



The Shenzi Fragments: A Philosophical Analysis and Translation

Yuri Pines

To cite this article: Yuri Pines (2017) The Shenzi Fragments: A Philosophical Analysis and Translation, Journal of Chinese Religions, 45:2, 204-206, DOI: [10.1080/0737769X.2017.1369709](https://doi.org/10.1080/0737769X.2017.1369709)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0737769X.2017.1369709>



Published online: 02 Oct 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Buddhist precept, “do not kill,” in chapters 3 and 4; network members’ household recitation practices in chapter 5), and are full of erudition and insights. These chapters may have presented a less dynamic picture of the Fellowship than chapters 6 and 7, but they solidly demonstrate that self-cultivation was a serious commitment for members of the Fellowship and that their quest adopted multiple modes and took place in multiple locales.

In short, this is a rich study with fruitful and instructive findings. Its calls for a more interactive and fluid model of late Ming Buddhist-Confucian relations and for further exploration of Buddhist epistolary collections should be heeded. As shown in Eichman’s book, letters can be instrumental in fleshing out contexts and putting faces to concepts. With their expectations adjusted, other readers, I hope, will be able to enjoy and learn from the book without the reservations noted above.

YIQUN ZHOU
Stanford University

© 2017 Yiqun Zhou
DOI 10.1080/0737769X.2017.1369711

EIRIK LANG HARRIS, *The Shenzi Fragments: A Philosophical Analysis and Translation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. xviii, 180 pp. US\$55 (hb). ISBN 978-0-231-17766-5

The catalogue of the Former Han (206/202 BCE–9 CE) imperial library classified ten texts as belonging to the “Legalist” (*fajia* 法家) category in the Masters (*zi* 子) section. The second largest of these was the 42-chapters-long *Shenzi* 慎子, attributed to Shen Dao 慎到 (fl. ca. 300 BCE). The text and the author to whom the text is ascribed were relatively well known from the third century BCE on, prompting criticisms or endorsements by eminent thinkers such as Xunzi (荀子, ca. 310–230 BCE) and Han Fei 韓非 (d. 233 BCE). However, history was not kind to *Shenzi*: most of the book was lost between the Tang (618–907 CE) and Song (960–1279 CE) dynasties. In the nineteenth century, scholars started reconstructing the text from multiple fragments scattered through imperial compendia and encyclopedia from the pre-Song period. Nonetheless, ongoing debates over the authenticity of some of the *Shenzi* fragments, most notably over those forged by Shen Maoshang 慎懋賞 in 1579, discouraged in-depth engagement with this text in China and elsewhere.

In 1970, Paul M. Thompson completed his dissertation on the authenticity of *Shenzi* fragments. This dissertation and the subsequent monograph published by Oxford University Press (1979) became a milestone in *Shenzi* studies worldwide.¹ Yet Thompson was less interested in the text’s philosophical content, and his monograph even omitted the translation prepared back in 1970. As a result, his book remained of limited appeal to students and broader audience. In the almost forty years that have passed since Thompson’s study, *Shenzi* prompted just two articles

¹ Paul M. Thompson, “The Shen Tzu Fragments” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 1970); idem, *The Shen Tzu Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

in English (both by Soon-ja Yang),² in addition to a few scattered comments in broader publications. It has remained one of the least studied of the major texts of the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought.

This sad state of neglect has fortunately ended now with the publication of Eirik Harris's study. Harris provides the reader exactly with what was missing from Thompson's magnum opus, namely a careful translation of all the fragments deemed authentic by Thompson, coupled with in-depth study of the text's philosophy and its impact. A lucid and generally accurate translation combined with a systematic, engaging, and highly original analysis of *Shenzi's* thought and of its intellectual context ensure that Harris's study will become a standard textbook for all those interested in this long neglected but highly significant early Chinese text.

Harris excels in analyzing *Shenzi's* political philosophy. He laudably abandons the habitual reduction of *Shenzi's* thought to a single overarching notion of "positional power" (*shi* 勢) and explores the text's ideas in their full complexity. Of particular value for the current reviewer is Harris's observation that *Shenzi's* political theory is grounded in the authors' sober understanding of human nature as intrinsically selfish and unchangeable. Rather than bettering humans, the ruler should build "a structure that provides incentives to these [self-interested YP] people to exercise their talents and abilities in the way that benefits the state" (p. 27). This observation permits very interesting parallels between ideas of *Shenzi* and those expressed in the *Book of Lord Shang* associated with Shang Yang 商鞅 (d. 338 BCE).³ It is also closely related to Han Fei's view of society as driven purely by the forces of self-interest.⁴ The idea that the political system should be based on "the people as they actually are rather than ... on how they ought to be" (p. 24) is arguably the major dividing line between the so-called Legalists and their Confucian opponents. In this respect, Harris's analysis of Shen Dao's views is a major contribution to the general research of Chinese political philosophy.

