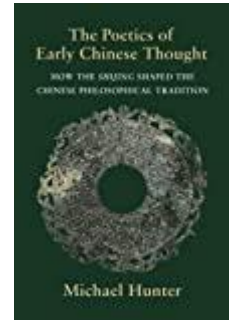


Michael Hunter. *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. 228 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-20123-0.



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Published on H-Asia (August, 2023)

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This book leaves me, by turns, grateful and grumpy. When reading Hunter's own praise for the book as stunningly innovative, I become grumpy; to my mind, the equation between themes of "movement" and "philosophy" shows a naiveté or an ambition that does not augur well. But when I turn to consider Hunter's book as but the latest instance of a time-honored genre, the *rumen* 入門 guides to the Classics, I see that the book serves some purposes, even if it seems oddly outdated in certain respects. Yes, its use of certain terminology is occasionally anachronistic and tone-deaf, as when Hunter imagines the *Shi* subordinating individuals to the collective (p. 13), or when he translates Chinese titles, for example, *Grand Scribe's Records* for the *Shiji* (pace Stephen Durant et al.) and *Exalted Documents* for the *Shangshu*. "Venerable" would have been more accurate. And Hunter's decision not to discuss unprovenanced material (p. 16) doesn't explain the omission of any reference to the excavated Fuyang finds (from a tomb closed ca. 155 BC), nor his failure to reference Jeffrey Riegel's writings on

pleasure in the *Odes*, since those cited Mawangdui as well as the "found" Shanghai Museum *Kongzi shi lun* (Kongzi on the *Odes*), not to mention Victor Mair on the "Seven Stimuli" (pp. 103-104) or Paul Rouzer on gender-bending talk in the *Chuci* (chapter 4). Forgive me, but I am deeply immersed in *Xunzi* and the *Documents* classic of late, and they hold not paying one's debts to the living and the dead to be immoral, if not illegal. (Earlier, Hunter ignored John Makeham's work on the *Analects*, so it seems to be habitual.)

But first on the central claims of the book. By Hunter's chief assertion, he will demonstrate that movement in the *Odes*, often back and forth between home and a distant site, constitutes a philosophy or an ideology. Hunter's secondary assertion is that he will "rescue" the *Odes* from oblivion, for "the *Shi* has not been taken seriously ... [due to] its exclusion from Chinese philosophy" (p. 10). A tautology, that—unless rephrased with greater precision: "its exclusion" from once standard textbooks (e.g., Benjamin Schwartz's tome, published in 1985). But if "aesthetics" is deemed

part of philosophy, then Hunter's claim is simply false; histories of aesthetics in China typically begin with the *Odes* and properly so. Monographs exploring the will of Heaven routinely mention the *Odes*, as has been true since Mori Mikisaburō's 森三樹三郎 masterful *Jōkyo yori Kandai ni itaru seimeikan no tenkai: jinseiron to unmeikan no rekishi* 上古より漢代に至る性命観の展開: 人生論と運命観の歴史 (1971), to which Franklin Perkins, a philosopher, has turned of late. That said, "Heaven's cruelty" does not "confirm the strength of the Zhou social fabric," a non sequitur given the previous analysis (p. 66). Of course, there is an underlying issue here: the persistence of the old "schools" approach to Chinese philosophy, given the sheer convenience of adopting those labels, though many scholars are endeavoring to move beyond the labels, including, I would have thought, Hunter himself.

Hunter's third major assertion concerns methodology: he aims to treat the *Shijing* like a digital object (p. 31). I am unsure where that "method" gets us. Nowadays we all use databases all the time to make down-and-dirty comparisons of pre-Han and Han texts, but does this qualify as a *method*? Not in my book, even if it happens to prompt a new question or two. Roaming texts in this way is definitely not what Yang Xiong, Lu Ji, and others had in mind; they thought of deep immersions, not quick plunges (p. 31). Hunter's curious fourth: that the *Laozi* does not simply evince little interest in the *Odes* but was compiled expressly to oppose it (p. 115). One wonders how or where one could get definitive evidence for this startling hypothesis at this remove, given the paucity of the extant sources, detailed by Jean-Pierre Drège's *Les Bibliothèques en Chine au temps des manuscrits (jusqu'au X^e siècle)* (1991).

