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In Case You Missed It: An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy

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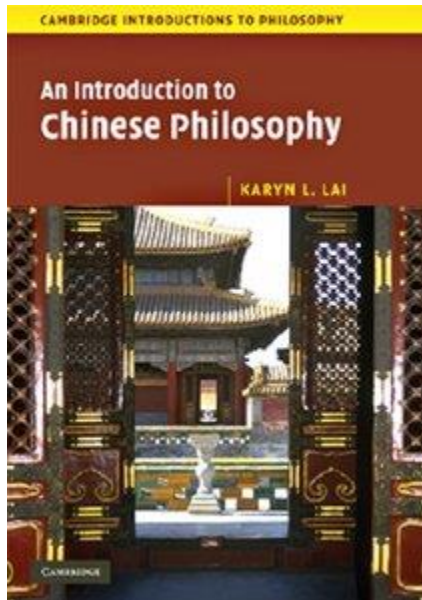
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By Miri Kim

Karyn L. Lai, [An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy](#). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.



In this well written and organized book, Karyn L. Lai lays out the founding personalities, texts, and interventions in the early history of Chinese philosophy. What could easily have been a tortuous path through centuries' worth of extant materials and a plenitude of voices devoted to their understanding is, rather, a brisk and focused guided tour that covers major developments in Chinese philosophy without eschewing its lesser known – but still important – aspects. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* does exactly what it promises to do: provide a clear introduction, neither too truncated nor too bogged down in detail, that is accessible to the lay reader or student just beginning his or her journey. The book is organized thematically, with each chapter devoted to a particular philosophical tradition. For readers amenable to meandering, notes at the end of each chapter provide detailed information and suggestions for further reading on the topics discussed. Finally, after clearly explaining the main concepts of various aspects of Chinese philosophy, and providing useful summaries of the scholarly debates around them, a postscript addresses the ways in which organizing Chinese philosophy in this manner can de-emphasize the degree of differences and diversity found even within such "traditions."

To this reader, what is particularly pleasing in this book is that the author takes time aside to cover less familiar works, like those produced by the Mingjia philosophers and the Later Mohists, which might easily be rendered into blurs by the wayside against the prominence of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in Chinese philosophy. However, as Lai demonstrates, even though their potential was curbed by the hostile attitudes of contemporaries and the indifference of later generations, strands of Chinese thought represented by these groups still have much to contribute to our knowledge of Chinese philosophy. For example, some of the thinkers found under the Mingjia umbrella had a reputation for sophistry, but "seriously considered methods of argumentation and criteria for justification" (112), an area that was undervalued by the major schools. Mohists also debated issues in the physical sciences, the relationship between language and thought, and how to go about evaluating human knowledge, but like the works of the Mingjia philosophers, Mohists' writings, too, felt the political fires of the Qin dynasty more keenly than Confucian and Daoist works, which survive in far greater numbers, possibly skewing our perspective of the philosophical terrain (113). Nevertheless, when they do survive, even the most obscure of philosophical works can go on to have a rich afterlife; one such legacy can be glimpsed in the discussion of Gongsun Long and his "White Horse" thought experiment (118-123), which is as lucid as the puzzle itself is baffling. Indeed, the

paths not taken in Chinese philosophy prove just as fascinating and worthy of investigation as its main thoroughfares.

A look at the foundations of Chinese philosophy, framed from a slightly different angle, is as much a story of the political developments of early Chinese history as it is a story about intellectual trends and developments. The chapter on Legalism presents Legalist philosophy in terms of its significance in the Qin and Han dynasties, but also connects it to broader debates among Confucian thinkers about human nature, and how viewing it as essentially good or essentially bad affected notions of good governance (186-189). Lai refocuses Chinese philosophy in another way when she highlights possible points of comparison between Chinese and Western philosophy. For example, when discussing the significance of the ideas found in the *Zhuangzi* to Chinese philosophy in general, Lai emphasizes the ways in which different schools of thought built upon one another's work, arguing that the progressive gestalt of early Chinese philosophy may be a fruitful site to bring the philosophy of the European Enlightenment to bear (166-168). Throughout the book, Lai emphasizes that the self in Chinese philosophy, broadly conceived, is shaped in relation to its contexts – embedded within social relationships and constantly shaped and re-shaped in the interstices of the human and natural worlds (6-7). At the same time, Lai is careful not to draw too sharp a distinction between Western and Chinese conceptions of the self, since both Chinese and Western notions of self share some of these features, albeit emphasized in different measures.

Lai strongly argues that “a sense of intellectual history” is essential to capturing the plurality and dynamics within Chinese philosophy (15-16). As she illustrates, the political and social developments of the day informed Chinese thought in profound ways. *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* also reminds us that the ancients who composed these texts were not just thinkers and writers, but storytellers as well. One cannot quite imagine Zhuangzi's ideas having so much traction had he not been able to put himself, his friend Hui Shi, and the reader inside the mind of a fish—and, paradoxically, inside the patent impossibility of being inside the mind of a fish—using a delightfully tessering vignette (152).

Each chapter of *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* builds on previous chapters but all are modular to an extent, so instructors of introductory and survey courses on Chinese or East Asian culture may find this feature of the book helpful. As Lai and other scholars maintain, the study of Chinese philosophy is incomplete without the reading alongside of the classical texts – suggesting that conversely, analyses of Chinese philosophy such as these can contribute to advanced language courses that expose students to the classical Chinese language through Confucius' *Analects* and the like. This book is a surefooted addition to our efforts to understand and appreciate Chinese philosophy in its historical, political, and intellectual contexts.

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