

The Lost Texts of Confucius' Grandson: Guodian, Zisi, and Beyond. By Kuan-yun Huang. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2023. \$55.00 hardcover.

This is a rich, but I suggest flawed account of the Guodian 郭店 (ca. 300 B.C.E.) manuscripts—flawed because the two central premises of the book are dubious to my mind: first, that the majority, if not all of the Guodian cache represents the “lost teachings” of Zisi 子思 (a.k.a. Kong Ji 孔伋, grandson of Confucius) “in one way or another” (pp. 8, 45), in “at least two chronological strata” (p. 89 and chap. 7); and second, that Zisi initially was a fierce critic of the powers-that-be, but sometime during the third century B.C.E., he was transformed into a slavish “suppliant” (p. 80) of the same powers. Huang concedes, more than once, that not all of his readers will accept his initial premises (e.g., p. 79). My problem is that Huang never once seriously plays the role of devil’s advocate with himself, at least not in print. The stakes of assigning these texts to Kongzi’s own patriline for chiefly political reasons are not inconsequential. Such an assignment risks upsetting all that we have so painstakingly learned over the last few decades, and by “we” I mean a great number of scholars, both Euro-American and East Asian, who would like to walk away from the late Qing and early Republican constructions (influenced heavily by the Jesuits, the Protestant missionaries, and Kang Youwei 康有為) that sought to designate a “Confucian” wing separate from Daoists, Legalists, Mohists, Logicians, and other partisan “schools,” to counter Western civilizational models that were sectarian. Now that China is an acknowledged superpower, do we really need “Confucian” learning to provide the modern nation-state of China with a “moral rearmament” sufficient to defend China from further depredations? Surely, it is a major irony of history that beleaguered Chinese Communist Party leaders at one point decided to champion Confucius as the national hero, considering his reputation under Mao as the “running dog” of the exploiting princes. Since that tactical move, readers of Chinese have been deluged, for corrupt as well as for good reasons, by modern intellectuals’ rhetoric positing a unitary “mainstream tradition.”¹ The historian in me rejects the old “schools” talk (especially pronounced in Huang’s Chapter 4). That said, assigning multiple texts to Zisi accords with longstanding “tradition,” insofar as four chapters of the late Western Han *Liji* 禮記 compilation (*juan* 30–33, including the *Zhongyong* 中庸) were assigned to Zisi

¹ When I say this, I do not denigrate Chinese readers. Here I follow Sheldon Pollock, who has shown, with respect to the Sanskrit classics, that the modern reception of the distant past is usually a largely new spin-off from “tradition” designed to adapt the message of those classics to modern preoccupation, *as it should be*.

in the early Tang bibliographic treatise preserved in the *Suishu* 隋書.² But what, pray tell, does that assignment tell us, precisely? That question gets ahead of the narrative, but no more than Huang's study, which early on promises to present major parallels between the Zisi materials and Gnosticism (p. 7) but does not return to that subject until pp. 148–49.

It may be helpful to provide a chapter synopsis of the book first: Chapter 1 notes that Xunzi 荀子 devotes several passages of criticism to Zisi (pairing him with Mencius, Zisi's pupil, in legend), accusing the two of badly misrepresenting the true teachings of Confucius and Zigong 子貢. Supposedly, Zisi taught something called the "Five Conducts" (*wuxing* 五行), the content of which Xunzi does not elucidate, aside from insisting that it gets its categories wrong (p. 44).³ By Huang's account, Zisi and Mencius signal the important rise of interiority, with heaven (external) increasingly less important than what is "directly rooted in me." This turn Huang identifies as "already emerging in the Guodian texts but not completed until Mencius" (p. 16) and this is one of the main storylines that Huang intends to pursue (but with pp. 20, 86–88, etc. undercutting the strong inner/outer dichotomy).

