Abstract and Keywords

“Masters Literature” constitutes China’s most influential and productive repository of philosophical thought, featuring debates about fundamental questions of social order, the good life, governance, heavenly justice, human character, and the cosmos. The chapter first discusses how people have defined the Masters corpus from antiquity to the present and how divergent definitions affect our understanding of this textual genre. It then surveys the most important intellectual camps and approaches within Masters Literature, namely Confucians, Mohists, Persuaders, Lao-Zhuang and Huang-Lao Daoism, statecraft specialists, encyclopedic compendia, and Han masters and scholar-officials, asking in each case what central intellectual concerns were at stake and what major rhetorical formats and strategies were used to make convincing arguments. Lastly, it touches on how Masters Literature is significant today and what kind of debates it has catalyzed for the present.

Keywords: Masters Literature, philosophy, early Chinese thought, Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, Mohism, Huang-Lao Daoism, rhetoric
CALLED zishu 子書 in the traditional fourfold bibliographical scheme, “Masters Literature” (or “Masters Texts”) constitutes one of China’s most influential and productive text corpora. The bulk of the corpus was written during the Warring States into the Han, the foundational period of Chinese thought and literature. Featuring debates about fundamental questions of social order, the good life, governance, heavenly justice, human character, and the cosmos, some texts were later canonized and became the fountainhead of cultic practice and systematic philosophical reflection, such as Laozi 老子 as scripture in religious Daoism and the Analects (Lunyu 論語) and Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) as parts of the “Four Books” of Neo-Confucianism. Beyond China, the Masters had a broad impact on East Asia, furnishing a repertoire of philosophical concepts, historical anecdotes, and pithy aphorisms appearing in texts as diverse as Japanese court poetry, Japanese medieval warrior tales, or early modern Korean and Vietnamese vernacular novels. Today the Masters belong to a Chinese “hypercanon” of texts that have traveled exceptionally well across temporal and cultural borders. While some of the venerable “Classics” (jing 經, Chapter 12) and foundational texts from the “Collections” (ji 集, Chapter 15) category still await complete translation into contemporary English, the core texts of the Masters, sometimes even with classical commentaries added, have generated a solid number of multiple translations. Laozi is probably China’s most translated text.

Despite the prominence of the corpus, since antiquity it has been fraught with uncertainty. Except for recently excavated materials, the Masters Texts come to us through the efforts of Western Han scholars and bibliographers and later scholars who edited and compiled the vast and fluid textual material that had accumulated in the imperial library. Comparison with the legacy of Greek philosophy lets us appreciate the layers of uncertainty regarding places, people, and texts at stake in Masters Literature. Despite debates about details, we know the location of Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum based on textual evidence and modern excavations (Caruso 2013); this is not true for any of the pre-Qin “schools” that we know existed, such as Confucians (Ru 儒; also called “Ruists” or “Ru traditionalists” in English to show their pre-Confucian roots and distinguish them from later forms of canonized state Confucianism since the Han) and Mohists. Thanks to the Hellenistic “biographies” and “doxographies” (collections containing doctrinal tenets of various thinkers) produced by Alexandrian scholarship, we know many details even about the daily lives of Greek philosophers from Diogenes Laertius’s Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers (3rd cent. CE). Chatty and unreliable as Diogenes might be, Sima Qian’s few and short chapters mentioning pre-Qin master figures pale in comparison to Diogenes’s lengthy and vivid portrayals of his protagonists, testifying to the rich Hellenistic biographical and doxographical scholarship partially preserved. Also, whereas we have lists of successive “scholarchs” who headed the Academy, the Lyceum, the Stoic School, and Epicurus’s Garden through the centuries, such information is sparse for pre-Qin Masters Literature; the Neo-Confucian lineage (daotong 道統) linking Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Mencius (fourth century BCE) back to Confucius emphasized spiritual lineage over succession in an actual school setting. Lastly, for no Chinese master can we trace the development of his thinking through “early,”
"middle," and "late" periods as with Plato’s dialogues. Instead, Masters Texts like Zhuangzi or Guanzi, though attributed to an eponymous master, contain a wide variety of intellectual positions recorded over several centuries.

