentary undertakes a dialogue with previous commentaries in relation to a common base text. This list, far from being exhaustive, reveals the diversity in terminology to designate commentaries, but also the variety of the texts themselves (and their function as well).

These different types of commentaries are part of a textual ecosystem, as they often combine with one another – a phonetic annotation is often juxtaposed with a gloss or an explanation. It is believed that, after centuries during which commentaries circulated separately from source texts, Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166) introduced a new page layout, which placed commentaries alongside base text, in smaller

⁴ In the encyclopaedic works dedicated to Chinese theories of literature and Chinese literary criticism through the ages, the contrast between the *lilun* 理論 (theory) and *piping* 批評 (criticism) realm and that of *quanshi* 詮釋 (exegesis) and *zhushu* 註疏 (annotations) is clearly visible; see for instance Wang 1996.

⁵ For an introduction to Li Shan's work, see Fuller 2021. On Liu Xiaobiao, see Evan Nicoll-Johnson's paper in the present volume.

⁶ See for instance papers by Olga Lomová and Tian Xiaofei in the present volume.

characters in double columns just after the part of the text under study. This type of page layout is typical of commentaries in all their forms until the end of the empire, although in late imperial China marginal annotations, sometimes in different colours, are also to be found. This typical page layout contributes to distinguishing what we call commentaries from other types of paratext such as prefaces and postfaces, which appear in separate sections and in full-size characters.

This volume is intended to document, analyse, and study how scholars and intellectuals shed light on a base text and what characteristics their textual products might share. Commentaries, narrowed down as explained above, raise a number of questions, starting with their possible definition as a genre.

A Pragmatic Approach to Commentary

The object under study is a set of texts which seems to constitute a loose category, considering the terms and the variety in length, syntax, and functions that characterise commentaries. The uniformity in the way they are displayed on the page suggests that we might be dealing with a genre. Such is Anthony Grafton's choice, when he extends the meaning of "genre" beyond the literary realm proper, and applies the concept to feature footnotes (Grafton 1997). However, before we choose an umbrella term to characterise Chinese commentaries, we need to carefully examine historical cases.⁷

The variety of words that serve to designate commentaries in Chinese possibly contrast with the European footnote, which appears as a precise device and does not include all types of additions to a base text.⁸ The complexity of a paratext recently produced to accompany Jin Yucheng's 金宇澄 (1952-) novel *Fanhua* 繁花 (Blossoms) is presented from a practical perspective by designer Jiang Qinggong 姜庆共 (1960-) in a postface (Jin 2023, 681-82):

古书批注，手书或刊印，多以朱笔或蓝笔天头作眉批（书籍页面上方的空白处），或于字里行间圈点、校注。无论涂涂划划的注释，或有规矩的刊刻、活字印刷，竖排的墨色朱笔互嵌，一利阅读识别，二显“添彩”之意。《繁花》批注全本包含了正文、夹批、侧批、段批、尾批等几类版式，文字双色显现，朱色批注于墨色正文间横竖交往，让现代横排批注本，又多了一次版式的尝试和阅读的体验。

In ancient books, annotations, either handwritten or printed, mostly consist of "eyebrow commentaries" – written at the top of the pages in red or blue (using the empty space at the top of the book pages), or in annotations and emphasising circles between the columns of characters. No matter if the exegetical notes are randomly scribbled or if they are regularly printed using xylography or movable type, the vertical lines have black text and red annotations intermingled, so that, first, they are easily distinguished when reading, and second, they express the meaning

⁷ In a similar move to Enenkel and Nellen 2013.

⁸ This assertion would certainly need more thorough comparative work, along the lines of Henderson 1991.

of “illumination”. The complete annotated “Blossoms” book includes such formats as base text, interlinear commentaries, marginal commentaries, section commentaries, and closing commentaries. Characters appear in two colours: annotations in red cannot but interact with the base text in black, allowing for a modern horizontally-printed annotated text to be enriched by experiments in format and the experience of reading.

Such a complex contemporary book format inspired by late imperial novel commentaries (as stated by commentator Shen Hongfei 沈宏非(1962-) in his own postface [Jin 2023, 678]) points to the diversity of functions commentaries may perform. Rather than approaching this set of texts from the perspective of genre categorisation, we need to start by shedding light on the reasons why commentaries are appended to a text in the first place.

