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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Between Cooperation and Competition. A Comparative Reading of Eastern Han Commentaries to the *Liji* 禮記

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This study explores the "conspicuous disconnect" between different commentarial writings from the Eastern Han dynasty. Using Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi as examples, it advances a comparative reading, noting the relative lack of engagement with other commentators' opinions in commentaries to the classics despite evidence of intellectual exchange. One key reason for this is that such discourses seem to have been consciously excluded from commentaries, giving rise to a discursive sphere reflecting the author's personal readings. Instead, more direct engagements with contemporaneous scholarly opinions took place in separate "opinion texts" rather than in commentaries. This study thus urges scholars to reconstruct the intellectual discourses surrounding the respective textual traditions and the genesis of commentaries, treating these as an integral part of them. It is crucial to shed light on the historical and personal influences that motivated commentary-writing and informed the way the practice was conducted. Finally, this study reflects on the phenomenon of the "survival of the fittest commentary", observing that some contemporaneous commentarial writings enjoyed greater popularity than others. This effectively suppressed the other commentaries, which has meant those surviving commentaries came to be regarded as paradigms of textual scholarship, despite the fact that in their own time they represented but singular, and sometimes outlying, voices.

本研究聚焦於東漢時期不同經註之間的"脫節"現象。以鄭玄和盧植為例，本文通過比較分析發現，儘管當時存在思想互動的證據，但在他們的註釋中卻很少回應或討論同時期其他註釋家的觀點。同輩學者的觀點似乎被有意回避，這可能是為了在註釋中為個人見解的表達創造獨立的空間。值得註意的是，當時學術上的互動更多出現在非經註性質的作品而並非直接呈現於註釋文本之中。基於這一觀察，本文主張結合經註生成的歷史背景和學術脈絡，重新建構圍繞這一特定文本傳統的思想辯論。

Keywords: Zheng Xuan, *Liji*, commentaries to Chinese classics, intellectual discourse, Han China, thought

關鍵詞： 鄭玄，禮記，經典註釋，思想話語，東漢，子

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Introduction[1]

Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) and Lu Zhi 盧植 (?–192) are among the most prominent intellectuals of the late Eastern Han era (Dong Han 東漢, 25–220). Having studied under the renowned scholar Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166), they prolifically authored commentaries on the canonical classics and beyond. Both individuals, alongside many other scholars of their time, had the potential to shape classical scholarship—Lu Zhi perhaps even more so than Zheng Xuan, given his employment in the prestigious Eastern Pavilion office (Dongguan 東觀). And yet, while the lion's share of Zheng Xuan's commentaries to the three *Mores* (*Li* 禮) classics[2] has survived to this day, of Lu Zhi's commentaries only fragments remain, which are collected in the *Compilation of Lost Writings from the Jade Envelope Mountain Studio* (*Yuhan shanfang ji yishu* 玉函山房輯佚書) by Ma Guohan 馬國翰 (1794–1857).[3] While Zheng Xuan is hailed as an emblematic classical scholar and commentator of the late Eastern Han period and praised for having "tied shut the bag of the great canons" (*kuonang dadian* 括囊大典),[4] before long Lu Zhi apparently no longer enjoyed a reputation on par with Zheng. This was despite his writings not being structurally dissimilar from, let alone "inferior", to Zheng's. Why?

Seeing that historiography suggests Zheng and Lu were in close contact, the present study will advance a comparative reading of their commentaries to the *Notes on Mores* (*Liji* 禮記) as examples. It will endeavour to carve out indicators of intellectual exchange, asking whether this consisted in cooperation, in different conclusions drawn based on a shared intellectual view of passages in the classics, in "conspicuous disconnects", or in straight-up disagreement. It will be noted that Zheng Xuan's contemporaries almost never feature in his writings explicitly, and that this is similarly the case for other Eastern Han commentaries: it is generally the case that ongoing intellectual discourses are not explicitly reflected therein. Possibly for this reason, Zheng's connections to other scholars have hitherto not received much attention.[5] In the case of Zheng and Lu, this may result from their writing the commentaries at roughly the same time. In other cases, the "conspicuous disconnect" found in Eastern Han

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[1] The research for this study was conducted as part of the International Doctorate Programme "Philology. Practices of Premodern Cultures, Global Perspectives, and Future Concepts" (IDK Philologie) based at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich (LMU) and funded by the Elite Network of Bavaria. A part of it was carried out during a research visit to the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy of Academia Sinica in Taipei, supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I am indebted to Jennifer Reynolds-Strange (University of Wisconsin-Madison) and Markus Samuel Haselbeck (KU Leuven) for proofreading my draft, as well as to the anonymous reviewers and the Young Scholar Award jury of the EACS for their comments. I am honoured and humbled to have received the award.

[2] The *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮), the *Ceremonial Rites* (*Yili* 儀禮), and the *Notes on Mores* (*Liji* 禮記). The translation of *li* 禮 differs due to the connotations of this concept in the different texts. It ranges from concrete ritual procedures to a philosophical notion, which is commonly translated as "ritual propriety", but might be best rendered as "morality" when it comes to the philosophical concept, which applies beyond the sphere of ritual.

[3] *Yuhan shanfang* 902a–911b.

[4] *Houhanshu* 35: 1213.

[5] For some notable exceptions published in recent years, see Hua Zhe 2018 (esp. chapter 2) and Morgan 2022. Some scholars have focussed on comparing different commentarial writings but without trying to reconstruct the discourse of which they were part. For instance, see the comparison between Zheng Xuan and Wang Su 王肅 (195–256) by Shi Yingyong 2007.

commentaries may speculatively be explained by historical and personal factors pertaining to the practical dimension of commentary-writing—to distinguish oneself as a scholar, amongst other sociopolitical factors. The present study will thus argue that commentaries were used to highlight the readings of their author, whereas what I will call "opinion texts"[6] served to weigh into broader discourses and engage with other opinions.

In research on Eastern Han scholarship of the classics, but especially the *Mores* classics, Zheng Xuan's readings have long tended to dominate, as many other commentarial voices from the same period had gradually been drowned out. It has thus become increasingly tempting to consider his commentaries to be paramount, and moreover, as representative of how Eastern Han scholars read the classics. On the other hand, a personal essentialism has prevailed: Qing 清 (1644–1911) scholars praised Zheng's genius,[7] and contemporary Chinese-language research has perpetuated this tendency to depict him as towering over the intellectual life of the Eastern Han.[8] In some respects, Zheng seems to have propounded opinions that were different from his peers, as if actively trying to set himself apart from his predecessors. But on many other levels, his writings were not the only ones of their kind, and the attention he has received is mainly warranted by his having been favoured in the later transmission process of his work, rather than by any particular individual excellence.[9] Yet, as this study sets out to demonstrate, Zheng Xuan's commentaries should not be conceived of in isolation from contemporaneous intellectual and societal discourses. There are indicators that Zheng Xuan cooperated with others such as Lu Zhi as he wrote his commentaries, though, for reasons I will discuss, this is only very rarely explicitly noted in his writings. In order to better understand the trajectory of commentarial writings, it is thus necessary to further situate their commentators in the intellectual milieu within which they operated and into which they contributed.

