



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis. by
John B. Henderson

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idea of *li*, or “inherent pattern,” in Su’s poems. Although the abstract nature of this concept and its relation to poetry is sometimes difficult to sort out in Fuller’s analysis, the author is, in fact, attempting to identify an underlying intellectual dimension and its direct relation to Su Shi’s development as a poet.

I suspect that some specialists in Song dynasty literature will find fault with Fuller’s use of an intellectual perspective (*li*) to search for “inherent patterns” in Su Shi’s poetry. This, in part, may be an inevitable reaction to the abstract language that seems to almost always accompany discussions of such philosophical terms, especially those of the Song period. I must confess that there were occasions when I got lost in Fuller’s discussion of *li*. What is more significant, however, is that Fuller’s bold methodology and discerning analysis offer a fresh and (in my opinion) revealing look at Su’s development as a poet. In fact, Michael Fuller has bravely begun the almost impossible challenge of not only telling us why but also showing us *how* Su Shi was a great poet. The published results of his efforts are commendable. Let’s hope his next book treats the further development of Su Shi’s poetic voice in the period following the Huangzhou exile.

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Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis. By JOHN B. HENDERSON. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. xii, 247 pp. \$35.00.

John Henderson’s book is primarily about the Confucian Classics and their Chinese commentators from the classical era to modern times. Although not intended as a history of classical studies in imperial China per se, the work provides a useful, if intentionally abridged, account of the development of classical studies for both the general reader and the intellectual historian. Of the Five/Nine/Thirteen Confucian Classics, Henderson’s book deliberately stresses two: the *Change Classic* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which he sees both as representative and as complementary opposites. At the same time, Henderson directs the specialist to more detailed Chinese and Japanese studies of the complex evolution of the Confucian Canon since antiquity.

In addition, Henderson successfully places the Confucian Canon and its commentators within the larger context of the role played by sacred texts and commentary in other major intellectual traditions, chiefly Vedantic (India), Qur’anic (Middle East), Judaic (Eastern Europe), Christian (Western Europe), and classical Greco-Roman literature. This is no small achievement, for no Chinese or Japanese scholar has yet entertained such an ambitious synthesis. That Henderson has achieved all this in 200-plus pages is a tribute to his combined powers of brevity and conceptualization. Specialists on this or that classical text or Confucian commentary will at times be disappointed by the level of generalization that such an enterprise requires. I might pick a few bones with Henderson’s specific presentation of the commentaries to the *Annals*, for example, but in the end such picayune points on these or other texts would not detract from the usefulness of Henderson’s overall account.

Analyzing the Confucian Canon in the context of other commentarial traditions, Henderson develops a straightforward narrative of the processes of canon formation and closure, and the modes of thought that emerge when certain texts are singled out as sacred. Henderson concludes that universal aspects of intellectual development

exist in all the textual traditions that he compares to the Confucian Canon, which reveal a uniformity of presuppositions and procedures for what he calls the “universal commentarial mentality.” These universal commentarial assumptions are the heart of the book. Three of these assumptions Henderson finds most general: (1) the comprehensiveness of the sacred text; (2) its coherency; (3) its inner consistency. Three other assumptions are deemed somewhat less general: (1) the sacred text contains a moral vision; (2) it is profound; (3) it is in no wise superficial, that is, straightforward. Along the way, Henderson penetrates the textual devices, such as allegory, accommodation, and modal distinctions (the same word used in two or more senses), that commentators in all traditions employed more or less successfully to resolve textual contradictions or inconsistencies in the sacred text.

In a thoughtful final chapter on the “death and transfiguration of commentarial world views,” Henderson describes the changes wrought by modernity on the great canons of Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Greco-Roman classicism. He points selectively to the impact of printing and the development of the philological sciences in the cumulative supersession of commentary as the dominant mode of intellectual inquiry. Henderson for the most part remains steeped in a scholarly analysis that leaves aside consideration of the roles of economic and social change in the death of the commentarial traditions he painstakingly anatomizes. Surely, the rise of capitalism in Western Europe and the demise of the moral economy of late imperial China reshaped the social and intellectual phenomena to which the sacred Christian and Confucian canons referred. In the process, both canon and commentary increasingly became anachronistic because of their lack of relevance to the new historical circumstances in which they were read or not read. It took time for commentary to catch up with the changes. Witness the late twentieth-century linkage between Neo-Confucianism and economic modernization in Pacific Rim ideology. Nor should one take for granted, as many do, the important role of the Confucian civil service examination in the evolution of the Chinese classical tradition since Tang times. How were canon and commentary affected by state examination standards? Here, classical learning as a curriculum for examinations separated China in practice from classical traditions elsewhere.

Henderson is right, nevertheless, when he describes how the writings of Marx (or Mao) and Freud have been “canonized” in the twentieth century into self-consistent and comprehensive “canons.” Similarly, Sanford Levinson (*Constitutional Faith*, Princeton, 1988) has pointed to the long-term intellectual consistencies between schools of American constitutional interpretation and earlier Catholic versus Protestant commentarial strategies vis-à-vis the New and Old Testaments. Henderson ends by suggesting “the necessity of commentaries as buffers in defense of sanity and civilization.” Whether commentaries have such wide normative powers is debatable. But it is also likely that the sacred texts to which the commentaries referred were used by emperors, caliphs, and popes for much self-righteous mischief as well as public good. By taking the side of the commentator to a sacred text, Henderson perhaps underestimates its other side, namely the place of the sacred in the realm of political power.

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