This book explores the origins of moral and political philosophy of early China, focusing especially on the development of Chinese thought from the fifth century to the late third century BC. Presuming that the origins of ancient Chinese philosophy resulted from “a prolonged, complex, and often opaque process,” in which generations of thinkers formulated, reshaped, edited, canonized, and transmitted contested ideas, Tao Jiang offers an analysis of how pre-Qin writers contemplated the relationships among the personal, familial, and political domains as they competed to introduce what they perceived as a desirable moral-political world in response to the collapse of the Zhou dynasty (p. 34). In doing so, he examines these thinkers’ attempts to position themselves in relation to a few moral norms: humaneness, a person’s natural inclination to be partial to those related to them; justice, one’s willingness to move beyond the webs of relations in which one is embedded to adopt an impartial, universalist attitude toward others; and personal freedom, one’s cultivation of personal space where one could liberate oneself from the confines of the sociopolitical domain. In his analysis, whereas pre-Qin philosophers’ diverse visions of order emerged from the competition between those who embraced humaneness and those who believed in justice, the quest for personal freedom, which took place outside of the contention between these two groups, represented early China’s imagination of how humans could live outside of the restraints imposed on them by ethical and social values associated with humaneness and justice.

The book depicts Confucius’s moral and political thought as follows (chapter 1): Confucius, who lived in the fifth century BC, invoked the concept of ren (humanity, humaneness, or benevolence) as the foundation for the Zhou ritual system, which he intended to revive for the reconstruction of order. And ren is marked with the tension between humaneness—preference for one’s family—and justice—the Golden Rule, based on one’s impartiality for all. Confucius’s career set the stage on which later thinkers transformed the humaneness-justice tension into a debate. Although both Mozi/the Mohists and Mengzi/the Mencians believed in heaven as a nurturing force that cares about humans, they were responsible for creating the divergence between humaneness and justice: whereas Mozi and his disciples aligned themselves with justice, Mengzi and his supporters chose to commit to humaneness (chapter 2).[1] On the one
hand, the authors of the Daodejing disapproved of humaneness and shared with the Mohists their embrace of justice and impartiality. But on the other hand, they naturalized heaven as well as valorized Dao as the ultimate source of the universe (chapter 3). In the early third century BC, early fajia (legalist) thinkers, including Shen Buhai, Shang Yang, and Shen Dao, refused to imagine politics and governance in terms of historical actors’ virtues. By focusing on realpolitik and the effectiveness of the state apparatus, they inherited the Mohists’ emphasis on impartiality, and Shen Dao hoped to build a state that resembled the patterns with which heaven worked (chapter 4).

In Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China, Jiang writes that as the Warring States drew to a close, a few sophisticated thinkers emerged. Zhuangzi and his followers constituted a group unlike any other. They did not share early thinkers’ serious engagement with the challenge of how to revive or create a new moral-political order, nor did they appreciate their peers’ interest in serving the state. The Zhuangzi glorifies personal freedom, defined as humans’ physical distance from, as well as their intellectual and spiritual freedom in, the political domain. The text is also about one’s liberation from the ideal of order, which was understood in terms of humaneness, justice, or both (chapter 5).

Xunzi, the great late Warring States defender and renovator of the Confucian project, worked to bridge humaneness and justice in response to non-Confucian thinkers’ influential views on justice and heaven. He adopted the Laozian view on heaven, pointing out the differences between heavenly regularity and human orderliness and emphasizing that humans were responsible for their own affairs. He defined humaneness with a strong focus on the sage king’s care for the people. His effort to institutionalize ritual was aimed at creating a state where justice would prevail—that is, resources would be properly distributed, and the government would be run by a worthy elite (chapter 6).

The last thinker Jiang investigates is Han Fei, who synthesized significant fajia ideas (chapter 7): not only did Han Fei reject the Confucian tradition of humaneness, he also brought the Mohist cause of universal justice to its “statist and impartialist finish” (p. 400). Despite the severity of fajia-style governance, Han Fei was able to envisage a powerful state that was equipped to implement its law and standard as well as take into consideration the welfare of the people.