Mentorship and Cooperation: The Relationship between Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi

The main historiographical source on the Eastern Han era, the *Book of Latter Han* (*Houhanshu* 後漢書) by Fan Ye 范曄 (398–445), mentions that Zheng Xuan made his way into the private school of

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[6] For a list and discussion of writings by Zheng, see chapter 2 in Liu Qiuzeng 2003.

[7] Compare Pi Xirui 2021: 278–384.

[8] This is not only a question of individual scholars' appraisals but may also be inferred from the sheer amount of research dedicated to Zheng compared to other Eastern Han scholars. Notable publications include but are not limited to Wang Zhenmin 1999, Yang Tianyu 2007, and Honey 2021. These examples, from three different decades, also illustrate how consistently Zheng Xuan has received attention in research.

[9] Only more recently have some scholars started to discuss the issue of Zheng's reputation being constructed by tradition. While acknowledging Zheng's great influence, Shi Yingyong even sums up his impression of Zheng's commentaries as "a heap of trivia" (*suoxie douding* 瑣屑餖飣), Shi Yingyong 2007: 122. Andrew Plaks likewise labels Zheng's commentary to the *Rites of Zhou* as "disappointing" to "all but the most pedantic philologists" in chapter 5 of Elman and Kern 2010: 156.

Ma Rong "owing to" (*yin* 因) Lu Zhi.[10] This may mean that Lu recommended that Zheng join Ma Rong to further his studies, or, more likely, that he persuaded Ma to take Zheng on as a disciple. It thus seems that the two were connected by a bond of friendship or mentorship between peers (Lu being the more advanced in his studies) and had acquired a comparable education. Judging by their death dates, they may also have been of roughly the same age, though it is unknown when Lu Zhi was born.[11]

Ma Rong's attention extended to a wide range of texts, as did those of Zheng and Lu, though each is known to have been particularly interested in a certain set of writings and to have exhibited greater talent in certain areas.[12] Zheng is said to have left an impression on Ma on account of his capabilities in calculations based on "apocryphal" writings[13] and diagrams (*chenwei* 讖緯 or, in this case, *tuwei* 圖緯).[14] Nowadays, he is best known for having positioned the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮) and the *Mores* canon (*San Li* 三禮) in general at the centre of his worldview,[15] culminating in the expression "The *Mores* canon consists in Zheng scholarship" (*Li shi Zhengxue* 禮是鄭學) by Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648).[16] The nowadays less familiar Lu Zhi, on the other hand, is depicted in the *Book of Latter Han* with a greater emphasis on his political career. Regarding his textual work, his time at the Eastern Pavilion is foregrounded, during which he and Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–ca. 192) worked on emendations to commentarial notes on the classics, as well as the historiographical *Notes on the Han from the Eastern Pavilion* (*Dongguan Hanji* 東觀漢記).[17] Still, what has been referred to as their synoptic interests (or "comprehensive scholarship", *tongxue* 通學)[18] may present a major unifying factor in the profiles of both Zheng and Lu.

Given their supposedly close relationship and their similar formation as "generalist" text scholars and commentators, is it to be assumed that Zheng and Lu exchanged on their readings of the classics or cooperated in their commentary-writing? A longstanding claim concerning Zheng Xuan's commentary to the *Notes on Mores* as well as other classics has been that he relied on editions by Ma Rong and

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[10] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[11] Zheng Xuan was born in 127 CE and died at the age of 73 in 200. Lu Zhi had died four years prior in 196. If he reached a similar life expectancy, we may assume that he was of similar age to Zheng Xuan, or slightly older, which is suggested by Zheng's appellation as discussed below.

[12] These three scholars lived during the so-called "Old Text/New Text controversy". What editions of the Classics were used, was thus another potential point of contention. Whereas Ma Rong is widely considered an Old Text adherent, Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi seem to have pursued synoptic interests. For more on this topic, see Connery 1998; Nylan 1994; Ess 1999; Kern 2001: 78–80.

[13] For a general introduction to *chenwei* writings, compare Giacinto 2013. For insights into Zheng's work with *chenwei*, compare Ikeda 2004, Lü Kai 1982.

[14] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[15] Luo Jianwei 2015: 26.

[16] *Lijj* 40: 1354a.

[17] *Houhanshu* 64: 2117.

[18] Compare Shi Yingyong 2007, Zhao Houjun 2008.

Lu Zhi.[19] He is, however, said to have redacted them into editions of his own, then authoring a commentary to the resulting, combined version (*yin Lu Ma zhi ben er jia jiaozheng* 因盧馬之本而加校正).[20] This idea was perpetuated early on by Lu Deming 陸德明 (556–ca. 627)[21] and later by Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞 (1850–1908).[22] Edition philology might thus constitute one field where scholarly exchange (including clashes) between Zheng and Lu occurred, though this is now difficult to assess. It is furthermore possible that Zheng and Lu worked in direct cooperation when they wrote their commentaries to the *Notes on Mores*. This may be inferred from a passage in the *Records of Zheng* (*Zhengzhi* 鄭志), which depicts discussions between Zheng Xuan and his disciples in the style of the *Assembled Discussions* (*Lunyu* 論語; commonly known as the *Analects*). This compilation, by Zheng's successor Zheng Xiaotong 鄭小同 (ca. 194–ca. 258), contains an exchange between Zheng Xuan and one of his disciples, Gui Mo 炅模 (?–?), who references a quotation from the *Odes* (*Shi* 詩) in the *Notes on Dykes* (*Fangji* 坊記) chapter of the *Notes on Mores* and enquires about the corresponding commentary by Zheng:

> 【炅模問曰：】「坊記引燕燕，詩註以爲夫人定姜之詩。【何則？】」
>
> 【鄭玄】答炅模云：「為記註時，就盧君先師亦然。後乃得毛公傳記，古書儀又且然。記註已行，不復改之。」[23]
>
> [Gui Mo asked:] "The *Fangji* cites the ode *Yanyan*. The *zhu* commentary considers it an ode by consort Ding Jiang. [Why?]"
>
> [Zheng Xuan] answered Gui Mo as follows: "At the time I noted down the *zhu* commentary to the *Notes*, I approached my former master Lord Lu, who also saw it that way. Afterwards I obtained this [ascription to Zhuang Jiang] from the notes transmitted by Duke Mao, and it was the same as in the ancient *Documents* and *Ceremonies*. Given that [my] *zhu* commentary to the *Notes* was already in circulation, it was not re-edited."

