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Book Review: Hsieh Liang-tso and the Analects of Confucius: Humane Learning as a Religious Quest

Abstract

Hsieh Liang-tso is the first volume to explore Chinese traditions in the Academy Series sponsored by Oxford and the American Academy of Religion. Most previous titles in the series focus on Christianity, which perhaps explains Selover's attention to the perspectives of comparative religions and comparative theology in his introduction. There he briefly traces the history of the issues concerning the religious dimensions of the Chinese literati tradition and outlines a comparative framework for approaching eleventh-century Chinese thought. Inspired by Robert Neville's *Beyond the Masks of God*, Selover focuses in the introduction on four themes—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This framework, however, does not figure prominently until the conclusion. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

religion, scripture, tradition, reason, experience

Disciplines

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narrow and unstated urban bias. The best-selling literature produced by Kong's second channel, with individual title sales frequently far below a million in a country of 1.4 billion, raises troubling questions about the centrality of literature and books in today's China that are not addressed. Similarly, the book's comparative dimension is weakly developed; emphasis lies on influences from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The book ends on an afterword note that implies that Kong's future research interest lies in "hot media" developments. Deeper comparative and historical understanding of Chinese print culture might help her identify long-term media trends and patterns among them.

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Hsieh Liang-tso and the Analects of Confucius: Humane Learning as a Religious Quest. By THOMAS W. SELOVER. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Oxford University Press, 2005. xi, 183 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

Hsieh Liang-tso is the first volume to explore Chinese traditions in the Academy Series sponsored by Oxford and the American Academy of Religion. Most previous titles in the series focus on Christianity, which perhaps explains Selover's attention to the perspectives of comparative religions and comparative theology in his introduction. There he briefly traces the history of the issues concerning the religious dimensions of the Chinese literati tradition and outlines a comparative framework for approaching eleventh-century Chinese thought. Inspired by Robert Neville's *Beyond the Masks of God*, Selover focuses in the introduction on four themes—scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. This framework, however, does not figure prominently until the conclusion.

What follows is instead a textual and historical analysis of Xie Liangzuo's (Hsieh Liang-tso, ca. 1050–ca. 1120) commentary on the *Analects*, particularly his commentaries on its first two books. Four chapters and a conclusion total less than sixty pages of text, but they are supplemented by three substantial appendixes. The first two are translations of Xie's commentaries on books 1 and 2 of the *Analects*. Those commentaries are no longer extant as independent works, and Selover has excerpted them from the *Lunyu jingyi* (Essential meanings of the Analects) compiled by Zhu Xi. Selover considers the interpretive problems created by Zhu Xi's filtering of the text. Facsimiles of the Chinese text form the third appendix.

In the first chapter, "Disciple of the Cheng Brothers," Selover discusses Xie's relationship with the Cheng brothers, particularly with Cheng Hao, and he describes Xie's career and corpus of writing. Given Xie's influence on later thinkers, Selover's detailed textual study is a much-needed exploration of how the thought of the Cheng brothers was transmitted to later generations. Chapter 2, "The *Analects* Can be Hard to Read," is a close study of Xie's understanding of the *Analects* and of what Selover calls the "intratextuality" of Xie's commentary—that is, how Xie interprets one passage from the *Analects* from the perspective of the *Analects* as a whole. Selover also explores the influence of works other than the *Analects* on Xie's commentary and traces each classical allusion (and there are hundreds of them) to its source. Interestingly, Xie drew more heavily on the *Book of Rites* than any other work (and only a minority of those citations are from the *Daxue* or *Zhongyong*). One wonders to what extent Song understandings of Confucius were mediated by how he is depicted in the *Rites*, which portrays him as a master of ceremony and ritual.

In chapter 3, “Knowing *Jen*,” Selover focuses on the concept of *ren* (humaneness, humanity) and its relationship in Xie’s thought to *jue* (to awaken, to realize). Selover translates *jue* as awareness or sensitivity. In a departure from most earlier studies of both *ren* and *jue*, Selover takes seriously the somatic aspects of those concepts. Following Cheng Hao, Xie Liangzuo closely associated humaneness with embodied sensitivity. Accordingly, those who lacked humaneness were thought to exhibit moral, social, and physical insensitivity—which Xie understood literally as numbness.

One would like to know more about the larger cultural context for Xie’s understanding of *jue*: was it influenced at some level by Buddhist usages of the term, where it was understood as enlightenment? The *Yuanjuejing* (Sutra of complete enlightenment) was popular in some contemporary forms of esoteric Buddhism, which were soon to take concrete form in such structures as the *Yuanjuedong*, or “Grotto of Complete Enlightenment,” in the sculpted cliffs at Dazu. Selover notes that Zhu Xi criticized Xie’s understanding of *jue*, and one would like to know more about Xie’s detractors.

Chapter 4, “Authentic Transmission of Humane Learning,” traces the later history of the notion of *ren* in the thought of the Hu family, Zhang Shi, Zhu Xi, and even the much later Tan Sitong. Selover notes that Tan was perhaps the first to use the compound term *renxue*, or humane learning, an expression that figures in a more general sense in the subtitle of Selover’s book. “Humane Learning as a Religious Quest,” the title of the conclusion, proposes that Chinese notions of *ren*, as transmitted in texts such as Xie’s commentaries on the *Analects*, offer a starting point for religious and theological dialogue across cultures.

Chinese characters are provided throughout the text, and a glossary of terms is included. Only a handful of works cited in the bibliography were written after 1993 (none after 1997), so the renaissance of interest in intellectual history that has occurred in the past ten years in mainland China, and the vast secondary literature it has produced, are chronologically beyond the reach of this study. Selover has forgotten to include in his bibliography his own 1994 dissertation, “Authentic Transmission and the Learning of *Jen*: Hsieh Shang-ts’ai (c. 1050–1120) and the Confucian *Analects*.”

Although in some ways brief, *Hsieh Liang-tso* is nonetheless one of the longest published studies of Xie Liangzuo’s thought in a Western language. In fact, it is still one of the few full-length English-language studies devoted to Xie, or to any of the other important disciples of the Cheng brothers.

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China’s Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils. By ROBERT G. SUTTER. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, 312 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

Written by a veteran analyst of Chinese affairs who has been a voice of reason in the often frantic debate over China and U.S.-China relations, this book offers a comprehensive review of China’s rise in the Asia-Pacific region and a nuanced assessment of its possible impact on the U.S. Based on the author’s extensive consultations with scholars and policy makers in the region and an extraordinary amount of up-to-date secondary literature, it makes a convincing argument that China’s growing power has thus far led the country to be less of a challenger to the status quo in Asia and more of a net contributor to regional order, and that the future trajectory of Chinese policy in the region will depend critically on how the U.S. conducts itself in Asia.