The book concludes with a discussion on Zhuangzi from a comparative perspective. It illustrates how Zhuangzian-style personal freedom is not unlike Isaiah Berlin’s concept of “negative freedom,” as it rejects the normativity of (Confucian) morality and asks for a personal space where one can cast aside the constraints of social-political relationships. Jiang also draws attention to Zhuangzi’s focus on self-cultivation, which in his view may add a spiritual dimension of—or even spiritual foundation for—Berlin’s negative freedom. However, he thinks that unlike Berlin, who treated negative personal freedom as a political project, the Zhuangzians’ limited engagement with political-moral discourse led to Zhuangzi’s marginalization in China. Finally, Jiang invites readers to ponder the integration of Zhuangzi’s personal freedom in a fajia state, a road never taken in history but a possibility that can be germane to the contemporary world.

Jiang has authored an impressive book. With imagination of interconnectedness between ideas and attention to the evolution of historical contexts, he explains convincingly how, in response to changes during the Warring States era, major pre-Qin thinkers advocated humaneness, justice, or personal freedom as they borrowed from, reflected on, and contended with each other. He reveals both the coherence and diversity of voices expressed during the formation of early Chinese moral-political philosophy. To be sure, despite his
examination of a few excavated texts, Jiang primarily deals with well-studied figures (or texts), such as Confucius, Mozi, Mencius (Mengzi), Laozi, Shang Yang, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Han Fei. What is fascinating, however, is that these ancient philosophers and existing scholarly studies of them shine anew as they are reinterpreted or repositioned in an analysis framed around humanness, justice, and personal freedom.

I do not always agree with Jiang. For instance, I admire, but am not totally satisfied with, Jiang's discussion on the moral aspect of the Han Feizi. He notes Han Fei's condemnation of how commoners suffered great injustice in a system where laws and regulations were developed to control them. By drawing on works by such scholars as Kenneth Winston and Alejandro Bárcenas, Jiang stresses Han Fei's view that the law should be supportive of the weak and the disadvantaged. In addition, he recognizes how universal justice is not really possible in Han Fei's legalist system, which fails to separate the monarch's self-interests and the monarchical state's interests. While Jiang's use of extant literature is substantive, I surmise that readers can still benefit from a deeper engagement with the Han Feizi.

In addition, I question his interpretation of Menczi's positions on familial and political virtues. According to him, in the Mengzi, familial and political virtues are not necessarily interrelated. Chapter 2 contrasts Menczi's tolerance toward the killing of a tyrannical ruler with his refusal to accept the killing of an abusive father. Jiang especially draws attention to Menczi's imagining of what the sage king Shun would do if his father murdered someone. In Jiang's analysis, the Confucian sage's narrative on Shun demonstrates that "for Mencius a father is always a father, no matter how unworthy or even abusive he is.... For Mencius, filial piety is absolute, whereas the political obligation to one's ruler is conditional such that the killing of a tyrant can be justified in a way the killing of a father can never be" (pp. 178-79). He then states: "The Shun narrative is key to the Mencian absolutist position on filial piety" (p. 179).

I would like to point out, however, that if Mencius tolerated the killing of a tyrannical king, he also delimited carefully the circumstances under which tyrannicide should be tolerated. In the Mengzi, such tyrants as Jie and Zhou were epically evil rulers who wreaked havoc on the world. They mutilated benevolence and righteousness and therefore deserved attacks by great kings, such as King Wen and King Wu, who were agents of heaven whose impeccable moral caliber was not to be matched by any Warring States rulers.[2] In sum, Mencius rendered the killing of an evil ruler virtually impossible in reality. Undoubtedly, Mencius's theoretical acceptance of tyrannicide still poses a contrast to his categorical rejection of patricide. However, the contrast between his attitudes toward tyrannicide and patricide is not as stark as what it is made out to be in the book.

These, nevertheless, are only my quibbles about this book, which offers an exciting and important approach to early China's politics and thought. In addition to stimulating discussion on ancient Chinese thought, the book includes basic introductions to the textual history of early Chinese sources and thoughtful assessments of existing scholarship. Moreover, Jiang always succeeds in providing interesting examples to make his point. It will attract nonacademic but well-informed readers as well as intelligent undergraduates who love Chinese history. It should be read by graduate students who intend to become specialists in Chinese philosophy and pre-imperial China. More important, Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China promises to be a valuable resource for those teaching courses that cover to various degrees pre-imperial Chinese thought, politics, and culture at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Instructors teaching survey courses on China or East Asia can refer to the basic information and interesting anecdotes contained in the book to introduce essential ancient
Chinese texts and their main ideas. In graduate seminars, students can be encouraged to think about how the book provides new perspectives on early Chinese thinkers ranging from Confucius to Han Fei.

Notes

[1]. In the Warring States period, students addressed their teachers as zi.


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