Gui Mo questions Zheng's identification of the person the ode is supposed to be about with Ding Jiang 定姜 (?–?), the consort of Duke Ding 定 of Wei 衛 (?–577 BCE). Meanwhile, in his *jian* 箋 commentary to the *Mao Odes*, he instead follows the commentary ascribed to Mao Heng 毛亨 (?–?) in identifying the ode with Zhuang Jiang 莊姜 (?–690 BCE), the consort of Duke Zhuang 莊 of Wei

[19] Habberstad and Liu 2014: 296.

[20] Pi Xirui 2021: 345. The different editions are not extant.

[21] In his overview of *Commentators and Transmitters of the Three Mores Classics* (*San Li zhujie chuanshuren* 三禮註解傳述人), Lu Deming states that "Zheng Xuan also relied on editions by Lu and Ma and commented them" (*Zheng Xuan yi yi Lu Ma zhi ben er zhu yan* 鄭玄亦依盧馬之本而註焉). *Wuyingdian Liji* 1: 2b.

[22] Pi Xirui 2021: 345.

[23] *Zhengzhi* 11b. For the passage in the *Notes on Dykes*, see *Liji* 51: 1641b. For the full ode, see *Maoshi* 2: 142b–146a.

(?–735 BCE).[24] Zheng responds by admitting he had been yet to discover the Mao interpretation when he authored the comment in question. Upon arriving at the passage, he had asked Lu Zhi about it, and the pair had agreed on Ding Jiang. Only later did Zheng come across the Mao interpretation and change his mind, but by that point his commentary was already in circulation, and so was not changed retroactively.

Zheng's and Lu's commentarial remarks on the passage in question match verbatim. The *Notes on Dykes* say, "The *Odes* state: 'Thinking of the former lord, should [make one] accommodate his widow'" (*Shi yun: "Xianjun zhi si, yi chu guaren".* 詩云：『先君之思，以畜寡人。』).[25] The two commentators' explanations are identical:

> 此衛夫人定姜之詩也。定姜無子，立庶子衎，是爲獻公。畜，孝也。獻公無禮於頂[sic] 姜，定姜作詩，言獻公當思先君定公，以孝於寡人。[26]
>
> This ode is about consort Ding Jiang of Wei. Ding Jiang had no son, so the bastard son Kan was established; this was Duke Xian. "To accommodate (*chu*)" is "to treat with filial devotion (*xiao*)". Duke Xian had no mores towards Ding Jiang, so Ding Jiang composed this ode to say that Duke Xian should think of Duke Ding, the former lord, and for this reason be more filially devoted to his widow.

This is not the only passage where the two commentaries overlap in their phrasing or are even worded identically. Duplications like these may also stem from misattributions by later scholars. But on the informational level, the question of whether the ode is to be attributed to Ding Jiang or Zhuang Jiang is one of relatively few where it is evident that there was in fact an intellectual exchange between the two commentators going on. Furthermore, there is only one time Zheng Xuan explicitly quotes Lu Zhi in his commentary to the *Notes on Mores*. In the *Tan Gong II* (*Tan Gong xia* 檀弓下) chapter, referring to the sentence "Zixian reported [the execution of] his assignment to Duke Mu" (*Zixian yi zhiming yu Mu gong* 子顯以致命於穆公), Zheng says:

> 使者，公子縶也。盧氏云：「古者名字相配，顯當作韅。」[27]
>
> As for the envoy, that is prince Zhi. Mister Lu states: "The ancients' names and styles corresponded to one another. The character *xian* 顯 should be written as *xian* 韅".

Zheng thus invokes Lu Zhi to explain why the envoy is referred to as Zixian 子顯 [韅] (by his style name) and not as prince Zhi 縶 (by his personal name). The sentence has been incorporated into the collection of fragments of Lu's commentary in *Compilation of Lost Writings from the Jade Envelope*

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[24] *Maoshi* 2: 142b.

[25] *Liji* 51: 1641b.

[26] For Zheng Xuan, see *Liji* 51: 1641b. I have adjusted the punctuation here. For Lu Zhi, see *Yuhan shanfang* 911b. In quotations from *Compilation of Lost Writings from the Jade Envelope Mountain Studio*, the punctuation is mine throughout this study.

[27] *Liji* 9: 307b.

Mountain Studio from Zheng's commentary.[28] Maybe Lu had spoken to this effect in a personal conversation, or perhaps Zheng had seen Lu's commentary or a draft thereof. Why does Zheng Xuan choose to explicitly reference Lu's words in this instance? We may recognise in this explicit reference an appeal to Lu Zhi as an authoritative source, invoked to provide if not evidence, then at least credible additional information on the text. Yet, this is the only instance where this happens throughout the *Notes on Mores* commentary. So why are there only so few traces of scholarly cooperation to be found?

The timeline when the commentaries were drawn up may be decisive in this case. After parting with Ma Rong towards or after the end of Ma's life in 166,[29] Zheng Xuan completed his education and moved back to his home region of Gaomi 高密 in present-day Shandong province where he himself took to teaching.[30] He is often speculated to have authored the bulk of his commentaries later on, during his prohibition from office (170–184), having "retreated from public life to dedicate himself to the task of the classics" (*yin xiu jingye* 隱修經業).[31] As the passage from the *Records of Zheng* above reveals, the *Notes on Mores* seems to have been one of the earlier commentaries written by Zheng, potentially during this time.

Lu Zhi, according to the *Book of Latter Han*, had finished a first, no longer extant, commentary, the *Word Explanations to the 'Notes on Mores'* (*Liji jiegu* 禮記解詁), around 175.[32] He is then described as having worked as governor of Lujiang 廬江 in modern-day Anhui province for roughly a year. Thereafter, he was appointed to the Eastern Pavilion to "check the notes and transmissions of the *Five Classics* by the palace writers,[33] as well as emend and continue the *Notes on the Han*" (*jiao zhongshu Wujing jizhuan, buxu Hanji* 校中書五經記傳，補續漢記).[34] This could have been when he set to work on his *zhu* commentary to the *Notes on Mores*, but he was removed from this office before long due to the emperor's dissatisfaction with the team's slow progress.[35] Seeing as the next part of Lu's biography in the *Book of Latter Han* sets in at around 178, we may assume that the removal took place before that date. For the rest of the account, Lu is portrayed as being deeply involved with politics, rather than working on texts.[36] We may thus speculatively infer that at least a part of his commentarial work on the *Notes on Mores* occurred between 176 and 177/178, but the *Book of Latter Han* does not tell us if or when it was finished.[37]

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[28] See the annotation in *Yuhan shanfang* 904b.

[29] According to *Houhanshu*, Ma was still alive when Zheng left, *Houhanshu* 35: 1207. Wang Chenglüe 2004: 51 claims that Ma died that same year.

[30] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[31] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[32] *Houhanshu* 64: 2117. For a study on this commentary, see Ikeda 1990.