Through a few anecdotes recounting Zisi's interactions with Lord Mu of Lu (Lu Mugong 魯穆公, tradit. r. 407–377 B.C.E.), Chapter 2 portrays Zisi as a stalwart remonstrant, ready to sacrifice his own salary and rank for the sake of the community he represents (p. 49); Huang characterizes Zisi as making "the most extreme statements calling political authority into question" in "unflinching" ways (pp. 63, 77, 80). This is hardly the case. Quite a few thinkers from the early empires called for the abdication of the current throne-holder, as Gary Arbuckle and Sarah Allan have shown.⁴ Huang then hypothesizes that there was a *post-facto* "purposeful distortion of the stories about Zisi" (p. 74), by which he becomes a mere groveling conformist before the reigning powers (p. 80). Chapter 3 proposes to adopt the "scientific method" to arrive at a "controlled experiment" through "the rule of one," defined as changing only one variable and seeing what effect results from that change.⁵ He then examines three texts

² Wei Zheng 魏徵, comp., *Suishu* 隋書, *juan*. 13, *zhi* 志 8 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), p. 288.

³ Interestingly enough, *Suishu* bibliographic treatise (*juan*. 34, *zhi* 29) downplays the differences between Zisi, Mencius, and Xunzi. See p. 999.

⁴ Arbuckle's "Restoring Dong Zhongshu : An Experiment in Historical and Philosophical Reconstruction" (Ph.D. diss., University of British Columbia, 1991); also, Sarah Allan, *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdications and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo Slip Manuscripts* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

⁵ Wei, comp., *Suishu*, 3 vols.

(plainly related): the “Black Robes” essays from Guodian, the unprovenanced Shanghai version, and the *Liji* chapter by the same name. (Curiously, Huang does not consider the version from Wuwei 武威 city, Gansu 甘肅 province; I say “curiously,” as all these versions are presumed to relate substantially to the *Liji* chapter by the same name.) Again, Huang locates a historical narrative to explain the differences he finds: that the *Liji* version focuses on a “radically different concern” (how to serve one’s ruler), further confirming for Huang the recasting of Zisi’s image around the third century B.C.E. Unfortunately, Huang sees but two alternatives: an action performed on the mind, coming from outside, or the conception that “there is inherent goodness in the mind” (p. 101). To my thinking, a much wider range of possibilities is put forward in the theories of the Ancients. All that talk of broad consultation with others (pp. 95–107) would suggest so, and Huang’s discussion there badly misses the point, equating the masses “easy to know” with their mistreatment (with modern bad politics the palimpsest for his analysis).

With Chapters 4–7, we move ever further from the Zisi of tradition into Guodian, although Huang puts the real break in his book at Chapter 5. Chapter 4 imagines the major dialogues between the *Analects* and the *Laozi*, presumably because (a) Huang thinks (contra Xunzi) that the genealogical connection between Confucius and Kong Ji must predominate; (b) he wants to bring into his Zisi corpus yet another Guodian text—“Taiyi Gives Birth to Water” (*Taiyi sheng shui* 太一生水)— apparently on the grounds that this text has things “more or less” on their own, “without anyone’s intervention” (p. 122).

In Chapter 5, we move to two odes, “The Cuckoo” and “The Swallows” (*Maoshi* 毛詩 152 and 28), that appear in the Guodian “Five Conducts” text, their major tropes being care for all and the advance of worthies by rulers who care for all (pp. 174–76). In Chapter 6, three odes cited in the Guodian “Five Conducts” essay allow Huang further interpretive scope regarding the theme of “the ruler meeting the worthy man” (p. 219). The opening translation of “Great Brightness” (*Maoshi* 236) prompts him to expatiate on the “correspondence between the Zhou rulers and the Way of Heaven” (p. 191), and the importance of not being “of two minds” (pp. 192–97, a line featured in *Maoshi* 300). While Huang evinces little interest in the base text of “Bringing Out the Carriages” (*Maoshi* 168), he draws our attention to three readings of it, those in *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, on resolving family disputes; in *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論, on the good ruler’s finding good men for his employ; and in *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, on slander and sycophancy. Huang finds a single thread in all three odes (“loneliness”), rather than the surcease of despair that accompanies the worthy man’s appearance at court. The contrast and comparison are with “The Grasshoppers” (*Maoshi* 14), where