Commentarial traditions focusing on philosophical works in general and Confucian texts in particular seem to have triggered much attention from scholars in the past fifty years (see for instance Gardner 1998; Liu and Yang 2007; Chang 2007). Certainly, the case of Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) and other Song Dynasty so-called neo-Confucian masters strikingly illustrates how commentaries produce new interpretations, which in turn transform an intellectual trend.⁹ One could say that adding a commentary to a text is a way of engaging with the possible meanings enclosed in this text and of producing new meanings, new ideas, along with new texts. The case of Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) exemplifies the influence of exegetical work (Wagner 2000; A. Cheng 2002).

At a more basic level, this creative dimension is made possible thanks to the following premise: a commentary explains the words of a text; it is meant to unfold its inner meaning. Hence, commentaries perform a didactic function, one of transmission. If the text cannot be directly understood by the readers, it is mainly because particular skills are needed (Church 1999 and Lanselle 2004) or because the passing of time and changes in the world have created distance, although other reasons appear in paratexts. The role assigned to the “Zhengyi” 正義 (Righteous Meaning) enterprise launched by emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 627–650) at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty precisely meets the needs of reader disconnected from the language and traditions of the Confucian age. The *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Old Book of the Tang), in the exposition on *ru* studies 儒學, reminds us that, after he had commanded the establishment of the text of the *Wujing* (Five Classics) by Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) in 629, the emperor ordered in 631 that Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) set up a team to establish the understanding of the texts (Liu 1975, j. 189):

又以儒學多門，章句繁雜，詔國子祭酒孔穎達與諸儒撰定《五經》義疏，凡一百七十卷，名曰《五經正義》，令天下傳習。

Then [After the established text was circulated], because many schools had flourished among *ru* scholars and because the understandings of sentences and paragraphs were very diverse,

⁹ This aspect of commentarial history is illustrated in Michael Schimmelpennig’s paper in the present volume.

[Emperor Taizong] ordered that Kong Yingda, Chancellor of the State Academy Directorate, along with other scholars, edit and establish a subcommentary on the meaning of the *Five Classics*. The resulting work, in a hundred and seventy scrolls altogether, was entitled *The Righteous Meaning of the Five Classics*. Taizong ordained that the work be disseminated and studied throughout the empire.

Notwithstanding the rich contribution of Kong Yingda's team, the choice that consisted in setting up subcommentaries in addition to minutely selected historical commentaries (Meyer 1999) suggests that the team did not mean to stand as a source of authority but preferred to position themselves within traditions. In other words, commentaries crystallise shared reading experiences of texts. They belong to a transmission mindset and contribute to the establishment of schools of interpretation (A. Cheng 1985).

Far from building monolithic discourses, commentarial traditions meet and converse *in the middle* of a text of reference. Each stratum sheds a distinct light on its base text (lexicographic, phonologic, interpretative, documentary). As a result, they generally complement and enrich each other. They may also debate with one another and disagree.¹⁰ Hence, commentaries can be seen as vivid testimonies of intellectual activity triggered by the reading of texts through time. The *Mao Shi Zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Righteous Meaning of the *Poems* in the Mao Tradition) illustrates the intense discussions that went on to read and interpret or understand the meaning of the poems from the Mao commentators (ca. 100 BC) to Kong Yingda (574–648), including Zheng Xuan (127–200) and many other commentators from the Six Dynasties quoted in the so-called Kong Yingda subcommentary.

Nevertheless, commentators did not simply engage in commentary writing to decipher the meaning of words, sentences, or larger units of texts, or to establish dialogue with their predecessors; it also happens that they introduce pieces of information that complement the text. Among other intentions (see for instance Bisetto 2017), some commentaries were meant to confirm the assertions present in the base text using knowledge of their time, such as Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda struggling with measurements in commentaries to the Confucian Canon (Morgan 2022). Despite their distinct concerns, commentaries look, in such cases, similar to those attached to mathematical treatises (Chemla and Zhu 2022), as if commentaries were also responsible for enriching base texts with updated knowledge. In stand-alone commentaries – meaning commentaries that circulated independently from base texts – such as Lu Ji's 陸璣 (ca. 200–500) *Mao Shi caomu niaoshou chongyu shu* 毛詩草木鳥獸蟲魚疏 (Commentary on flora and fauna in the *Poems* in the Mao Tradition), later enriched by Mao Jin 毛晉 (1599–1659) in his *Mao Shi Lu shu guangyao* 毛詩陸疏廣要 (Extended overview on Lu's commentary to the *Poems* in the Mao Tradition), a similar inclination towards the accumulation and aggregation of external snippets of knowledge is to be seen.

¹⁰ Lanselle 2004 illustrates how an opposing view can be imagined by the commentator to help him make his point.

