

Michael Hunter: *The Poetics of Early Chinese Thought: How the Shijing Shaped the Chinese Philosophical Tradition*

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I.

We tend, observes Michael Hunter, to read the earliest extant Chinese poetry through the commentaries on and quotations of that poetry in, for instance, the Confucian *Analects* (*Lunyu*), or in the books bearing the names of the Warring States thinkers to whom they are ascribed: the *Mencius*, the *Mozi*, and the *Xunzi*. Consequently, we seldom recognize the importance of the *Shi* 詩 (which specifically refers to the 305 odes in the canonical *Shijing*, but also to the many poems or stanzas of a similar format found in pre-Qin texts and manuscripts) for the formation of early Chinese thought. Similarly, and relatedly, we should reconsider the assumption that the Warring States intellectual discourse was generated, or at least propelled forward, by polemic debates between Confucian, Mohist, and Taoist “Masters”, and that the Masters’ texts allow us to “reconstruct” those debates: these texts were in fact “peripheral to the conversation, if they were involved at all”.

Hunter proposes that we instead regard early Chinese thought as a “network centered around the *Shi*” and that certain recurring tropes in the *Shijing* odes were foundational for early Chinese culture and intellectual history. One example is the concept of the king as the “father and mother” of the people, another is “water” as a Chinese root metaphor for the “flows’ of the world”, and a third is Tao, which in the *Odes* refers not so much to the ineffable principle of the Cosmos, or to a correct way of behaviour, as to the concrete “path” that leads an anxiety-ridden subject back to his or her proper home. In the *Odes*, to be ridden by and express anxiety (*you* 憂) is tantamount to being an “individual”, since the anxious subject withdraws from the collective and instead regards the world from a detached distance. And from the figure of the displaced individual who voices his or her anxiety and longing to return “home” is derived the first author figure in the Chinese tradition: he who appears in Sima Qian’s “autobiographical postface” to the *Shiji*, where “the act of authorship ... is a metaphorical movement out of each predicament”. Finally, Hunter also claims (in a wonderfully provocative phrase) that “it makes more sense to introduce Kongzi through the *Shi*” than the other way around, since Confucius is “a figure whose legend was woven out of the *Shi* tradition”.

II.

I have read the five chapters of this lucidly written, boldly argued book with much interest and admiration. The book is of great value for anyone interested in early Chinese intellectual history, canon formation, and how the *Shi* relates to other forms of (supposedly) pre-Qin thought. Methodologically, Hunter’s “reading from the midrange” intelligently, and by internal necessity, challenges the assumption that the poems of the received *Shijing* – perhaps stemming from an earlier “fluid oral repertoire” – were overdetermined by the process of transcribing, editing, and annotating to the point that it is near futile to read them outside the ideological and “allegorical” framework; the thematic



interpretations of the *Odes* in chapters 3 and 4 are thereby doubly important. Hunter's command of the source material is impressive (although Lu Ji 陸機 is once mistaken for Lu Ji 陸璣, and on p. 66 it is the "Preface" to ode 131 that is quoted, not the *Mao Commentary*).

The consternation that I have occasionally felt is largely due to the speculative nature of Hunter's enterprise and the always risky thinking of "great thoughts" – I mean this as high praise – but there are some real bones of contention. The project comes with an inevitable conundrum: was early Chinese thought influenced by "*Shi* poetics", or were these quotidian things and phenomena (water, roads, parenthood, melancholy, statesmanship) rather commonplace topics and metaphor-material for early Chinese thinkers who, in accordance with the conventional assumption, quoted the culturally prestigious *Shi* simply because the motifs of the poems happened to suit the argument they were advancing? With reference to chapter 3, did Duke Ai of Lu weave a Kongzi "legend" "out of the *Shi* tradition" by composing a poem which borrows heavily from the *Shi*, as related in *Zuozhuan*, Ai 16? It is to Hunter's great credit to have shown the intertextual connection between the *Odes* and many of the passages in pre-Qin literature which describe Kongzi, but could those authors not have used the language of the *Odes* precisely because contemporary Kongzi lore had him championing the *Shi* as a supreme medium for communication? Similarly, while Hunter convincingly describes the poetics, or philosophy, of the *Laozi* (a bona fide pre-Qin text) as an inverted version of its *Shi* counterpart, I suggest it would be equally valid to postulate that, for instance, the critique of "moral fortitude" (*de*), "compassion" (*ren*), "righteousness" (*yi*), and "rituality" (*li*) in *Laozi* 38 was a reaction against *Ru* ethics, thus being an example of the kind of polemic dialogue between different "schools" or "Masters" that Hunter puts in question. By the same token, is it not possible that the *Laozi* dismissal of *xue* 學 ("study", "emulate exemplary people") in sections 20 and 48 was a critique of a *Ru* insistence on the absolute necessity of *xue* expressed in oral discourses and texts during the Warring States period and later appearing in, for example, the *Lüshi chunqiu* and the *Lunyu* – in addition to its *hapax* appearance in ode 288? Despite the conspicuous and surprising lack of *textual* evidence that Hunter discusses in chapter five, are the theory of a "*Shi* poetics" and a "Masters narrative" (with the assumption of a pre-Qin culture of fierce philosophical debate) mutually exclusive and not complementary?

Third, the strongly dichotomizing claims about the "dualistic and essentializing explanations" favoured by "Western metaphysics" and the "immanence of Chinese metaphysics" require, in my opinion, more contextualization and exemplification than provided here, as do the rote opposition of Chinese *shi* to Western *poièsis*.

III.

In its finest moments (and there are many of them), Hunter's book inspires the reader to explore the traces of "*Shi* poetics" in later texts. Hunter's important analysis of the connection between "anxiety", individuality, and authorship in chapter 3 could have included another prominent *Shi* theme, namely the concept of language as a medium for miscommunication, lies, and manipulation, as expressed with great force by the melancholic poet in the "catastrophic" ode 192, a theme which arguably influenced the Warring States figures Confucius (*Lunyu* 5.10; 13.3; 17.17–18; 17.13), Mencius, Xunzi and, *mutatis mutandis*, Laozi.

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