

constructed adult identity” (p. 299), and that he “felt incomplete without a strong bond to his father, for this father was a necessary prop to Yan Yuan’s creation of himself as a filial son” (p. 303).

Filial love makes for dramatic stories, as this book shows numerous times. *Orthodox Passions* demonstrates convincingly that, compared to what one might at first come across, filial piety played a far greater role in the lives of people existing at the same time that novels such as *Jin Ping Mei* 金瓶梅, *Guwangyan* 姑妄言, and *Honglou meng* were written. *Orthodox Passions* will compel closer attention to the aspects of filial love in these and other texts, whether distinctly portrayed or not. I can also envision a spin-off topic, namely, filial piety elsewhere than China, especially given the myth we often heard years ago (and sometimes still hear) that, compared to China, Western culture has a miserable way of treating elders. A phenomenon like “filial piety” that receives a unique name and focus in one culture may not easily carry over elsewhere, or if it does, no longer with the same boundaries of meaning and structure of application. But something like filial piety exists everywhere, if not necessarily in the same ways, and awaits our consideration, especially now that so much more has been said about it in this book.

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The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition. By Michael Hunter. New York: Columbia University Press, 2021. Pp. 228. \$145.00 hardcover, \$35.00 paperback.

In *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition*, Michael Hunter seeks to show that the *Shi* 詩, whether writ large as *The Shi*, i.e., the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Classic of Poetry*), or writ small as simply *shi* (poetry) “was the most foundational corpus of early Chinese thought,” “a sine qua non of elite education in the Warring States period (fifth century BCE–221 BCE), that so-called Golden Age of Chinese thought” (p. 1). Despite this importance of the *Shi*, Hunter argues that it has been left out of surveys of Chinese intellectual history for various reasons (its “pigeonholing” as literature rather than philosophy being just one of the more obvious), and that most readers today do not approach it as a part of Chinese thought (p. 5). This book is his attempt to redress this perceived lack.

The book includes five chapters sandwiched between an Introduction and a Conclusion: “Reading the *Shi*,” “A Poetry of Return,” “*Shi* Poetics Beyond the *Shi*,” “The *Shi* and the *Verses of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭),” and “Comparing Canons: The *Shi* Versus the Masters,” the titles of which provide good indications of their contents. Since Chapter One proposes a serious challenge to reading the *Shi* at all, one which if valid would seem to render the other chapters superfluous, it is doubtless the place with which to begin a review of the book. In the Introduction, he says: “Before we can read the *Shi* for its ideas, we have to figure out whether we can read ‘the *Shi*’ (as opposed to the *Mao Shi* or another instantiation) at all. That problem is the subject of Chapter 1” (p. 10). As I read his discussion of this problem, it seems to me that his answer is “no,” we cannot read “the *Shi*” at all. He concludes his discussion of close reading of the text by quoting Martin Kern: “There are no original *Odes* available to us; all we have are the *Mao Odes*—that is, a text constructed through a particular interpretation” (p. 28).¹ In support of this, Hunter proposes a thought experiment: travelling back in time and asking “ten different literate individuals from across the Warring States to write out the same *Shi* poem” (p. 19). Presumably influenced by the earlier work of Kern,² he states “The tremendous variability of *Shi* material in excavated manuscripts teaches us to anticipate ten different transcriptions of the *Shi* in question, if not ten different poems” (p. 19). The problem of what he means by “excavated manuscripts” is a topic to which I will return at the end of this review, but if every “literate individuals from across the Warring States” was free to write “the *Shi*” as he wished, then presumably there is no such thing as “the *Shi*.” Hunter anticipates this problem and says that at least part of it “has to do with the nature of the Chinese writing system,” suggesting that “a given word could be written in any number of ways depending on the writer’s training, locale, and personal preferences” (p. 19). If everyone were indeed writing in a quasi-personal cipher, then writing would not have been a very efficient means of communication. And yet we know that people wrote quite a lot, and much of what was written was not written just for the writer’s own amusement, but doubtless was written with the expectation that others would read it. After all, even today, twenty-five hundred years later, we can read and understand most of what was written then, and it would stand to

¹ The quotation is from Martin Kern, “Excavated Manuscripts and Their Socratic Pleasures: Newly Discovered Challenges in Reading the ‘Airs of the States’,” *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 61.3 (2007): 792.

