

Origins of Political-Moral Philosophy in Early China: Contestation of Humaneness, Justice, and Personal Freedom

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Yuri Pines

Beijing Normal University and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
yuri.pines@mail.huji.ac.il

Tao Jiang's new magnum opus is the most welcome addition to the rapidly increasing number of studies of early Chinese thought. *Origins of Political-Moral Philosophy in Early China* offers inspiringly refreshing perspectives on the major texts associated with the so-called Hundred Schools of Thought. Rich in insights, lucidly written (minor pinyin inaccuracies notwithstanding), and based on thorough incorporation of secondary studies in English (albeit fewer in Chinese and none in other languages), this monograph is a must-read for students and scholars of China's intellectual history.

The text's lengthy introduction (pp. 1–52) is particularly noteworthy. Jiang discusses with unusual candor the predicament of scholars of Chinese philosophy, who are caught between the Scylla of “generalist” philosophers and the Charybdis of Sinologists. The uphill battle to get recognition from the departments of “general” (viz. Euro-American) philosophy is well known. By contrast, frustration with fellow “Sinologists” (referring primarily to historians of early China) has never—to the best of my knowledge—been articulated with such clarity.

The “Sinological challenge to Chinese philosophy” comes from the currently emerging consensus that the major philosophical texts from China's preimperial period (before 221 BCE) were not produced by a single author but evolved over generations, taking their final shape only in the early Han dynasty. This view can put “philosophical projects in jeopardy . . . Without being able to attribute the authorship . . . to a single person . . . the philosophizing enterprise might become groundless and objectless” (pp. 14–15). For philosophers, as Jiang clarifies, “the assumption of a single author makes possible a particular interpretative strategy,” allowing to read the text “in terms of its textual unity and coherence” (p. 15). Hence, Jiang seeks a new strategy to allow philosophers “to focus on ideas in Chinese classics, . . . without having to engage in the Sinological dance that is not always integral to the philosophical project” (p. 21).

To his credit, Jiang comes up with an interesting solution. He acknowledges the advantages of Sinological methodology (and displays impressive mastery of critical approaches toward the texts he discusses). Yet Sinologists deal with a “historical author,” whereas philosophers are in need of “textual author.” The latter is “an authorial personality that is primarily the product of a text.” The understanding that a “historically influential text has created an authorial personality that possesses a distinct character and intention of his own, whatever the historical author's intent,” allows the philosopher “to preserve the integrity of a text that has taken on a life of its own” (pp. 21–22). It is with these “inherited” rather than “original” (p. 23) texts that Jiang deals throughout his book.

I am very impressed by Jiang's ingenious solution to the problem of authorship. Indeed, it is entirely legitimate to analyze a text not from the vantage point of its real authors but from that of its readers, who imagine a single author and read the texts on the basis of this presupposition. Yet the question is, do we really need an imagined author to appreciate a text's intellectual depth? Is not it more engaging to analyze, for instance, intratextual debates among the text's multiple authors and editors? (When Jiang does address these debates, his analysis gains a lot, though he does so infrequently). Moreover, the focus on a “textual author” perpetuates the common malady of prioritizing texts with a known ascribed author and glossing over all the rest.

The latter point is particularly pertinent to Jiang's book. His discussion is focused overwhelmingly on texts that are traditionally associated with a single author—from the *Analects* of Confucius, through *Mozi*, *Mengzi*, *Laozi*, fragments of Shen Buhai 申不害 and Shen Dao's 慎到 writings, the *Book of Lord Shang*, *Zhuangzi*, *Xunzi*, and *Han Feizi*. This is surely an excellent sample, but it leaves out several most interesting compendia—such as *Guanzi*, *Lüshi chunqiu*, parts of *Liji*, and so forth. The philosophically rich segments of historical works—such as *Zuozhuan*, *Gongyang zhuan*, or *Guoyu*—are ignored entirely. Ditto for most of the recently discovered manuscripts (aside from a very interesting engagement with a few of Guodian manuscripts; pp. 101–11). Most regrettably in my eyes, Jiang's study, which focuses on Heaven's interaction with the humans, ignores entirely some of the most relevant manuscripts—the so-called *Yellow Thearch Documents* (*Huangdi shu* 黃帝書) from the site of Mawangdui.

Limitations of space prevent me from dealing adequately with Jiang's discussion of the origins of moral-political philosophy in China. Suffice it to say that his analysis focusing on “the contestation of humaneness, justice, and personal freedom in the early Chinese effort to negotiate the relationships among the personal, the familial, and the political domains, under drastically different conceptions of Heaven and its evolving relationship with the humans” (p. 45) is among the most interesting I have read in years. For instance, Jiang's identification of *fajia* 法家 (usually translated as “Legalists”) as resolute promoters of impartiality does more justice to this current than its common caricatures as “authoritarians” or “totalitarians.” The view of Zhuangzi, committed as he was to personal freedom, as “the singular outlier” (p. 49) in traditional China's ideological landscape is also highly engaging. Ditto for many observations about mutual impact among different thinkers (e.g., Mozi's and Sunzi's impact on *fajia*; pp. 149, 249).

Jiang's book will surely generate a lot of debates and disagreements, but I am confident that it will not be ignored. Jiang should be congratulated on his great enterprise.

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Ignorance is Bliss: The Chinese Art of Not Knowing

By Mieke Matthyssen. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 380 pp.
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Yang Shen

Hebrew University of Jerusalem
yang.shen@mail.huji.ac.il

The renewal of classical and imperial Chinese cultures in late socialist China has been conspicuous. Given the richness of the phenomenon, critical assessments of such comebacks are still underway. In this new book, Belgian Chinese studies scholar Mieke Matthyssen claims that invoking discourses from an earlier era has more than nostalgic or ideological significance. Instead, conventional wisdom developed in imperial China can continue to function as a survival strategy for our East Asian coevals in navigating their current public and interpersonal relationships. The argument is built on recognizing a “close link between ‘applied’ philosophy and Chinese indigenous and folk psychology” (p. 7). Matthyssen's emphasis on a culturally mediated sense of psychological agency or well-being, along with her focus on the indigenous attitude to knowledge, helps fine-tune the parameters of discussion on the politics of knowledge and traditions in China.

At the center of the treatise is a native idiom, *hutu* (not knowing), and its derivative folk philosophy, *hutuism*—the art of not knowing. It was not until the late imperial scholar-official Zheng Banqiao (1693–1766) distilled the proverb *nande hutu* (ignorance is rare) that the value of ignorance (*hutu*)