This chapter explores the rich tradition of Masters Literature in the face of much uncertainty through three questions. How have people defined the corpus of the Masters from antiquity to the present, and how do divergent definitions affect our understanding of this textual genre? What are the central intellectual concerns at stake in Masters Texts, and what are the major rhetorical formats and strategies used to make convincing arguments? And, lastly, how is Masters Literature significant today, and what kind of debates has it catalyzed for the present?

The Corpus of Masters Literature

Masters Texts, Han Dynasty scholars, traditional bibliographers and, later, modern philosophers and literature scholars have drawn the lines differently and in shifting fashion when defining the beginning, end, and even content of this genre. Regardless of intellectual outlook, pre-Qin Masters Texts share a common "playing field," evident in the intense preoccupation with a limited set of central keywords and an increasingly agonistic spirit expressed in arguments and polemics against perceived opponents. Thus the "Masters" are defined by intellectual contention and lineage filiation rather than by emulation and variation, which characterizes the "Histories" and "Literary Collections."

Opponents

Whereas Confucius (551–479 BCE) became the first and foremost master—the Master of all Masters—Mozi (fifth century BCE) and his followers created Masters Literature as a discursive space through their vitriolic attacks on Confucius’s teachings. In “Against Confucians” (“Fei Ru” 非儒) Mozi attacks the Ru for their wasteful obsession with ritual, mannerist antiquarianism, and failure to abide by their own values. In contrast, the Analects, which was likely compiled during the Western Han when Confucius was canonized as the sage master-author compiling the “Classics” but contains material dating back to the fifth century BCE, keeps to a world of undisputed sagehood: the Master might have adversaries, but no intellectual opponents. Attacking other masters and their values became common from the fourth century BCE onwards. Mencius argues against other masters with patient persuasion rather than aggressive polemic. By the third century BCE, we see attempts to systematize the increasingly complex world of contending masters into intellectual camps and lineages. In "Against the Twelve Masters" (“Fei shi’er zi” 非十二子), Xunzi 荀子 (fl. ca. 280s–230s BCE) presents six pairs of masters, with each pair representing roughly opposite opinions on the concept of human nature, the guiding principles of ordering society, and the importance of precedents set by former kings.
Xunzi’s desire to curb intellectual diversity and project a sense of orthodoxy produces a strict and symmetric typology that says more about the author of the essay than the masters under discussion. But with the unification, argumentative modes promoting integration became popular during the Western Han: Zhuangzi’s “All Under Heaven” (“Tianxia” 天下), presenting six master groups, praises all masters as sharing a deeper truth about the ancient Way, except for Zhuangzi’s belligerent friend-and-foe, the sophist Hui Shi 惠施. Here contention disappears into mutual complementation and symbiosis.

Experts

The two most influential schemes that have defined the corpus and categorization of Masters Literature come from Western Han scholars and bibliographers. Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BCE) father Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. 110 BCE) proposed a scheme of “Six Experts” (liujia 六家): “Yin-Yang specialists,” “Confucians,” “Mohists,” “Legalists,” “Logicians/Sophists,” and “Daoists.” The “Confucians” and “Mohists” certainly existed in some institutional form during the pre-Qin period. The “Daoists,” in the peculiar form of Huang-Lao 黃老 Daoism claiming descent from the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) and Laozi, were a contemporary intellectual force. But the other three “expert traditions” had less pedigree and probably represented types of expertise in divination and calendrical calculation (Yin-Yang), disputation (Logicians), and statecraft (Legalists), amalgamating Warring States figures with Han exigencies and practices (Smith 2003, Csikszentmihályi 2002, Csikszentmihályi and Nylan 2003).
Library Books

