
Commentaries as nexus of information: How transmitted classical texts carried sets of knowledge along with hermeneutics

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Abstract

Commentaries are most generally conceived as texts in the margin whose very existence is grounded in their ancillary function – commentaries are meant to help readers understand base texts. Both this status and this function are historically established, and many of the transmitted texts of the Chinese tradition would indeed be very difficult to read without exegetical apparatus.

Nevertheless, some elements suggest that commentaries constitute a specific space of knowledge, complementary to lexicons and encyclopedias. There are different types of commentaries. Some of them replicate for example the technique of either lexicons – by use of glosses and association of synonyms – or encyclopedias – with the identification of shared words and references in previous texts. Li Shan's (630-689) commentary of the *Wenxuan* illustrates such an approach. Among many other kinds, commentaries that combined glosses with hermeneutical discourse proved most important in both influence and volume.

I propose to study this specific commentarial tradition through the analysis of the different layers that constitute Kong Yingda's (574-648) *Maoshi Zhengyi* [The Right Meaning of the Poems in the Mao Tradition]. I will demonstrate, through a close study of poem number 35, that Kong Yingda elaborates on both of the trends defined by Mao (ca. 100 BC) and Zheng Xuan (127-200): He brings new definitions and additional sources of knowledge to shed light on the text, and he offers more developed explanations on the meaning of the original poem. What more, I will assess, he grounds the hermeneutical process in the definitions that he cites thanks to the operation of translation. In other words, his approach transforms pieces of information into applied knowledge. Words are not just synonyms, they point to something with specific characteristics in the real world, and these can in turn be used as references in a metaphorical or symbolic way.

All the more, I will argue, these commentaries stand as a missing link in the transmission of knowledge that texts from different periods of time carry. This point may for instance be illustrated by cases of combinations of words that appear in the hermeneutical readings of the *Maoshi Zhengyi* and that resurface in texts of the late Medieval period. If the intertextual weaving that literati prized sometimes involves the exegetical apparatus, then the process of appropriation encompasses more than elegant references: The appropriation may also touch upon interpretation, understanding and knowledge.

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Commentaries thus played an important role in the linguistic continuum that they allowed and in the carrying of complex elements of knowledge through history. Commentaries can therefore also be conceived as critical nodes between ancient texts.

Marie Bizais-Lillig is associate professor at the University of Strasbourg (France). Her main research area is poetry and poetics in the Chinese medieval period, with special attention to the *Wenxin diaolong* and the Six Dynasties. Her most recent research project focuses on the *Shijing* commentaries, their variety and their influence on texts in different genres down to the Tang dynasty. This project combines a classical philological approach to texts with techniques borrowed from the field of digital humanities.