the good man meeting his match makes for pleasure, by contrast to the agitation (p. 205) the ordinary person feels when encountering a noble man. Again, Huang's chief concern turns out to be to characterize the "shift" between "The Grasshoppers" and "Bringing Out the Carriages" as a "shift in discourse over time" (p. 212), marking always (as with the *Chuci* 楚辭) "the growing authority of the ruler" (p. 213). Huang ends the chapter by finding the same shift in *Shiji* 61, the memorable biography of Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Huang decides to compare the "Five Conducts" with another Guodian text, "Six Virtues" (*Liude* 六德), to have us tarry over what he calls "the rare but not unimaginable occasion" when priorities must be established in the case of dual events calling for mourning (p. 223). (This occasion he regards as evidence for a potential conflict between *ren* 仁 and *yi* 義 on pp. 221, 229. An excursus into paranomastic glosses (leading us to consider the metaphor of "soft wood" for good officers who are open-minded and mild) soon yields to a discussion of "softness" and "hardness" (how much is too much in officials?), as treated in a range of Qin and Han texts. The reason for this seems to be so that Huang can affirm what is found in the *Analects* 論語 and *Mencius* 孟子: that it is best to conceal the faults of one's kin (which suffices for Huang to show these belong to Zisi's teachings). Huang's final conclusion (p. 249) insists on seeing stark contrasts,⁶ where the contrast is perhaps not so strong, and his analyses of the characters *lian* 廉 and *bian* 弁, while useful, take us far afield in a long excursus (pp. 251–69). The problem for me is that Huang's "numerous ancient accounts" lump together pre-Han and Han texts, without considering changes in meaning over time, and Huang does not establish for readers why these two characters are so vital to our readings of the Guodian cache, when Shang oracle bones come into play. Finally, Huang addresses the question of which came first, the "Five Conducts" or the "Six Virtues" essays in Guodian. The question seems misplaced, since, by Huang's own account, the two texts "do not seem to contain any clear indication that one must be earlier than the other" (p. 269). Huang's reasoning that Mencius must be responding in his treatment of human nature to Zisi (pp. 270–71) eludes me, since Xunzi doesn't mention "human nature" in connection with Zisi, only his Five Conducts teachings.⁷

⁶ Others, of course, read *ni* differently, e.g., Scott Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian: A Study and Complete Translation*, vol. 1 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 790.

⁷ Xunzi, chap. 23 (*Xing e* 性惡), par. 3: "凡性者，天之就也，不可學，不可事。" complaints about *xing* are made of four other thinkers: Ta Xiao 它囂，Wei Mou 魏牟，Chen Zhong 陳仲，and Shi Qiu 史鱗 (not Zisi and Mencius).

Chapter 8 moves from Guodian to the “Zhongyong” attributed to Zisi by multiple traditions (e.g., *Shiji*; *Hanshu*).⁸ For Huang, the real advance is from Guodian, which places no special emphasis on *zhong* 忠 and *cheng* 誠, to the “Zhongyong,” with what he takes to be its greater emphasis on interiority. But are *zhong* and *cheng* necessarily only interior, by the Han commentarial constructions?

The “Final Reflections” seem unduly rushed. Huang assumes that Zisi the man was “an especially original thinker” (p. 327), when perhaps he was not all that unusual. We have no way of knowing this. Huang then proceeds quickly to the Qing thinkers, as if exhausted by the end.

Huang clearly explains his research method:

I begin with the transmitted literary record and the accounts contained therein about Zisi. If I have reason to believe that these accounts correspond to the Guodian texts, then I proceed to read the two sets of sources against each other.... In this way I go back and forth between the two groups of sources, and the more connections I find between them, the more I am persuaded that they illuminate one another, with Zisi being the figure behind all of them... While I do not think it was ever doubt that Zisi was connected to the Guodian texts in some capacity, the question remains in what way, and how specifically this relationship can be defined. (p. 79)

But is this the method of a historian or a diagnostic philosopher who is historically informed, or does this method prompt many ahistorical suppositions about historical events—suppositions that are hard to prove when we now have so few of the texts that once existed? Readers will decide that for themselves. When contradictory stories swirl around legendary figures, I do not myself find this cause for wonder, as multiple works by Jens Østergaard Petersen have demonstrated that this pattern is quite usual, because authoritative names are tacked onto set pieces in manuscript culture, to enhance their credibility or persuasiveness within a specific textual community.⁹ Insufficiently addressed by the author are the answers to these questions: What constitutes evidence of influence (never easy to establish, since mere repetition of a few graphs doesn’t prove connections)? How do we assess the *direction* of borrowing,

⁸ Author’s note: In the Preface to *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義·序 (Kong Yingda 孔穎達) ascribes “Black Robes” not to Zisi, but to Gongsun Nizi (緇衣公孫尼子所撰). Kong Yingda in early Tang does not associate “Fang ji” and “Biao ji” with Zisi, judging from the *Zhengyi* edition.