[33] Translation according to Bielenstein 2008: 49.

[34] *Houhanshu* 64: 2117.

[35] *Houhanshu* 64: 2117.

[36] *Houhanshu* 64: 2117–2120.

[37] The *Suishu jingjizhi* 隋書經籍志 (*Treatise on Classical Materials in the Book of Sui*) lists an edition of the *Liji* by Lu Zhi in ten fascicles

It could hence be possible that Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi worked on their commentaries concurrently or that Zheng's was finished some time before that of Lu. It is thus conceivable that they did not have access to each other's complete writings yet each were acquainted with the other's ideas about the *Notes on Mores*.

The "Conspicuous Disconnect" between Commentaries

Scrutiny of the timeline sketched out above may help explain why a phenomenon which might be called a "conspicuous disconnect" occurs between the two commentaries. In such cases, the commentaries by Zheng and Lu do not even engage with each other through agreement or disagreement, let alone explicitly reference one another. There is either no multilateral discourse going on, or the interplay between different commentarial writings is so implicit as to render it mute, at least on the surface level. Given the vigour of debate surrounding the classics at the time, this counterintuitive phenomenon warrants interrogation.

A particularly striking example may be found in the discrepancy between Zheng's and Lu's remarks on the authorship of the *Royal Regulations* (*Wangzhi* 王制) chapter. In his *Refutations of the 'Divergent Meanings of the Five Classics'* (*Bo 'Wujing yiyi'* 駁五經異義), Zheng Xuan explains that "The *Rites of Zhou* are an arrangement by the Duke of Zhou, the *Royal Regulations* are what has been noted down by great worthies, successors of Confucius" (*Zhouli shi Zhougong zhi zhi, Wangzhi shi Kongzi zhihou daxian suo ji* 周禮是周公之製，王製[38]是孔子之後大賢所記).[39] Zheng Xuan thus ascribes the authorship role of the chapter to one or several successors in the line of Confucius (Kongzi 孔子, 551–479 BCE). This is ostensibly an attempt to explain why it depicts regulations different from the *Rites of Zhou*, which he ascribes to the Duke of Zhou (Zhou gong 周公, ?–? BCE). But Zheng remains silent on who the "great worthies" were and when the *Royal Regulations* were committed to writing. Lu Zhi's ascription, meanwhile, is much more precise. As he describes it, "the Filial Wen Emperor ordered all the erudites among the court academicians to compose these writings, the *Royal Regulations*" (*Han Xiao Wen Huangdi ling boshi zhusheng zuo ci Wangzhi zhi shu* 漢孝文皇帝令博士諸生作此王制之書).[40] *The Notes of the Scribes* (*Shiji* 史記, commonly known as the *Records of the Grand Historian*) likewise date the compilation of the *Royal Regulations* to the fourth month of the fourteenth year of the reign of Emperor Wen 文 of Han (r. 180–157 BCE), that is, the year

(*juan* 卷), which would be only half of the edition commented by Zheng Xuan (twenty *juan*). Lu's commentary may thus have been fragmentary at this point or complete but significantly shorter than Zheng Xuan's, but it is equally possible that it was never completed. *Suishu* 32: 922.

[38] Here, the variant of *zhi* 制 is used, apparently with no noteworthy conceptual difference.

[39] *Bo Wujing yiyi* shang 12.

[40] *Yuhan shanfang* 905a.

166 BCE, with Lu seemingly borrowing their phrasing.[41] If Zheng and Lu collaborated and their grounding in the classics was so similar, how could such a discrepancy in exactness be explained?

Perhaps Zheng Xuan was less interested in dwelling on the details here, as the point he is making in this instance serves mainly to establish an unambiguous hierarchy and expound his worldview: the *Rites of Zhou* were to him a direct representation of an enlightened past, and the *Royal Regulations* mere vestiges thereof. Meanwhile, unlike Zheng's remark in the separate text, Lu Zhi's clarification stems from his *zhu* commentary on the chapter itself. Lu was hence focussed on the *Royal Regulations* in and of themselves, and may therefore have seen greater value in adding context to clarify the text's origins. A difference surfaces here between what I might call "opinion texts" such as the *Refutations of the 'Divergent Meanings of the Five Classics'* on the one hand, and commentarial writings which are consciously and conspicuously attached to an important text to support its reading on the other. This difference is telling with regards to the purposes of commentaries as opposed to writings designed as standalone texts: opinion texts did pass comment on other text(s) but were not designed to accompany its reading. Rather, they weighed in on contemporary discourses surrounding the classics.[42]

Zheng Xuan especially made use of opinion texts to engage in debates with his contemporaries more directly. He picks up on the *Divergent Meanings of the Five Classics* (*Wujing yiyi* 五經異義) by Xu Shen 許慎 (58?–147?) in *Refuting the 'Divergent Meanings of the Five Classics'* mentioned above. Another instance of a contemporary opponent is He Xiu 何休 (129–182). Concerning the *Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) traditions, He Xiu wrote texts entitled *Mo's Defensibles of Gongyang* (*Gongyang Mo Shou* 公羊墨守), *The Devastating Diseases of Guliang* (*Guliang feiji* 穀梁廢疾), and *The Vital Points of Mister Zuo* (*Zuoshi gaohuang* 左氏膏肓).[43] Zheng Xuan again set to work on responding texts, the *Dispelling 'Mo's Defensibles'* (*Fa 'Mo Shou'* 發墨守), *Eradicating the 'Devastating Diseases'* (*Qi 'Feiji'* 起廢疾) and *Acupuncturing the 'Vital Points'* (*Zhen 'Gaohuang'* 鍼膏肓), wherein he critically responds to He's readings.[44] This confrontational move is said to have troubled He Xiu, leading him to

[41] *Shiji* 28: 1382.

[42] What I call "opinion texts" for the purposes of this study, could be considered commentaries by definition, but do not closely adhere to the classics in structure and content, as well as pursuing different purposes from what I term "commentaries" (to simplify, commentaries explain the classics, whereas opinion texts weighed into contemporary debates surrounding the texts, supplying a general outlook on the texts or addressing other readings). Commentaries, then, are appended to the classics, often line by line, and were integrated into the manuscripts of the classics early on: Henderson 1991: 70 points to "the Latter Han at the earliest". Chen Yinke 1992: 110–114 places this arrangement style which he calls "combined edition of commentaries to the *masters*" (*heben zizhu* 合本子註) in the context of Buddhist writings, the influx of which began in the second and third centuries.

[43] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207–1208. Jack Dull translates the three titles as "The Kungyang, as strong as a city defended by Mo-tzu", "The incurable maladies of the Tso commentary", and "The debilities of the Ku-liang commentary", respectively. Dull 1966: 391. Benjamin Elman, discussing the *Guliang feiji* and the *Zuoshi gaohuang*, translates them as "Disabling Diseases of Ku-liang" and "Incurability of Master Tso". Elman 1990: 253.

