

# A Review of The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them

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Paul Goldin. *The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them*. Princeton University Press, 2020, pp. 328, 30.00 USD.

*This review examines Paul Goldin's book The Art of Chinese Philosophy: Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them. The book gives interpretations of eight texts from the classical period that respond to the same set of central questions and each other's arguments. In addition, the book presents historical background and describes the complexity of authorship of these texts.*

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Paul Goldin presents an excellent and much-needed new reader in classical Chinese philosophy. As the title of the book suggests, it offers commentaries on eight texts from the classical period and ways of reading them. The selection of texts ranges from seminal Confucian classics that are well-known to most readers to texts less studied by philosophers, such as the *Sunzi*.

The book consists of nine chapters. The introduction and chapter one provide an overview of the “what are we reading?” and “how should we read them?” questions. There are two things worth noting in the introduction of the book: First, Goldin deliberately moves away from classifying groups of philosophers into a handful of intellectual factions (*jia* 家)—a project led by Sima Qian 司马迁. Instead, Goldin focuses on reading the texts *as texts*. I am sympathetic with Goldin's approach since Sima Qian's view has cast an exorbitant influence on later generations. There is a tendency among later scholars to take it as the correct classification, which is not conducive to new ways of seeing the interconnectedness and family resemblances among texts. Moreover, taking Sima Qian's classification as the authority is also not in accord with his self-understanding, which is to “establish one school of sayings (about history)” (成一家之言). Under this background, it might be helpful for readers first to have a direct encounter with the texts instead of reading with historic classifications in mind. I wish Goldin said more, other than what he remarks in the *Han Feizi* chapter, about the methodological implications of reading these texts as texts, particularly implications for those interested in the philosophical ideas and justifications in these texts. For instance, how should we read texts of complex and ambiguous authorship differently from those of Kant or Hume when reading for the philosophical ideas in the text? Does reading texts as texts give more or less room for rational reconstructions?

Second, Goldin rightly points out the importance and potential danger of relying on the historic commentarial tradition to understand these early texts. I am sympathetic to both of Goldin's claims: For one, certain texts (such as the *Laozi*) simply cannot be read without their commentaries. For another, the commentaries are a network of interpretations undergirding discrete worldviews, and they should be read as such. This issue has also manifested in various debates throughout Chinese

intellectual history, with the latest being the upheaval of the “Doubting the Ancients Faction” (*Yigupai* 疑古派) after the May Fourth Movement. However, like the issue of complexity of authorship, I wonder what follows from this; as contemporary people, *how* should we use the traditional commentaries to aid our understanding of these texts?

The first chapter of the book is on the argumentation style of Chinese philosophy. Goldin points out three prevalent non-deductive forms of argument in Chinese philosophy: paradox, analogy, and appeal to exemplars. In addition, he gives a list of examples of Chinese texts engaging in deductive reasoning. The most exciting statement that I find in this chapter is toward the end: Goldin says, “Thus Chinese philosophy demands a high level of interpretive participation [...]. If the strength of deductive argumentation is supposed to be that it yields correct inferences regardless of circumstance [...]. By contrast, an audience presented with a statement like ‘Only after years has grown cold does one know that the pine and cypress are the last to wither’ must ponder it sympathetically—or else derive little, if any, benefit from it” (27). The difference between deductive arguments that yield correct inferences regardless of circumstances and those of Chinese philosophy that invite and demand interactions from the reader is fascinating. For me, this points to the overarching theme of the book: the *art* of Chinese philosophy requires one to actively develop a taste for it. However, I think this thesis is underdeveloped in this book. In the words of traditional Chinese literary theory, the “dragon” (thesis) is not carved out and lacks details. As a reader, I am eager to know more about the implications of the demand for interactive participation from the reader. Does the general argumentative style of Chinese philosophy imply a meta-view about what should be considered as justification or proof of an argument? Is there anything lost in the process of translating non-deductive arguments into deductive arguments? Does viewing Chinese philosophy as art risk mystifying the texts?

Chapters two, three, and four are commentaries on the *Analekts*, the *Mozzi*, and the *Mencius*, respectively. These three chapters are grouped under the heading “Philosophy of Heaven,” presumably because of the central role that Heaven 天 plays in these texts. This is an interesting curation that highlights not only the concept of Heaven but also the various manifestations of the notion of “mandate” 命 across these texts. In the *Mozzi* chapter, Goldin coins the term “intransigent optimism,” which means that the *Mozzi* thinks that the universe never diverges from its just and beneficent pattern because Heaven would not allow it (69). The same kind of “intransigent optimism” also seems to appear in the understanding of history in the *Mencius*. Relating to the argumentative style of Chinese philosophy that demands interactive participation from the reader, I find that contemporary philosophers often overlook the *attitude* conveyed in these texts while focusing excessively on the *views* they have about the world. Is something like “intransigent optimism” worthy of our philosophical attention? I think these attitudes are often essential components of the inner life of the arguments and theories that the ancients have developed over ethics, governance, or the world in general. They represent how the ancient texts *see* the world and the values in it.

