

Why Don't We Know Our Chinese Philosophy?

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American philosophers have all heard of Confucius (Kongzi) and Lao Tzu (Laozi). Some have also heard of their (approximate) contemporaries in classical China: Mencius (Mengzi), Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi), Mo Tzu (Mozi), and Hsün Tzu (Xunzi). So why haven't most of us read any of their works?

Even by the strictest criteria, Mo Tzu and Hsün Tzu are plainly philosophers. Both wrote discursive essays on ethics and political philosophy; both support their views with reasonable (if not always ultimately persuasive) arguments; both offer counter-arguments to opponents' views. Their arguments do not require the acceptance of any narrowly religious dogma, but rather start from considerations that for the most part are intuitive and widely acceptable even in the contemporary United States. Mencius and Chuang Tzu did not write in standard philosophical essay format, but both offer persuasive arguments for positions in ethics, political philosophy, philosophy of mind, and epistemology. Unconventional format should no more prevent us from regarding them as philosophers than it does in the case of

Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. The philosophy of Kongzi and Lao Tzu (setting aside authorship complications) we find only in fragments without significant argumentation, but the same is true of some pre-Socratic philosophers. The works of classical Chinese philosophers are taught more in Religious Studies than in Philosophy departments, but in fact their religious commitments are less invasive and dogmatic than the religious commitments of many European philosophers.

Perhaps the classical Chinese philosophers are not sufficiently important to warrant broader attention in the United States? If 'important' means good, it is not clear that this is so. Although to some extent such judgments are a matter of taste, in my estimation Mencius' and Hsün Tzu's views of moral psychology are as good as anything we have going now, and their debate about whether human nature is good or evil is considerably more sophisticated than the corresponding debate between Hobbes and Rousseau. Chuang Tzu's skeptical and relativist arguments are as lively and challenging as Descartes' first two Meditations, Sextus Empiricus, or Peter Unger, and his positive vision is interestingly distinct from that of any major philosopher in the West.

If we assess importance by historical influence, different potential criteria come into competition. Considered globally, Confucius, Lao Tzu, and to a lesser extent the other major classical Chinese philosophers have been enormously influential, probably more influential in Far East than Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have been in Europe and the Americas. Even in the United States among the general population Confucius and Lao Tzu are better known and more broadly discussed than any but a handful of European philosophers. Still, perhaps the proper measure of historical importance for us in deciding what to teach and read is the influence that a particular philosopher has had on contemporary philosophy in the United States. Here, finally, we may have a justification for our ignorance of classical Chinese philosophy.

But it is then worth inquiring why classical Chinese philosophers are not especially influential here and now. One possibility is historical accident: Because the dominant culture in the United States traces back to Europe, the classical Chinese philosophers were not taught to, and thus not read by, the succeeding generations. Ignorance thus apparently justifies ignorance: Because we do not know their work, they have little impact on our philosophy; because they have little impact on our philosophy, we are justified in remaining ignorant about their work. On the other hand, perhaps these philosophers would not have much influence even if we did read them; but if they are good, it is hard to see why this would be so unless our education had so distorted us that we were unprepared to learn what they had to teach.