[44] These writings are gathered in the late imperial collection *Wenjingtang congshu* 問經堂叢書 1, *Baibu congshu jicheng* 百部叢書集成 38.

cry out, "Kangcheng [i.e. Zheng Xuan] has entered my home, taken hold of my own spear, and used it to attack me!" (*Kangcheng ru wu shi, cao wu mao, yi fa wo hu* 康成入吾室，操吾矛，以伐我乎).[45]

As these examples illustrate, there must have been heated debates over the texts and their meanings underway in the Eastern Han era, but commentarial writings from this period were not the main medium wherein such discourses were carried out, at least not explicitly. This is not to say they did not *implicitly* reflect ongoing disputes. However, in his commentaries, Zheng only indirectly responds to scholarly discourses of his own era, apparently to render his writings more timeless and concise, but also to obliterate any influence of others and position himself as the foremost authority on the text by excluding other voices rather than engaging with them. Only in the case of the *Rites of Zhou* does he regularly cite two select commentators from earlier times, namely Zheng Zhong 鄭眾 (?–83 BCE) and Du Zichun 杜子春 (ca. 30 BCE–ca. 58 CE).

Another conspicuous disconnect is found in the absence of traces of Ma Rong's scholarship in the writings of both Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi. Rather than conforming to the tradition established by their master, Zheng and Lu seem to have striven to assert their own voices within the scholarship of their era. There are even cases when Zheng Xuan explicitly contradicts his former teacher. This may not be surprising: after all, Ma Rong was only one of a number of intellectuals Zheng had sought out for his studies, which also included Diwu Yuanxian 第五元先 (?–?) and Zhang Gongzu 張恭祖 (?–?).[46] When Zheng took up the brush to write his commentaries, Ma was likely already deceased, and Zheng had himself become an esteemed scholar of transregional acclaim. There is thus no strong reason to suggest Zheng should cling to Ma's teachings. Still, the pervasive absence of Ma's name in Zheng Xuan's writings has even given rise to question over the credibility of a narrative found in the *New Discussions of Widespread Tales* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世説新語), according to which Ma was so jealous of Zheng's scholarly prowess he even sought to kill him after Zheng left his school.[47] It is more likely, however, that Ma and Zheng simply had different opinions and worldviews, leaving no reason for Zheng to include Ma in his writings. Alternatively, perhaps their viewpoints did not differ significantly enough to warrant engaging with Ma's readings.

This is exemplified when Ma Rong prefaces the *Monthly Ordinances* (*Yueling* 月令) chapter of the *Notes on Mores* by stating that "the *Monthly Ordinances* were composed by the Duke of Zhou" (*Yueling Zhou gong suo zuo* 月令周公所作).[48] The same remark is later echoed by Cai Yong,[49] as well as Wang Su 王肅 (ca. 195–256).[50] All three agree on the Duke of Zhou's authorship of the chapter, and use identical remarks to highlight this in their writings. Zheng Xuan, meanwhile, does not consider this to be the case. He goes so far as to take a direct jab at his own teacher by criticising that "nowadays,

[45] *Houhanshu* 35: 1208.

[46] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[47] This claim is considered unfounded in Liu Qiuzeng 2003: 44–45.

[48] *Yuhan shanfang* 901a.

[49] *Yuhan shanfang* 914a.

[50] *Yuhan shanfang* 937a.

uncultured people state that the Duke of Zhou composed the *Monthly Ordinances*; but this [idea] was not widely circulating in antiquity" (*Jin suren jie yun Zhou gong zuo Yueling, wei tong yu gu* 今俗人皆云周公作月令，未通於古).[51] Clearly, Zheng's opinion—on a question so fundamental—differed from many of his contemporaries, including Ma Rong.

The issue of the lack of cross-referencing between Zheng and Lu in their commentaries, meanwhile, may reach a straightforward resolution if we assume that the writing process of the two texts overlapped in time. There simply may not yet have existed a finished commentary by the other to which to respond. Still, extant writings by the two scholars reveal some similarities and some differences, which, for purposes of this study, may be read together to gain a sense of how (in)compatible their readings were.

Compatible or Overlapping? Similar Commentaries

Similarities between the two authors can occur with respect to their wording, their ideas and interpretations, or both. In addition, there is significance in which parts of a given line from the *Notes on Mores* a commentator opts to address, and what, by inference, he appears to have found less noteworthy or unproblematic. At these sites, the two commentaries often take different vantage points, allowing us to read them as complementary or contrastive. It is questionable, however, if a reading of the two commentaries side by side was intended by their authors. There is no evidence to suggest that Lu and Zheng aimed to expand upon or implicitly correct one another, or that the readership in this era would consult more than one commentary to accompany the text.[52] Still, the fault lines emerging from a comparative reading allow for important insights into the plurality of opinions on and approaches to the classics in the Eastern Han dynasty.

Pertaining to the sentence "Upon entering through the gate, one inquires about taboos" (*Ru men er wen hui* 入門而問諱) found in the *Mellow Rites I* (*Quli shang* 曲禮上) chapter,[53] Lu Zhi remarks that "the rulers of neighbouring domains are just like our own ruler" (*Linguo zhi jun you wu jun ye* 鄰國之君猶吾君也).[54] In what respect does Lu mean that? Zheng Xuan implicitly replies to this question in his commentary. He summarises the passage by stating that "All these [phrases] are about respecting one's host" (*jie wei jing zhuren ye* [...] 皆為敬主人也 [...]).[55] The two commentaries, read together, thus reveal the passage to be denoting that visitors to another domain should inquire about the tabooed

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[51] *Liji* 15: 578.

[52] Neither is there a lot of evidence to suggest the opposite, however. Further research needs to be conducted on the material form of commentaries to gauge their use in late antiquity.

[53] *Liji* 3: 101a.

[54] *Yuhan shanfang* 903a.

[55] *Liji* 3: 101a.

names of deceased rulers in the said domain, thereby paying the same respect to rulers of other domains as they would to those of their own. There is no major conflict between the respective interpretations. A synoptic reading proves constructive here, because the two commentaries go in the same direction. Yet, their wording and vantage points differ slightly: Lu spells out the principle behind the phrase in question, whereas Zheng connects it to the phrase's immediate context in the *Notes on Mores*.

