

# “Text and Commentary in Imperial China”

Workshop in Heidelberg 14-17 June 2000

A workshop “Text and Commentary in Imperial China” which was applied for by the EACS and funded by the Chiang Ching Kuo foundation is organized and will be hosted by the Institute of Chinese Studies, University of Heidelberg. It will be held in Heidelberg from 14-17 June 2000 and will be organized in double sessions: the first parts will consist of presentations by invited scholars; the second of joint reading of Chinese source material related to the topic presented by the speaker.

About 12 Young scholars (pre- and postdoc, junior faculty) from across Europe who have a strong interest to learn about this field of inquiry are invited to take part in the workshop. They should prepare with the help of the papers and materials and join in the discussions of the arguments and the sources. All the costs and expenses will be covered by the organizer. Those interested are invited to apply with a short statement of their education and particular interest as well as a recommendation from their supervisor.

Please send your applications and any requests for further information to:

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## Outline

A very large part of Chinese speculative thinking has taken the form of commentaries to works deemed classical. This is true for all - including the Buddhist and Daoist - strands of tradition. It reflects a shared cultural orientation that sees in the allowed books of the sages rather than in experience the only real source of truth. This tradition has continued well into our days.

Given the high cultural status of the commentary and the often fierce competition for the interpretive control of the heritage, the commentators rarely could afford the luxury of random or associative commenting but as a rule went by the rules of rationality and argumentative acceptability prevailing among their peers and in their line of tradition. Still, the prevailing consensus that these “classical” texts were authored or edited by sages such as Confucius, Laozi or the Buddha, and the equally prevailing assumption that these sages were well aware of the inequity of language in expressing the ultimate things, led to a third consensus, namely that these texts contained much more than their surface seemed to indicate. It was therefore the duty of the commentator not just to

bridge the often long time, space, culture, and language distance between the "classical" text and the "modern" reader of his time through learned notes and "translations" into the contemporary written language, but also to rediscover to the reader the depths hidden in these texts. The archaic grammar especially of the Chinese classics such as the Chunqiu or the Laozi left much to a contextual understanding which the later born in fact did not have anymore. The texts thus acquired a certain openness not only of content but even of grammar that the commentators closed with their comments, but these closures were often quite different from each other. To understand the way how a given commentator read a certain passage, the passage has to be translated "through" the grammatical, terminological and analytical comments given by the commentator. A check on comments on the same passage by different commentators quickly reveals that the result of such "extrapolative translations" are texts which for an outsider certainly would not seem to be related at all - although we are dealing with the very same passage. The importance of such an extrapolative translation dramatically increases with the establishment of certain commentaries as the "official" commentaries to be used for the preparation of state examinations. The reading suggested by a given commentator in this case assumes the status of orthodox reading. A scholar finding a quotation for example of the Chunqiu in a Ming memorial and translating it (as is usually done) on the basis of what he thinks the "Urtext" means, would most definitely commit a grave error and be likely to miss the purpose of that quotation altogether with the result of a high degree of fogginess in the understanding.

Very little research has been done on the craft of the Chinese commentator, the development of the Chinese commentary, its relative status among the cultural goods, and the very complex relationship between the presumably stable meaning of an "Urtext" and the constantly shifting meaning of this text in the course of historical development. The skill needed for extrapolative translating is exceedingly difficult to acquire because it often means reinventing the entire text with a brain that has been conditioned for decades in one particular reading conveyed by current analysis of interpretation of the "Urtext".

## **The Project**

The workshop is to serve three purposes that are closely connected:

1. To invite a number of scholars who have worked in this field and have them present their methodology in dealing with the text/commentary relationship with very specific examples, and have them present those generalized arguments on the topic which they already feel confident enough in presenting, dealing, for example, with the rise of the commentary genre, the cultural status of commentary during a given period, the relationship of commentarial form and content, different exegetical methods, or the mentalité of a readership reading innovative proposals that come in the guise of comments on the classics. Both types of contributions would be distributed well in advance to allow for careful and critical preparation.
2. To jointly read, translate, and discuss the core pieces in the Chinese sources with which the methodology is illustrated. For this purpose the selected Chinese sources

would also be sent around beforehand for preparation. This proceeding has been tested in a conference on late Qing Chinese newspapers in October 1997. All participants agreed that this combination of critical debate of the argument, and joint reading and analysis of the textual evidence was very contributive towards spotting weaknesses in the argument and alternative strategies of analysis.

3. To invite young scholars (pre- and postdoc, junior faculty) from across Europe who have a strong interest to learn about this field of inquiry and who have the level to meaningfully participate in such a workshop. They should prepare with the help of the papers and materials and join in the discussions of the arguments and the sources. The participation of these younger scholars should help in connecting and confronting not just their generation with older scholars, but also in forming lively links among each other accross Europe as a good precondition for future cooperation and interaction. This would be especially important for young scholars from Central and Eastern Europe as well as from Southern Europe who often have little exposure to Chinese Studies outside their country's borders. The number of the younger scholars invited to participate will be limited to 12.

The papers and annotated materials are planned to be made into a workbook.