
The Tradition of Knowledge Transmission and Development of Commentary Genres in Confucian Exegesis (Han – Early Tang periods)

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Abstract

The Confucian scholarly community has been the core of China's intellectual life for two millennia and left a vast written legacy. In all the variety of Chinese classical literature, Confucian Classics occupy a special place. The corpus of the five most ancient and authoritative texts (*Wu jing The Five Classics*) acquired fundamental and undeniable significance in the middle of the 2nd century BC. The requirement to study, comment, and apply them in practice did not lose relevance until the XX century's very threshold.

The process of centuries-long interpretation and reinterpretation of Classics led to the formation of several commentarial genres that formed a complex exegetical system. The Confucian commentary, which has developed over the entire Classical scholarship in China, is the exegetical system framework that contains rich material for studying its specifics. However, Confucian commentary writings' heterogeneity was a considerable problem, even those that traditional Chinese scholarship formally related to one type. In this regard, developing a methodology for the systematical description and reliable attribution of commentary works to one or another genre is of particular relevance.

Of special importance is the study of some sharp turns in the development of Confucian exegetics that took place during the reign of the Han dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), during the era of the Six Dynasties (220–589), under the Sui Empire (589–618). This extended period can be considered the time of the origin and active development of all the main commentarial genres that were later used in exegetics.

Recent advances in textual studies allow us to pose new questions about Confucian commentary typology and seek new understandings of the logic of Confucian exegetical thought development. In this lecture, I attempt to identify the pattern of the historical development of Confucian exegetical thought of the Early Imperial and Early Medieval China based on the analysis of Confucian commentarial works of the 2nd century BC – early 7th century AD. I will analyze several knowledge transmission techniques in Confucian exegetical tradition and argue that the formation of new trends in exegetical thought was deeply connected to developing the new forms of the commentary. As a result of the study, I will present a historical typology of Confucian commentary and the periodization of the history of Confucian exegetical thought development, that is, try to identify how the tradition of knowledge transmission realized itself in Confucian exegetics and how it influenced the emergence of new commentarial genres.

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PhD thesis title "Confucian Exegetics in Ancient and Early Medieval China: Towards a Historical Typology of Confucian Commentary" (awarded PhD in 2021, Saint-Peterburg University). Research interests: Intellectual history of ancient and medieval China (pre-Han through Song); Confucian exegesis (*jingxue*): its history, exegetical methods, intellectual trends; typology of Confucian commentary; socio-cultural function of canonical texts.