When elsewhere in the same chapter the *Notes on Mores* spell out that "the lord of a domain does not take an unconventional chariot" (*Guojun bu cheng qiche* 國君不乘奇車),[56] Zheng and Lu again generally agree but differ in their approaches. Lu explains that a *qiche* is "a chariot which does not correspond to proper procedure" (*Bu ru fa zhe zhi che ye* 不如法者之車也).[57] Zheng meanwhile points to an overarching principle, saying that "going in and out [of the palace] must be conducted correctly" (*churu bi zheng ye* 出入必正也).[58] He explains *qiche* as "a chariot of the sort equipped for hunting" (*lieyi zhi shu* 獵衣之屬).[59]

To understand the contrasts between different commentarial agendas, it is often instructive to consider which parts of a passage or line in the classic commentators opt to problematise. For instance, the *Monthly Ordinances* chapter of the *Notes on Mores* states:

> 是月也，玄鳥至。至之日，以大牢祠於高禖，天子親往。[60]
>
> In this month, the dark birds arrive. On the day that they arrive, one brings a major animal sacrifice to the Matchmaker of Gao, and the Son of Heaven himself comes to attend.

Lu Zhi remarks that the "dark birds" arrived at the time when the natural forces *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 were in equilibrium, furnishing living beings with fertility. He explains the sacrifices as part of prayers for abundant offspring (more specifically, an heir to the throne) to a divine instantiation of the *mei* 媒 (matchmaker) office of antiquity,[61] thus the term *mei* 禖.[62] Zheng Xuan's elucidation is very similar overall, but he elaborates on certain points in greater detail than Lu: "dark birds" is glossed with "swallows" (*yan* 燕), explicating that they were considered symbols of marriage because of their arrival and nestbuilding at a time of procreation. Arguing that the *mei* office underwent an *apotheosis* due to its

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[56] This may refer to a chariot with unround wheels. Compare the *yinyi* 音義 commentary, which glosses *qiche* as "a chariot which is tilting and not upright" (*qixie buzheng zhi che* 奇邪不正之車). *Liji* 3: 114a. I thank Andrea Bréard (FAU Erlangen) for the discussion of the geometrical terminology used in these conceptions, which align well with the overall *Liji* passage, the prescriptions of which similarly focus on dimensions and the spatial order of a gentleman's comportment.

[57] *Yuhan shanfang* 903b.

[58] *Liji* 3: 114a.

[59] *Liji* 3: 114a.

[60] *Liji* 15: 554a. Gao stands for Gaoxin 高辛, a successor to the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝), who is connected to the inception of this office by Zheng Xuan.

[61] Compare *Zhouli* 9: 271b–272a, 14: 425a–432a.

[62] *Yuhan shanfang* 906a.

association with auspiciousness, he also delves into the details of the matchmaker office more than Lu, who remains focussed on the ritual itself.[63] Whereas their overall readings thus agree, Lu and Zheng focus on different points and comment on them to a different degree of detail.

While the approach taken by Zheng and Lu to a given passage differs in the above examples, laying bare that the two commentators often pursued divergent commentarial strategies, they nonetheless mostly agree on the meaning of the respective content in the *Notes on Mores* in each case: why a certain ritual is important, or what constitutes an "unconventional chariot". What need was there for several, overlapping commentaries, then? It seems that commentators deliberately wrote commentaries to open up discursive spheres of their own to present their personal understanding of specific passages in isolation from other authors. Comparative readings may hence reveal meaningful but indirectly expressed differences.

Disconnects and Incongruencies

Alongside the many commonalities, there exist many instances which suggest Zheng and Lu had a compatible understanding of a line's language yet disagreed on other aspects, including its meaning.

In the *Mellow Rites II*, a discussion is begun with the words "If one is removed from one's domain for three *shi*..." (*Qu guo san shi*... 去國三世...).[64] What is *shi*? Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi might have had different ideas about this. To Lu, "*Shi* is a 'lifetime'. As for the living beings, their lifetime is regarded as a *shi*" (*Shi, sui ye. Wanwu yi sui wei shi* 世，歲也。萬物以歲為世).[65] Lu Zhi thus reads the *Mellow Rites* to be speaking about three generations, though it is conceivable he is explaining that *shi* consist of *sui* in the sense of "years of one's life", meaning that *shi* (generations) were a time measurement for a certain number of years (*sui*) to him. Zheng Xuan similarly claims that "three *shi* go from the paternal grandfather to the grandson" (*San shi, zi zu zhi sun* 三世，自祖至孫).[66] Thus for Zheng, too, *shi* means "generations", but he foregrounds the cultural meaning of the ancestral cult, going on to suggest that rituals belonging the former home region would have been forgotten about after three generations had elapsed.[67] Lu meanwhile seems more focussed on establishing a general definition of the term *shi*, conceiving of its meaning as cognate with *sui* as more valid to comprehend the conditions of all living beings. Such conceptual differences reflect differing approaches to the same text by the two commentators.

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[63] *Liji* 15: 554a.

[64] *Liji* 4: 128a. For a more detailed discussion of this passage, compare Hua Zhe 2018: 76–86.

[65] *Yuhan shanfang* 903b.

[66] *Liji* 4: 128a.

[67] *Liji* 4: 128a.

As mentioned above, besides differing readings of a passage's language or ideas, another fault line consists in what commentators felt it important to highlight about a given passage. This may have had to do with their expectations of their readership's prior knowledge, but also with their personal priorities. In the *Royal Regulations* chapter of the *Notes on Mores*, pertaining to a passage about the elders above sixty years being nourished in the capital (*liushi yang yu guo* 六十養於國) as part of a ritual,[68] Lu is mainly concerned with the meaning of "to nourish" (*yang* 養). He understands the expression as exempting the elderly from military service (*bu yu fu rong* 不與服戎) and furthermore spells out that "the elderly" specifically refers to elderly commoners (*shuren zhi lao* 庶人之老).[69] Zheng Xuan does not pay attention to these points. Instead, he specifies that the "nourishing" would take place in the minor academy in the capital (*guozhong xiaoxue* 國中小學), adjacent to the palace. He highlights that the "nourishing ritual" was conducted by the Son of Heaven and the marquises (*zhuhou* 諸侯), as well as adding that the description in the *Royal Regulations* depicted the practices of the Yin 殷 administration (ca. 1600–ca. 1045 BCE).[70]

As these examples illustrate, there are discrepancies in the readings of even fundamental terms between Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi, which highlight that despite the apparent similarities in their personal backgrounds, their worldviews at times may have differed. In the following, the political and personal dimensions which may have brought this to the fore will be sketched out, along with the implications this had for the continued transmission of commentarial writings as well as for their study today.

Between Political Entanglements and Classical Writings for Career Purposes

By the Eastern Han period, the scholarly canon of classical writings[71] had assumed monumental importance among the political and literati elite of early imperial China.[72] These texts, many of which were supposed to stem from a more enlightened past, were exalted as paragons informing statecraft as well as providing guidelines for life and intellectual inquiry.[73] The classics were political in the sense that they were considered to outline ideals of rulership.[74] Understanding them and conveying one's understanding to others hence became a profession to some, the *Ru* 儒, or classical scholars.[75] Writing

[68] *Liji* 13: 491a. Compare also *Zhouli* 10: 308b.