When asked by Emperor Cheng in 26 BCE to edit and catalogue the books in the imperial library, Liu Xiang 刘向 (79–8 BCE) faced an eminently practical task. Continued by his son Liu Xin 刘歆 (d. 23 CE), the “Seven Summaries” (“Qi lüe” 七略) became the basis of the bibliographical treatise of the Han shu 漢書 (History of the Former Han), the “Monograph on Arts and Writings” (“Yiwen zhi” 藝文志) (see also Chapter 11). The category of “Various Masters,” featured alongside “Classics,” “Poetry and Rhapsodies,” “Military Books,” “Divination and Mantic Arts,” and “Medicine,” was subdivided into ten groups: the “Six Experts” of Sima Tan plus the “Strategists/Orators,” “Syncretists,” “Agriculturalists,” and “Storytellers.” Later bibliographies in the dynastic histories continued to adopt most Master groupings from the Han shu bibliography, but the fundamental changes in the post-Han intellectual landscape left revealing traces in the bibliographical schemes (see also Chapter 11). Increasingly, practical arts were collapsed into the “Masters” category, as with the treatise of the Sui shu 隋書 (History of the Sui), which established the traditional fourfold bibliographical scheme and integrated the previously independent categories for military books, astronomy and mantic arts, and medicine into the Masters. New productive categories were added, as with the bibliographical treatise of the Jiu Tang shu 舊唐書 (Old History of the Tang), which added “Encyclopedias,” “Meridians,” and “Miscellaneous Arts” (featuring, for example, works on chess playing—a Masterly art). “Buddhist” and “Daoist Scriptures” had appeared in an appendix to the Sui shu catalogue, but the Chongwen zongmu 崇文總目 (The Comprehensive Catalogue of the Hall of Venerating Culture) of the Song Dynasty and the bibliographical treatise of the Ming shi 明史 (History of the Ming) integrated them into the Masters, with the latter collapsing the “Sophists” and “Legalists,” which had become unproductive, under “Miscellaneous.”

The bibliographical definition of the Masters diverges most strongly from the widely accepted assumption that the Masters constitute the finest and deepest of Chinese thought. Going by the sheer number of texts, the “expert” traditions of military strategy, calendrical sciences, divination, and medicine (among others) were the most productive categories throughout imperial China. This would certainly be the least accepted definition of the corpus of “Masters Literature.” But we should not forget that Masters Literature was alive as a field of practical arts and sciences on the larger epistemological map of traditional China and that these forms of knowledge are constitutive parts of Chinese intellectual history (Ge 1998, Ge 2014).
Philosophers