These examples, which remind us that commentaries were written for all kinds of base texts – philosophical, technical, literary, if we use modern disciplines to categorise them –, also challenge common representations that place commentaries in an ancillary relationship to texts (Puett 2017). Given that commentaries play an essential role in textual transmission (Makeham 2003) and that they cover a very broad and diverse field – commentaries are attached to texts in different genres, covering a number of disciplines, they hold diverse functions and use a variety of rhetoric devices (Tian 2022), they establish all sorts of ties with base texts –, not only can we legitimately focus on commentaries as a research topic, we are also compelled to choose a specific perspective to analyse them.

How to Read Commentaries?

Commentaries have mostly been read in accordance with their assumed original function: they stand as hermeneutical tools useful to decipher a base text. The process that consists in reading a base text along with one or a series of its commentaries is rarely described unless it reveals compelling aspects within a commentarial project or in the commentarial effect. In a way, commentaries belong to the silent step of text decipherment; it mostly remains unspoken. The papers gathered in the present volume thereby aim to delineate the unique characteristics of commentaries as units of discourse and as part of textual networks.

Once we shift perspective and turn our focus to commentaries rather than to base texts, the knowledge, references, and thought they contain emerge in a structured manner to reveal some aspects of intellectual activity. As previously mentioned, some intellectual trends or even schools of thought bloom within the space of commentary. This volume contains three papers that adopt this perspective on commentaries. The first paper, by Shad Gilbert, stands as an explanation of one master's conceptual thinking as it crystallises in the form of a commentary. Meanwhile, as shown in the second paper, by Marco Pouget, researchers may observe how different commentaries from the same period and on the same text interplay or how they manifest kinship and differences. It is possible also, as Rusha Jin does in the third paper, to observe and analyse points of friction between a source and its commentary. While shedding light on the intellectual life of a period in history, such minute examination of commentaries seizes the rhetoric at stake in this textual form when it is associated with philosophical and religious texts.

Rusha Jin's article touches upon the role played by a commentary in relation to its base text by describing a case where the commentary states and strengthens the authority of the discourse it comments upon. The relation of commentary to base text is indeed multifold. Commentaries often shed light on elements present in the base text in a disjunctive way, in the sense that they establish keywords that in turn operate like a cogwheel at the junction between two different modes of discourse. As Rusha Jin notes, commentarial discourse may consist of an accumulation of information disconnected from the semiotic rationale present in the base text. This display of quotations, definitions, or even statements,

brings to light the encyclopaedic power of commentaries. However, this discursive mode of commentaries does not necessarily imply a rupture with the base text. Evan Nicoll-Johnson illustrates how references to works mentioned in anecdotes complement and reinforce the ideas and judgements suggested in the base text while building and sharing a bibliographical catalogue of texts partly lost since. Commentaries may also enrich a base text through the juxtaposition of alternative or parallel discourses which convey new approaches to the depictions in the source text and bring the reader to project himself, feel and thus emotionally respond to what would otherwise remain an objective landscape, as appears in Chu Hsienmin's paper.

The different ways in which commentaries are embraced in these studies are not, however, disconnected, given that all shed light on the transformations at stake in the world of literati, on the changes in modes of reading, and on the evolution of the symbolic value attributed to different genres. Commentaries are one of the elements that help us understand traditions of reading and their conditions of transmission, as shown, in a Japanese context, by Michel Vieillard-Baron, as well as in many of the papers on imperial China.

But what might be more striking for those who investigate commentaries should be their transformative power with regard to their source text. Commentaries bring to light issues of authority of the different actors involved in a line of commentators, and of the base text as well. Michael Schimelpfennig reminds us that the purpose of a commentator may be to establish a text within the realm of revered texts, and that it can also be to contest the legitimacy of a previous commentary. This agency of commentary is not unrelated to its exegetical and hermeneutical functions mentioned above. They may concurrently perform a role that is more complex than that of shedding light on the meaning of a text. Olga Lomová interprets a self-commentary as a device disguised in basic glosses and intertextual pointers, which drives a reading whose purpose belongs to the sphere of politics. Xiaofei Tian, on the other hand, brings to light how self-commentaries complicate the reading process by enriching the elements of context, bringing in historical information, or creating distance, even irony or humour. Such a variety of effects produced by commentaries place them as constituents of textual traditions in their own right.

Finally, commentary can be grasped as an overarching concept that frames the history of intellectual life throughout Chinese history. Commentary and exegesis then symbolise the efforts made by scholars to understand texts and the world simultaneously. Roman Lashin illustrates how such a representation of commentaries may become an inspiration to reflect on the relations of individuals, especially intellectuals, to language, slogans, texts and the world that surrounds them.

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