[69] *Yuhan shanfang* 905b.

[70] *Liji* 13: 491a.

[71] For an overview, see Nylan 2001.

[72] The *Notes on Mores* was by then in the process of becoming part of the classics, and Zheng Xuan may have contributed to this canonisation. Compare Habberstad and Liu 2014.

[73] Compare Zhao Lu 2019: xviii.

[74] Compare Lewis 1999: 351.

[75] Compare Zufferey 1994; Anne Cheng 2001.

commentaries to the classics evolved into a typical way for Eastern Han *Ru* to engage with a text they presumed themselves to be knowledgeable about. Putting forward their own readings and making their voices distinctly heard may have been a motive of commentators like Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi to write commentaries of their own when others already existed. But to do so, they had to enter a centuries-long scholarly tradition, and strive to assert their own status within it.

The political nature of the texts also positioned them as means for scholars to pursue a career in the state administration. Given that the classics were esteemed as having the potential to shape virtuous statesmen yet did not provide direct blueprints for the organisation of a government and hence required interpretation, experts were needed to extract the wisdom contained within the texts. This presented a job opportunity for classical scholars, as well as an expedient means to make their voices heard and lend them some authority. In Lu Zhi's biography, a memorial he once presented to the throne may serve as a case in point. While also chiding the court, it reads like a thinly veiled self-recommendation letter, demonstrating Lu's expertise in the classics through various quotations and flowery language:[76]

> 夫士立爭友，義貴切磋。書陳『謀及庶人』，詩詠『詢於芻蕘』。植誦先王之書久矣，敢愛其瞽言哉！今足下之於漢朝，猶旦、奭之在周室，建立聖主，四海有繫。[77]
>
> If the officials once established directly criticised their friends, righteousness and nobility would assist one another. The *Documents* expound, "slander reaches the common populace", and the *Odes* sing, "consulting those who mow the grass and cut the firewood". Long have I, Zhi, recited the writings of the former rulers, and presume to cherish their unintelligible words! As for the relationship between the Han dynasty and my humble self at your feet, it is like that of Dan or Shi to the ruling house of Zhou.[78] If one establishes a sage ruler, everything within the four seas will attach to him.

Lu quotes from the *Venerated Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書)[79] and the *Odes*[80] to lend authority to his words and posit himself as a potential adviser to the court. He repeatedly emphasises his longstanding and intensive adeptness with regard to the classics, as well as invoking the wisdom of the former rulers contained in the texts. In this case, the *Book of Latter Han* proceeds to report that "he could not be

[76] *Houhanshu* 64: 2113–2114. Given that the *Book of Latter Han* was written centuries after Lu's lifetime, it is open to speculation if its author really had access to such memorials.

[77] *Houhanshu* 64: 2113.

[78] Dan was the personal name of the aforementioned Duke of Zhou (Zhou gong 周公), who ruled on behalf of the young king Cheng 成 (1055–1021 BCE). Shi (?–?) is said to have supported the Duke of Zhou as a ruler of Shao 召. Lu Zhi thus likens himself to these famous personae who served their ruling house in obedient but influential positions.

[79] Compare *Shangshu* 12: 372a.

[80] Compare *Maoshi* 17: 1347.

employed" (*bu neng yong* 不能用).[81] Nevertheless, prowess in the study of imperially recognised classical texts seems to have generally been a viable path to a political or administrative career.[82] Indeed, Lu went on to be successfully hired, both to work on texts in the Eastern Pavilion, and to serve as governor and general. His tasks, then, deviated from the direct study of classic texts, as he was, for instance, tasked with the pacification of the Yellow Turban rebellions.[83]

The proximity of classical scholarship to the career options of intellectuals meant that commentaries, aside from serving to outline their author's ideas, may have been written with the motive of gaining the necessary prestige to prove one's qualifications for an official post. It also meant that adherents of different textual traditions and readings were often in competition with one another for patronage and recognition. The possibility that commentarial writings served to gain standing in society and ascend to the echelons of state service are especially striking if we contemplate that the late Eastern Han period was in many respects a society in upheaval. Despite (or even because of) the ensuing political crises foreboding the looming fall of the dynasty, many scholars towards the end of the Eastern Han apparently still sought recognition and employment from the central government (or warlords erecting para-statal structures).[84] After all, the texts they studied were considered political and supposed to contribute to aiding the government and informing its actions.

Not all scholars approved of the co-optation of their scholarship for political purposes, however. Zheng Xuan especially seems to have been keen to evade liability on these grounds. As a prominent scholar, at least in his home region,[85] towards the end of the Han dynasty Zheng was repeatedly sought out by warlords for his expertise and offered advisory positions, all of which he rejected or excused himself from.[86] He thus represents a countermovement of intellectuals retreating into private studies, having grown sceptical of engaging with state authority.[87] Zheng's source of income then was teaching at his own private school,[88] probably much like the one he and Lu had themselves studied at under Ma Rong. He hence depended as much on his reputation as a great scholar, perhaps even more so, than did someone pursuing a career in state service.

If commentary-writing was a way to gain recognition by the scholarly community and even a position and an income, this may present one reason why commentators felt prompted to author commentaries of their own while disregarding or at least not explicitly referencing those of others: to foreground their own, individual insights, and to avoid giving unnecessary airtime to their competitors. In addition,

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[81] *Houhanshu* 64: 2114.

[82] This is not to say that this was the only prerequisite: practical knowledge and experience probably also played a similarly significant role.

[83] *Houhanshu* 64: 2118–2119.

[84] For example Dong Zhuo 董卓 (?–192), Yuan Shao 袁紹 (?–202), or Cao Cao 曹操 (ca. 155–220).

[85] *Houhanshu* 35: 1212 states "He was considered an [intellectual] ancestor between Qi and Lu" (*Qi Lu jian zong zhi* 齊魯間宗之). Qi and Lu were regional states in the area around modern-day Shandong province during the Chunqiu 春秋 period (ca. 770–481 BCE).

[86] *Houhanshu* 35: 1209, 1211.

[87] Compare Zhao Lu 2019: 116.

[88] *Houhanshu* 35: 1207. See also Yoshikawa Tadao 2019.

brevity and reader-friendliness may have been a concern for commentators,[89] consequently opting not to represent broader discourses in their writings. Such information might have been imparted to the target audience orally instead. More explicit opinions and scholarly disputes were moreover voiced via the separate venue of opinion texts instead, such as those mentioned above that referenced Xu Shen and He Xiu.

To summarise, political factors and the social climate of the late Eastern Han leveraged a profound impact on scholars' lives and careers, and this in turn influenced the way they approached their commentarial writings. How a commentary was written depended on who they anticipated would read it, what was considered orthodox, and what standing and/or position a scholar held or hoped to gain. As shown above while commentaries were devoted to the readings of one individual, it is vital to note that their voices chime into a contextual discourse. This is often not sufficiently acknowledged in scholarship.