² See, especially, Martin Kern, “Methodological Reflections on the Analysis of Textual Variants and the Modes of Manuscript Production in Early China,” *Journal of East Asian Archaeology* 4.1–4 (2002): 143–81.

reason that contemporaries probably understood even more of it. Hunter suggests another caveat: “If we were to ask our ten elites to recite the *Shi* in question, their recitations would most likely sound more similar than their transcriptions would look” (p. 19). I am old enough to have learned Chinese before the time of universal Mandarin education and national radio and television, and I remember well hearing elites from different parts of China pronounce the language very differently. I can only imagine that the pronunciations of people from the Warring-States Qi 齊 and Chu 楚 were even more different. Of course, this is but a thought experiment, for which an actual scientific experiment will always be impossible.

Hunter suggests that not all is so impossible. He proposes instead a new way of reading the *Shi*: “reading from the midrange” (p. 28). Rather than reading the *Shi* as 305 distinct poems, he proposes to “let the boundaries of individual poems fade into the background to focus on themes, images, and topics across the anthology” (p. 28), as a consequence of which, he suggests, the study of the *Shi* would shift “from hermeneutics to poetics” (p. 28), for the latter of which he quotes Jonathan D. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*: “Poetics does not require that we know the meaning of a work; its task is to account for whatever effects we can attest to.”³ I am not sure just what this reading from the midrange entails, but if it “does not require that we know the meaning of a work,” it would seem not to be a very sound basis for recovering “the most foundational corpus of early Chinese thought.” I understand even less Hunter’s solution to the problem, which is “to approach the *Shijing* primarily as a digital object” (p. 31). He says this allows him to “shape the *Shijing* around the questions I’m most interested in” (p. 31). With this, we seem now to have eleven different literate individuals creating—and recreating—the text for themselves. There is nothing wrong with this. In this post-postmodern (or maybe post-post-postmodern) age of literary criticism, we have been taught that each reader and each reading creates the text anew. But we have also learned that evidence still has a place to play in those readings.

Chapter Two, “A Poetry of Return,” proposes that the theme of “return” (usually *gui* 歸, but also *huan* 還, *fu* 復, *fan* 返, etc.) is the key to understanding the *Shi*.

The upshot of this poetics of homecoming is a vision of society united at every level by the innate and universal impulse to *gui*. Lovers *gui* to each other, brides and grooms *gui* to their new homes together, children *gui* to their parents, subjects *gui* to virtuous rulers, the dead *gui* to their living descendants, and Di and Heaven *gui* to virtuous kings to create a home at the center of the world. (p. 52)

³ Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 61–62. The quotation is found on p. 198, n. 31.

Even the poem “Sheng min” 生民 (Birth to the people), usually read as a myth about the invention of agriculture and a justification for the making of harvest offerings, “is the story of an orphan who wants nothing more than to reconnect with a distant father (Di), and who goes so far as to invent agriculture and rites of sacrifice just to please daddy” (p. 45). More or less extensive passages of a great many of the 305 poems are quoted to demonstrate this thesis (I count seventy-six individual quotations in the forty-eight pages of the chapter, the translations all “adapted” from Arthur Waley’s 1937 translation, *The Book of Songs*⁴), leading to the following far-ranging conclusion:

At a bare minimum, my reading would seem to assume a degree of centralized planning on the part of early *Shi* recorders or compilers. Given the pro-Zhou orientation of the *Shijing* and its references to the fall of the Western Zhou capital, the most obvious locale for that planning is the court of the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE), which might have invested in *Shi* as a way of maximizing its ritual and cultural authority in response to the loss of its political and military dominance. In such a scenario, the emphasis on *gui* might have been intended to persuade Spring and Autumn-era elites to return to the Zhou fold. Given that so many of the aristocratic lineages of the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE) were descended from the Zhou royal house, representations of filial affection might have reminded aristocrats of their obligations to the Zhou ancestral cult. At some point, the success of a proto-*Shijing* tradition and the continued decline of the Zhou kings might have resulted in the tradition’s unmooring from the Eastern Zhou court. At this second stage, the anthology might have transformed into the more fluid and loosely bounded repertoire observed in Warring States sources. Older material might have been adapted to new purposes, and newer poems organized on older templates might have entered the repertoire. With the centralization of the Qin and Han empires, that repertoire become [*sic*] an anthology once more. But this is mere speculation. (p. 81)

It is not clear to me whether the admission of “mere speculation” pertains only to the final sentence or to all of the “might have’s” of the entire paragraph.