⁹ See, Jens Østergaard Petersen, “On the Sources concerning Sun Wu: What’s in a Name?,” *Asia Major* 5.1 (1992), 1–31.

since in manuscript cultures, with small textual communities, different versions may be produced for different motivations? Should we assume, as Huang does, wide (i.e., empire-wide) circulation in the pre-unification communities when that was not even the case for Qin and Western Han? Huang himself admits that it is not “uncommon that keywords, topics, syntactical units, and even quotations from more ancient sources ... turn up in multiple contexts” (p. 221). Elsewhere, in Chapter 4, Huang tells us that his “strategy is to suspend all judgments” (p. 116), a strategy that is hardly possible. Leaps of logic may distort the message. One example may illustrate the point: Huang takes *shu* 恕 (by his definition, using oneself as the measure to gauge others’ likes and dislikes) as “*self-reflection* as the source of the *single principle* that connects oneself and others” (p. 99; italics mine). A second example comes from Chapter 6, which takes the lines “majestic on high” to refer to the “Way of Heaven” (p. 191) when it more likely describes Kings Wen and Wu on high.

Had Huang read outside the Zisi materials, he would have found much that is similar in the *Yi Zhoushu*, as Grebnev’s recent book, but even more his thesis shows. What I deem an over-focus on the Guodian and Zisi leads to occasional contradictions. For example, Huang (p. 291) cites as evidence the *Documents*’ “Da Yu mo” chapter, having earlier called it a forgery. That Huang’s reasoning can become circular is shown in the discussion on the Guodian “Treasured Admonitions” (*Baoxun* 保訓) chapter from pp. 319–20. Huang’s propensity for abstraction, evident above, sometimes undercuts the plain sense of passages: It is not “success” or “fame” that is due for a fall, but successful people with overblown reputations (p. 123). In Chapter 3, to my mind, Huang badly misconstrues the theme of *duo wen* 多聞 or “wide consultation” by the ruler, and therefore ends up describing one version of the “Black Robes” chapter as more hierarchical and “authoritarian” than the others, a conclusion that is unsupported by the evidence but suits his “historical” narrative. Inevitably, Huang then raises the question of putting aside the body as an ascetic; one is parted from the body one yearns for (p. 175). Unaccountably, the lover has been omitted from Huang’s story, but not in the “Five Conducts” telling.

The foregoing critique makes it seem that I do not appreciate this book. To the contrary, I am very glad to have read it, because it stimulates me to think harder about how to refine my own approaches in the future. Moreover, Huang performs a stupendously generous act, when he provides his own translations for exceedingly difficult-to-parse passages. (I myself would never dare to discuss the “meaning” of the *Liude* essay from Guodian, having spent a whole semester on it in a reading group with very smart people.) That many of Huang’s ruminations are now available for students in the early China field is no small feat. I shall certainly assign parts of this book to graduate students, as Huang reflects openly on his methodology, a rarity in the early China field. So while Huang’s readings seem a bit pietistic to me and less rooted in early empires’ debates than in neo-Confucian preoccupations, his analysis is

thought-provoking. After all, careful reading of classical texts is precisely the work we academics should undertake, while comparing translations (Huang's to Scott Cook's to Li Ling's and so on).¹⁰ Then, too, when reading texts intertextually, it is impossible not to make selections of comparisons that some will criticize. Sitting in Berkeley, I raise a glass to Professor Huang.

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¹⁰ Cook, *The Bamboo Texts of Guodian*, 2 vols.; Li Ling 李零, *Guodian Chujuan jiaodu ji* 郭店楚簡校讀記 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2002).