So what, for Hunter, constitutes a neglected "philosophy" or an "ideology," since he seems to use the two words interchangeably? If it is praxis-guiding discourse, then the *Guoyu* is chock-a-block full of admonitions delivered and explicated via

the *Odes*. And as soon as one realizes a fact long noted, that some 80 percent of the *Hanshi wazhuan* reappears in the most famous of Liu Xiang's "philosophical" masterworks, the *Garden of Eloquence* (available in an award-winning translation by Eric Henry), then again Hunter's claim seems either wrong or inflated. (Paul van Els and Sarah Queen have coedited a fine book arguing that such anecdotes are the stuff of early history, and history, certainly for most of the early empires, was the mirror and substance of "philosophy.") Hunter seems to regard "kinetics" as philosophy (p. 13), but people migrating has been a fact of life since time immemorial. I feel I am missing something important here, but try as I might, I can't locate in the *Odes* a philosophy by any standard definition, and it is even harder to derive an "ideology" (i.e., a system of ideas and ideals, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy; or, more loosely, the ideas and manner of thinking characteristic of a group, social class, or individual). Is recitation of the *Odes* at any point "a manner of thinking," and if so, which class or status must we tie it to? Words matter, and choosing them with care matters more, I suspect, when considering antique eras. That the *Odes* classic is important for a host of reasons cannot be debated; that it constitutes, either in whole or in parts, a philosophy—evidence of that is not to be found in Hunter's book. The "Airs," by Hunter's own account, evince "a fascination with life at the margins" (p. 38). A fascination, even an obsession (p. 189), but not a systematic account. Hunter ably describes the Zhou king's magnetism, but attractions are only made systematic by an exemplary person through an arduous multistep process (p. 50). Nor are imperatives a sustained form of argument (p. 54). Psychological depth may be a precondition for good philosophy, but it hardly suffices as a definition for it (p. 61). And so on and so on. Latish in the book Hunter lodges a revised claim: that the *Odes* are "artifacts of a more or less coherent ideology" (p. 82), but how does this catchphrase vary

from the truism that all literary productions are artifacts of culture?

I confess to dimness, for I have no idea what is "true reality" as opposed to "concrete reality" (p. 43nn10-12). In any case, I find Hunter's prose at points inaccessible, whether it has the *Odes* naturalizing, categorizing, or assimilating (p. 44). And I am simply lost on page 74, when a poem about King Wen leads to talk about "wisdom as a breach ... as a lament." Then, too, is Assmann an adequate guide to the specificities of the early empires in China (or even just the members of their governing elites), when the Egyptologist describes a state where "order is to be discovered" (p. 77)? Do not the *Odes* and *Documents* insist that an order has already been discovered, and the human task is just to keep on recreating it, age after age, on a dynastic, familial, and personal basis? And why would Hunter demand a consistency that ignores everything we know about rhetoric (pp. 97-98), when he states that a good ruler can't simultaneously be a parent to his people?

Students of history will note surprising errors of fact. For instance, I cannot imagine what evidence Hunter has for his statement that there was an "official, state-sponsored curriculum from the Han dynasty onward" (p. 10). Emperor Wen did not abolish mutilating punishments (p. 95). Nor do I know of any evidence that the Kongzi of legend was "woven out of the *Shi* tradition" (p. 14), rather than from multiple, competing traditions, several of which had little or nothing to do with the *Odes*. And should we not write *Shi* traditions, plural, instead of positing a single monolithic tradition? The Han court spoke of six main streams (*Hanshu* 30.1708), after all. Finally, why conceal from the reader the two startlingly different translations of essentially the same text on pages 5-6, depending on graphic variant (永=詠)?

Hunter is best when he emphasizes the *Odes* as a "fluid repertoire," echoing Steven van Zoeren (p. 12), who is not given credit, sadly. He is at his worst when he pits the "anxious I" (almost cer-

tainly, the royal "We" in many lines) against the "happy we" (p. 13) or when he finds comparing the number of lost *shi* 詩 to the number of lost *shu* 書 "illuminating" (p. 29), despite the facts that (a) tabulating statistics for early manuscript culture is nearly meaningless, *pace* Edward Slingerland and company, since we have but a small proportion of what once circulated; and (b) the terms *shi* and *shu* both have referred to many compositions and compilations not included in the Five Classics corpus, as Sarah Allan, among others, has shown. There are peculiar translations (when "guide and fly him" is the translation on p. 73 for 以引以翼), and translations that ignore punctuation, so that "propriety" rather than "water" flows, as on page 103. (What would it mean to "fly a person"?) But, generally speaking, the translations are *fine*, and this is no small feat, even if I'm puzzled about what meaning English-only readers are expected to wrest from untranslated reduplicatives (as on p. 93).

Where the book succeeds, it does so because it stimulates our imaginations. It directs us to the primeval longing for community. It provides much of the right context for rethinking the *Odes*, even when encumbered by sloppy constructions.[1] It is time, indeed past time, that the *Odes* reentered academic conversations and I, for one, am glad to have read Hunter's book, so that I can cite it, along with several worthy companions, for serious people primed to reflect upon the sway of the *Odes'* traditions and rivals.

Note

[1]. For example, Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson, *Lives of Confucius: Civilization's Greatest Sage Through the Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 2010) never claim that Kongzi was "civilization's greatest sage"; the marketing division slapped that ridiculous slogan onto a book that steadfastly and consciously undermines the claim, *contra* p. 138n85. Methinks Hunter leaps too readily to such slogans.

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Citation: Michael Nylan. Review of Hunter, Michael, *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2023.

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