Chapter Three, “*Shi* Poetics Beyond the *Shi*,” is the longest chapter of the book and seems to have been intended to be the main argument. Hunter begins the chapter by stating that “The *Shi* inculcated certain habits of thought and expression

⁴ Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1937).

that reverberated throughout the early literature” (p. 83) and proceeds to test this through eight test cases: “Early Poetry,” which is to say poetic expressions similar to, but not found, in the *Shi*; “The Way Home (*Dao* 道),” which relates the notion of *dao* 道 not just to a “way,” but to a “way home,” and, thus, to Hunter’s argument for the centrality of *gui* (return) in the *Shi* anthology; “Father and Mother to the People,” which is a line in the poem “Jiong zhuo” 洞酌 (At the wayside pool) and which would also become a standard refrain of Warring States political philosophy; “Water (*Shui* 水),” which appears frequently in *Shi* poems and which “Sarah Allan has called ‘the most powerful metaphor in early Chinese philosophical thinking’” (p. 101);⁵ “The *Shi* and Kongzi,” which, as the title suggests, explores the relationship between Confucius and the *Shi*; “The *Laozi* as the Anti-*Shi*,” which, as this title also suggests, explores “*Laozi*’s counterdependency on the *Shi*” (p. 121); “*You* 憂 (Anxiety) and the Potent Personality,” which seems also to derive from a counter-dependency, or at least a seemingly antithetical but causal relationship between “anxiety” and “sagacity” (*sheng* 聖); and finally “Sima Qian’s Textual Homecoming,” which seems intended primarily to extend the discussion to the Western Han dynasty, which is the topic of Chapter Five. I doubt that anyone who has read at all widely in the early literature would deny the influence of the *Shi* on it, but these test cases hardly seem to be the best way to demonstrate it. True, water appears frequently in *Shi* poems, but so do birds and beasts, grasses and trees (*niao shou cao mu* 鳥獸草木), the names of which Confucius singled out as worthy of learning (*Analects* 17/9). And while “anxiety” certainly features in a number of poems, I think it would be hard to see it as characterizing the anthology as a whole.

Chapter Four, “The *Shi* and the *Verses of Chu* (*Chuci* 楚辭),” highlights Hunter’s contrarian streak. As opposed to the prevailing view, that “the differences between the *Shi* and *Verses of Chu* are fundamental and regional in nature, their similarities superficial” (p. 140), Hunter argues that ancient readers of the *Chuci* saw it inspired in various ways by the *Shi*. For Hunter, the important thing about the flight of Qu Yuan 屈原 in the “*Li sao*” 離騷 (Parting’s sorrow) is that in the end he decides to return home. This leads Hunter to return his discussion to the *Shi*, and especially to poems that describe campaigns or journeys, and to suggest that the journey of the hero in “*Li sao*” “isn’t a literal campaign but a movement through different roles associated with the *Shi*” (p. 156). But in the end, the differences seem still to be fundamental. The chapter concludes with several questions and an answer:

⁵ The quotation is from Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and the Sprouts of Virtue* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1997), p. 95.

Can a noble man alienated from his ruler and society find solace in the conventional roles of the *Shi*? Can he be a driver? A soldier? An abandoned wife? A suitor? A king? Again and again, the answer is no. Having exhausted the menu of *Shi*-based social options, the hero does in the end what no one in the *Shi* ever could: he says goodbye. (p. 167)

Chapter Five, “Comparing Canons: The *Shi* Versus the Masters,” is concerned primarily with “The Masters,” that is the *zhuzi baijia* 諸子百家, though Hunter suggests it would be more appropriate to refer to them as “The Mistfers.” This chapter reprises Hunter’s previous book on the *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects of Confucius*),⁶ but on a wider scale. Whereas in that book, he argued primarily that the *Analects* is a product of the Western Han, here he seems to suggest that virtually all of the literature usually dated to the Warring States period should be seen instead as representative of the Han.

If the chronologies of Masters texts are doubtful and if the very concept of “The Masters” dates to the Han period, then using Masters texts to reconstruct the intellectual exchanges of the Warring States period is bound to be problematic.

. . . [D]id the texts of the Masters as we know them drive the debates of the period? As a rule, no. Extant Masters texts (minus the *Laozi*) didn’t control talk about the Masters until the late Western Han at the earliest. Our Masters texts were peripheral to the conversation, if they were involved at all. (p. 183)

Hunter’s purpose here seems to deny the Masters texts (curiously enough, “minus the *Laozi*”) any real role in the history of early Chinese thought. If the Masters texts are to be displaced, then something will have to rush in to fill the vacuum. What could be better than the *Shi*. I applaud his interest in the *Shi*, but it seems to me that Warring States intellectual history is a big enough topic that it can accommodate both the Masters and the *Shi* (and doubtless many other topics as well).