Chapters five, six, and seven offer interpretations of the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Sunzi*. As mentioned at the beginning of this review, it is exciting to see texts that receive less philosophical attention, such as *Sunzi*, incorporated into this reader. It is also interesting that Goldin groups the *Sunzi* alongside the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* under the theme “Philosophy of the Way.” Goldin is against the widespread tendency of putting the *Laozi* in the same school as the *Zhuangzi*. I am sympathetic to his view. Linking the *Laozi* with the *Zhuangzi* as Lao-Zhuang philosophy 老莊哲學 often implies a hermeneutics strategy of interpreting the *Zhuangzi* that should not be taken for granted. Goldin’s interpretation of the *Laozi* highlights the political nature of the text, which is consistent with his understanding that the *Laozi* and the *Sunzi*—a book about war—draw upon one another. I think that it is important to highlight, particularly to the contemporary western audience, the political bent of

the *Laozi* through its early receptions. Moreover, the comparison between the Wang Bi recension and the Guodian excavated manuscript seems to affirm Goldin's emphasis on the political nature of the text. However, it does feel like the *Zhuangzi* remains an outlier in this curation.

The theme of chapters eight and nine is "Two Titans at the End of an Age." In this last section, Goldin presents his interpretations of the *Xunzi* and *Han Feizi*. In the *Xunzi* chapter, Goldin opens with a brief history of the reception of the *Xunzi* in Chinese intellectual history. This background information is especially important to western students who have just entered into the study of Chinese philosophy since the contemporary western zeal over the *Xunzi* could sometimes be misleading. However, Goldin seems to overlook that several twentieth-century Chinese thinkers, such as Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 and Li Zehou 李澤厚, have offered alternative theories of the *Xunzi*'s influence on the broad Confucian tradition highlighting its importance to Zhu Xi 朱熹. In particular, Goldin's emphasis on Xunzi's idea of using rituals that are based on immutable cosmic norms as an external force for moral correction seems to resonate well with Li Zehou's Xunzian portrayal of Zhu Xi. Nevertheless, the *Xunzi* chapter serves as an important reminder to the contemporary audience that the *Xunzi* is a far richer and more sophisticated text than the slogan "human nature is bad" entails. A similar effort in the English scholarship could be found in the *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi* edited by Eric Hutton.<sup>1</sup>

The *Han Feizi* chapter is exciting since Goldin offers an example of how background information about the authorship and style of the texts directly translates into a better understanding of the philosophy of the text. As Goldin puts it, "What Han Fei said varied with his expected audience, a point that scholarship has not always accounted for. Most of his chapters are addressed to kings; at least one, 'The Difficulties of Persuasion' ('Shuinan' 說難), is addressed to ministers; and for many chapters we can only guess at the intended audience" (201). This helps explain why Han Feizi seems to champion two drastically different views of what a minister should do. In the chapter, Goldin also presents another internal contradiction in the *Han Feizi* on whether the deeds of the former kings are relevant to the good governance of today. The issue is intimately connected to whether Han Feizi subscribes to an enduring cosmic order that serves as the basis for constructing human societal order. I agree with Goldin that there is considerable ambivalence in understanding the cosmology of Han Feizi. However, there could be some middle ground to the extent of which deeds of the sage kings are relevant to Hanfei. For instance, it could potentially be resolved through prioritarian reasoning: Xunzi, for example, *prioritizes* competent ministers over the institutions of the sage-kings in good governance, although it is a good thing to have the spirit of the sage-kings' institution in place.

The appendix offers an excellent synopsis of the various connotations of the concept of *qi* 氣. I find this appendix incredibly helpful material not only to those who just entered into the study of Chinese philosophy but also to seasoned scholars who never developed an understanding of the concept of *qi* despite its central role in Chinese philosophy. My only reservation is toward the end of the appendix: Goldin draws a rather hasty criticism of theories based on *qi* since "without an account of how and why *qi* sometimes produces bellyaches—but usually does not—its scientific value is nil" (244). I would simply like to point out that texts such as *Inner Canon of the Yellow Thearch* 黄帝内经 do endeavor to provide detailed accounts of how and why *qi* produces various physio-psychological diseases. Here I am not interested in getting into the debate of whether *qi*-based theories, such as traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), are falsifiable or not. I am far from an advocate of treating TCM as science. However, it is not fair to say that the ancients never developed models of how and why a person gets sick with *qi* as an essential constitutive element, just as how electrons are an essential element in Goldin's picture of the contemporary scientific model of the world (see n. 86, 290).

Overall, Goldin writes with a natural flow that each interpretation effortlessly travels from one theme to another. With each text, there is often one or more underlying thesis that Goldin takes upon. However, Goldin is not gearing up the text to tell the story that he has in mind. Instead, he is intentional in showcasing the various themes and internal connectedness across themes in these texts. He successfully shows that the Chinese classics are not “one-issue” texts; there is an incredible depth to most of these texts as they embody systematic thinking of cosmology, ethics, and governance.

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<sup>1</sup> ed. Eric L. Hutton, *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016).