Reflections: Survival of the Fittest Commentary

The transmission history of the commentaries has tilted the scales in favour of Zheng Xuan. As a result, any analysis of the fragmentary extant materials by Lu Zhi, Ma Rong, Cai Yong, or others must bear the caveat that crucial elements may have been lost. Inferences drawn based on fragments by the likes of Lu Zhi should therefore be treated as approximations. Nevertheless, they still provide a helpful means of comparison. Furthermore, the role afforded to Zheng Xuan on account of the more complete transmission of his writings has led him to dominate other scholars in our perception of his time. Though it is tempting to consider him representative of the scholarship of an entire era, in his day he would merely have been one voice among many.

Zheng's popularity at the time and his supremacy throughout the later transmission process may have indeed become a factor in the loss of writings by other commentators.[90] Once only Zheng's commentary was left in a mostly complete form, this ease of accessibility and broader coverage could only have cemented his prominent position among Han-era commentators, especially regarding the *Mores* canon and the *Odes*, his scholarship on which seems to have enjoyed particular esteem in the eyes of

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[89] Given the large number and volumes of commentarial writings in the Han era, they were sometimes decreed to be shortened. Compare Wang Chenglüe 2004: 6.

[90] The *Treatise of Classical Materials in the Book of Sui* already only lists two editions of the *Liji* by Han-period compilers, commented by Lu Zhi and by Zheng Xuan, as well as a *zhangju* 章句 (*section and sentence*) commentary of the *Yueling* 月令 (*Monthly Ordinances*) chapter by Cai Yong. *Suishu* 32: 922. The relative wealth of different commentaries to the *Liji* to be assumed for the Han period must therefore have already shrunk significantly by the Sui 隋 (581–617) and Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasties. The Tang-period editors of the authoritative *zhengyi* 正義 (correct meaning) edition then limited the range even further at imperial behest: "Now, an imperial decree has been presented to delete the old structures, to hold on to and adhere to Huang as the basis. What he has not equipped [the commentary with] is to be supplemented through Xiong" (*Jin fengshe shanli, reng ju Huangshi yiwei ben, qi you bubei, yi Xiongshi bu yan* 今奉勅刪理，仍據皇氏以為本，其有不備，以熊氏補焉). By imperial decree, the *Liji zhengyi* was thus to be based on the previous work by Huang Kan 皇侃 (?–?) and Xiong Ansheng 熊安生 (?–?) from the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Nanbeichao 南北朝, 420–589), both of whom are depicted as having based their own work on Zheng Xuan in the foreword to the *Liji zhengyi*. *Liji zhengyi xu*: 4a.

both his contemporaries and successors. Given the frequent invocation of *Odes* materials in the *Mores* classics, the synergies created by Zheng and the worldview he constructed around the *Rites of Zhou* may have supplied the impetus for readers of his commentary on one classic also to include his other commentaries to texts such as the *Classic of Filial Devotion* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) or the *Assembled Discussions* (*Lunyu*) over comparable writings by others. While some commentaries by Zheng Xuan seem to have been less popular and were themselves supplanted by others,[91] at a certain point his writings could deliver a relatively consistent guide to the reading of at least two entire classical canons and permit readers to draw connections. Meanwhile, other commentarial writings had become too fragmentary, and their lack of coverage meant they could no longer compete in terms of appeal and user-friendliness.

The predominance of certain individual commentators' readings was perpetuated, and today continues to exacerbate the suppression of competing writings. This process is exemplified by a remark in the *Book of Latter Han* with regard to the *Changes* (*Yi* 易) tradition:

> 建武中，范升傳孟氏易，以授楊政，而陳元、鄭眾皆傳費氏易，其後馬融亦為其傳。融授鄭玄，玄作易註，荀爽又作易傳，自是費氏興，而京氏遂衰。[92]
>
> Amidst the Jianwu period [25–56], Fan Sheng transmitted the *Changes* of Meng and taught Yang Zheng with them, whereas Chen Yuan and Zheng Zhong both transmitted the *Changes* of Fei. Thereafter, Ma Rong also made a *zhuan* commentary for it. Rong taught Zheng Xuan, and Xuan wrote a *zhu* commentary to the *Changes*. Moreover, Xun Shuang wrote a *zhuan* commentary to the *Changes*. From then on, [the *Changes* in the tradition of] Fei thrived, whereas [that of] Jing consequently went into decline.

Here the *Book of Latter Han* traces scholarly lineages, with layers of commentaries accruing virtually simultaneously to the text being passed on from master to disciple,[93] the more active reception of the edition by Fei Zhi 費直 (?–?) ultimately spelling a decline of interest in the tradition of Jing Fang 京房 (77–37 BCE).[94] An orthodoxy built around the *Yi* commentary by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) emerged later during the Tang period, which had grown out of a stream of the tradition earlier championed by Ma Rong and Zheng Xuan.[95]

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[91] For example, his commentary to the *Changes* (mentioned in the quotation above) is extant only in fragments. While this does not prove his commentary was less popular, this loss (which could tentatively be attributed to fewer manuscripts of it circulating due to less popularity) probably prevented it from gaining wider acclaim.

[92] *Houhanshu* 79 shang: 2554.

[93] The case of Zheng Xuan, who in this passage is said to have commented on and thus contributed to the popularisation of the Fei edition of the *Changes* presents an exception to this pattern, seeing that Zheng had started out his educational journey by being taught the Jing version of the *Changes* by Diwu Yuanxian prior to his time with Ma Rong. *Houhanshu* 35: 1207.

[94] Compare Shaughnessy 1993: 222–223.

[95] Shaughnessy 1993: 223.

The plurality of opinions brought forth in a certain timeframe and geographic sphere formed comprehensive discourses. The different approaches recognisable in the writings of Zheng Xuan and Lu Zhi on essentially the same textual basis were likely intended to highlight the individuality of their perspectives in an effort to stand out from these. But at the same time, a commentator must necessarily assume their own stance in response to what came before. Only with their integration into the intertextual mesh presented by the intellectual discourses of their time were individual readings rendered meaningful.

Commentary-writing was thus conducted in response to the intellectual requirements of the time and the sociohistorical background of commentators. For researchers nowadays, this context is often lacking, making it tempting to either dismiss certain remarks as idiosyncratic or to engage in a personal essentialism, ascribing certain readings to the whims or the genius of an author rather than to the practical purposes they intended to accomplish, to influences from their environment, or to the demands of the discourse at the time. An equilibrium should be maintained between studies on the individual commentarial exegeses of the texts on the one hand, and the fuller mosaic of historical intellectual discourses these commentaries were part of on the other. In this way, a commentary does not exist in a vacuum, and in order to succeed in interpreting its content, it is vital to attempt to reconstruct its context within the discourses to which it was designed to weigh in.

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