Not only is Warring States intellectual history a big topic; it keeps getting bigger. This brings me to the last point I would like to discuss in this review. Hunter concludes his Introduction by noting that he has “refrained from discussing looted manuscripts in this book” (p. 16). He admits that:

The choice not to discuss looted materials is especially painful for a scholar of the *Shi* given the wealth of *Shi* material in the Shanghai Museum

⁶ Michael Hunter, *Confucius Beyond the Analects* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

corpus (including the so-called *Kongzi on the Shi* [*Kongzi shilun* 孔子詩論] manuscript), the Qinghua University corpus (including a complete version of “Crickets” [Xi shuai 蟋蟀, #114]), and the Anhui University corpus, all of which offer insights into the use and circulation of *Shi* in the Warring States context. (p. 16; brackets in original)

Rejecting his practice in his previous book, in which he made use of looted materials, he says “this book calls for a different approach because I aim to reintroduce the *Shi* to students of early Chinese thought and, in the process, to prompt a conversation about how the subject should be framed” (p. 16). I am not sure I understand how students of early Chinese thought are well served by disregarding early manuscripts that pertain directly to their topic of research.

I appreciate that the Shanghai Museum, Tsinghua (Qinghua) University, and Anhui University manuscripts were looted from tombs and entered into these cultural and scholarly institutions through the vagaries of the antiquities market, and I certainly appreciate why this should give scholars pause to consider them as part of the evidentiary record for ancient China. Chinese scholars are every bit as concerned about the incidence of tomb-robbing in China as the handful of Western scholars who are clamouring for scholars everywhere—but especially in the West—not to make any use of looted materials in their publications. This is not the place to engage in a debate about scholarly ethics, but it is perhaps pertinent to note that the United Nations “Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property” of 1970 is entirely concerned with the removal of antiquities from the country of origin.⁷ Since the manuscripts concerning the *Shi* that Hunter mentions originated in China, it is the responsibility of relevant Chinese cultural institutions to make every effort to ensure that they do not leave the country, and if they do to procure their return. Within the country of origin, cultural and scholarly organizations have the right—and the responsibility—to preserve and make these manuscripts available to the broader public, which the institutions in question have done in a timely manner and to the highest standards of scholarship. Lothar von Falkenhausen addressed this issue in a recent review in this journal of the book *Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript Xinian and Early Chinese Historiography* by Yuri Pines, which is a study of the Tsinghua University manuscript, **Xinian* 繫年 *Annals:

⁷ For the convention, see UNESCO: <https://en.unesco.org/fighttrafficking/1970>, accessed 4 September 2021.

Whether or not one agrees with this particular line of defence, a plea for attenuating circumstances may indeed be made in the case of the *Xinian* on the grounds that it (a) remains in its country of origin, (b) is in the possession of a public institution, and (c) has been published in exemplary fashion. Things would be different if, as in the Mesopotamian and Maya cases, the target market were private collectors in the ex-imperialist countries of the West.

Pertinently, the Chinese academic community has no qualms whatsoever about dealing with unprovenanced texts, and it might well perceive an attempt by Western Sinologists to legislate “best practices” in Chinese manuscript studies as imbued with a whiff of imperialist arrogance. Pragmatically, in any case, a Western early China specialist who ignores these texts and the important scholarship done about them by Chinese specialists would consign his/her own work to irrelevance.⁸

Falkenhausen’s last point about a Western early China scholar who ignores these manuscripts consigning his/her own work to irrelevance may be harsh, but it is accurate in this case. I am sorry to say, but any work that purports to “reintroduce the *Shi* to students of early Chinese thought,” especially with respect to the thought of the Warring States period, and which does not take into account the Anhui University manuscript of the *Shi* will soon be irrelevant, if it is not so already. It is simply not acceptable to disregard evidence that bears importantly on the question. If one chooses not to deal with these manuscripts, which is certainly one’s own prerogative, it would be best to avoid the topic entirely by choosing a different topic of research.

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⁸ Lothar von Falkenhausen, Review of *Zhou History Unearthed: The Bamboo Manuscript Xinian and Early Chinese Historiography*, by Yuri Pines, *Journal of Chinese Studies* 73 (July 2021): 267.