Faculty dialogue

"How to Read Ancient Chinese Philosophy: Interpretation and the Problem of Authorship."

The history of pre-Qin Classical Chinese thought is usually woven around a small set of great philosophers, each taken as the authorial voice behind a single text: Kongzi (the Lunyu), Laozi (Daodejing), Mozi, Mengzi, Zhuangzi (the “Inner Chapters” of the Zhuangzi), Xunzi, and Hanfeizi. Does this view of texts and authors fit the reality of how texts were written and formed in early China? Based on archeological evidence from recently excavated texts and greater attention to the role of Han dynasty scholars in editing and forming texts, many scholars of early China have argued that it does not. In this faculty dialogue, Tao Jiang, Esther Sunkyung Klein, and Franklin Perkins will explore the implications of that conclusion for how we should read and interpret classical Chinese philosophical texts.

Tao Jiang is Professor of Chinese and Buddhist Philosophies at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ. He is the author of Origins of Moral-Political Philosophy in Early China (Oxford 2021) and Contexts and Dialogue: Yogācāra Buddhism and Modern Psychology on the Subliminal Mind (Hawaii 2006). Jiang is chair of Religion Department and director of Center for Chinese Studies at Rutgers.

Esther Sunkyung Klein (PhD Princeton, East Asian Studies 2010) is Senior Lecturer at The Australian National University. She researches pre-modern Chinese thought, including both the philosophical and historical traditions. She has published on the authorship of the Zhuangzi, ideas of the historian as author in relation to the Shiji, epistemology in Han dynasty thought.

Franklin Perkins is Professor of Philosophy at UHM and editor of the journal Philosophy East and West. His main research interests are in classical Chinese philosophy, early modern European philosophy, and in the challenges of doing philosophy in a comparative or intercultural context. His most recent book is Doing What You Really Want: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mengzi (Oxford 2021).

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