At times, Harris's analysis, incisive as it is, misses certain important points in *Shenzi's* thought. For instance, when discussing the notion of rulership, Harris fails to apprehend the critical importance of the ruler in Shen Dao's political theory. For Shen Dao, the ruler is the pivot of a well-functioning state, without whom "the principles of orderly rule would not pass through" (理無由通, fragment 21–22; in Harris's translation "patterns will lack what connects them to one another," p. 110). Only the presence of the ruler prevents the turmoil among his underlings from tearing the political fabric apart (fragments 58–60 and 75–77). And yet the ruler is also the weakest link in the state, as his "wisdom is not necessarily the greatest among the people" (fragment 42–43). The monarch's malfunctioning may jeopardize the very order he is supposed to preside over. It is against this backdrop that Shen Dao advises the ruler to minimize his personal intervention in politics, to entrust himself to laws and norms, and to delegate responsibilities to ministers. The immense tension between the absolute superiority of the ruler as an

² Soon-ja Yang, "Shen Dao's Own Voice in the *Shenzi* Fragments," *Dao* 10, no. 2 (2011): 181–207; idem, "Shen Dao's Theory of *fa* and His Influence on Han Fei," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 47–63.

³ See Yuri Pines (translated and edited), *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

⁴ Paul R. Goldin, "Han Fei and the Han Feizi," in *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Han Fei*, 1–21.

institution and persistent fears of the ruler's personal inadequacy is a common point in most texts of the Hundred Schools; but rarely it is stated as perceptively as in *Shenzi*.⁵ It is a pity that Harris did not elaborate enough on this point.

Harris's chapter on "Shen Dao in the Early Chinese Intellectual Milieu" presents a series of excellent insights on the possible impact of *Shenzi* on Xunzi, Han Fei, and the authors of later compendia such as *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 and *Huainanzi* 淮南子. Yet oddly the author eschewed entirely the parallels between *Shenzi* and two very close texts, the *Book of Lord Shang* and *Guanzi* 管子. The explanation provided by Harris, namely that the dating and authorship of the latter texts is not clear (p. 101) is puzzling: after all, this observation is applicable to *Shenzi* as well. It is indeed difficult to evaluate "who influenced whom" among roughly simultaneously composed texts, but by omitting close parallels between *Shenzi* and these texts, Harris missed a chance to contextualize the political thought of Shen Dao more broadly in the intellectual milieu of his age.

I am also disappointed by Harris's dismissal of the discussion of Shen Dao in "The World" ("Tianxia" 天下) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* as irrelevant (p. 102). *Zhuangzi* indeed presents an odd picture of Shen Dao as a quietist who "discarded knowledge and dispensed with the self" (棄知去己). The Shen Dao of *Zhuangzi* claims: "One should become like a senseless thing and that is all. Make no use of worthies and sages: after all, even a lump of soil does not lose the Way" (至於若無知之物而已, 無用賢聖, 夫塊不失道).⁶ It is true that this Shen Dao differs greatly from the one in the *Shenzi* fragments. But should we dismiss *Zhuangzi*'s evidence entirely? Maybe the historical Shen Dao was a more complex thinker than the extant fragments suggest? At the very least the parallels between the dismissal of "elevating the worthy" discourse by *Zhuangzi*'s Shen Dao and that in the *Shenzi* fragments (i.e., fragment 75–77) should have been addressed properly. By not doing so, Harris somewhat simplifies the picture of Shen Dao and his intellectual impact. Similarly, the only paleographic reference to *Shenzi*, namely the text *Shenzi Said: Respectfulness and Modesty* 慎子曰恭儉 from the Shanghai Museum collection should have merited more than being buried in a footnote (p. 141, n. 15).

Debates about the precise content of Shen Dao's ideas, his image, and his impact will surely continue. But the very possibility of engaging in these debates is in no small measure due to Harris's excellent introduction to this thinker's thought. Harris should be congratulated for this major contribution to studies of China's intellectual history.

YURI PINES

Nankai University and Hebrew University of Jerusalem

© 2017 Yuri Pines

DOI 10.1080/0737769X.2017.1369709

⁵ For a very similar point in *Han Feizi*, see Romain Graziani, "Monarch and Minister: The Problematic Partnership in the Building of Absolute Monarchy in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子," in *Ideology of Power and Power of Ideology in Early China*, ed. Yuri Pines, Paul R. Goldin, and Martin Kern (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 155–180. For a more general exploration of the tension between the uniform commitment to the ruler's institutional superiority and fears of his inadequacy, see Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 13–111.

⁶ *Zhuangzi jinzhu jinyi* 莊子今注今譯, annotated by Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 876.