Over the past century, “Chinese philosophy” has become a well-established academic discipline in China, which looks to the pre-Qin Masters Texts as the fountainhead of Chinese thought. Zhexue (J. tetsugaku) 哲學 is a nineteenth-century neologism coined in Japan and later adopted in China to translate the Western discipline of “philosophy,” a concept propagated by Plato with a complex, almost two-and-a-half-millennia-long intellectual and institutional history in the West. Jesuit missionaries from Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) on realized the importance of targeting the literati class with their China mission, and understood the advantages of presenting Confucius, and the Masters in his wake, as “philosophers.” Thus the first translations from the Neo-Confucian canon of the Four Books into a Western language (started by Michele Ruggieri and Ricci, but published in 1687 under the names of Prospero Intorcetta and Philippe Couplet) was called Confucius, Sinarum Philosophus sive Scientia Sinica latine exposita (“Confucius, the Chinese Philosopher or: Chinese Science Explained in Latin”) (Meynard 2011). With the arrival of Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, who rejected the Jesuit “accommodation” of Chinese ancestral rituals and the imperial cult as secular practices, the Jesuits became even more eager to present Confucius as a “philosopher” to avoid conflicts with Rome (Jensen 1997). This resulted in the “Chinese Rites Controversy” and repeated bans by several popes and the Holy See during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it also, indirectly, led to a downplaying of Confucius’s role as a cultic and religious figure that continues to this day (Eno 1990, Wilson 2002).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese students studying in Japan or Europe and the influx of Western texts led to the appropriation of the Masters as the core of a “Chinese philosophy.” While Liu Xizai 劉熙載 (1813–1881) in his Wengai 文概 (Outline of Prose) of 1873 still presented the Masters genre in its traditional form as a guide to self-cultivation and a model for prose composition, two decades later the Japanese Buddhist scholar Matsumoto Bunzaburō 松本文三郎 (1869–1944) published his Shina tetsugaku shi 支那哲学史 (History of Chinese Philosophy), the first history of “Chinese Philosophy.” It proudly featured the novel concept of “wisdom study” (J. tetsugaku, Ch. zhexue) in the title and made the Masters into “philosophers” and their teaching into neologisms such as “political theory” or “dialectics.” Hu Shi’s 胡適 (1891–1962) Zhongguo zhexue shi dagang 中國哲學史大綱 (Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy) of 1919, a fruit of his studies with the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) at Columbia University, marks the breakthrough in China in the creation of a “Chinese philosophy” that aimed to live up to universal claims of method, rationality, objectivity, and systematization. Together with Feng Youlan’s 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) Zhongguo zhexue shi 中國哲學史 (History of Chinese Philosophy) of 1934, it laid the foundations of the modern discipline and still impacts its present scope.

The philosophical approach has been the dominant interpretive paradigm for the pre-Qin Masters. Roger Ames, sometimes in collaboration with David Hall, has made the resonance between pragmatic philosophy and Confucianism inspiring fruitfully for
contemporary ethics and comparative philosophy (see for example Ames and Hall 1987). Angus Graham’s masterful *Disputers of the Dao* traces the unfolding of “rationality” in China, and his fascination with analytic philosophy led him to direct attention to the lesser-known Masters Texts, such as the “Sophists” and the Later Mohist explorations of logic. The most radically “philosophical” reading of the Masters is probably Chad Hansen’s *A Daoist Theory of Thought*, which has such high standards of “philosophicality” that for him already Han Fei 韓非 (ca. 280–ca. 233 BCE) constitutes the end of the Masters and is harshly scolded as a “nonphilosopher” (Hansen 1992: 345). The assumptions of this paradigm have been criticized on various fronts, not least because it tends to impose Western philosophical assumptions on Chinese thought and thereby threatens to distort the Masters, leading to misconceptions of their intellectual preoccupations and their place in the Chinese tradition (Defoort 2001; Ge 2006: 6–11; Mølgaard 2005; Denecke 2011).

“Masters Literature”

Literature scholars, attuned to questions of genre and the unfolding of textual traditions, have studied the argumentative formats and rhetorical strategies in conjunction with the intellectual claims in Masters Texts and coined the term “Masters Literature” for *zishu* (Zhang 1996, Denecke 2011). This approach highlights the authoritative role of the master figure as a social and rhetorical construct at the center of the genre; it analyzes the intellectual implications of the main formats of Masters Literature, such as the “scene of instruction,” (on this see also Lewis 1999, Chapter 2) “scene of persuasion,” the “expository essay,” or the use of poetry, analogy and allegory, and anecdotes and exempla (see next section); and it attempts not just to “decolonize” the Chinese Masters from the imposition of Western philosophical frameworks, but also to free the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition from the imposition of modern frameworks, in particular those of Western analytical philosophy. This approach rejects the tendency of philosophical interpretations to see the Masters and their “philosophical vibrancy” end with the Qin. Masters Texts continued to be produced in large numbers not just during the Han but throughout the early medieval period until the fifth century CE, after which writers began to invest their creative energies and individual concerns in more contemporary genres, in particular *shi* 詩 poetry (Tian 2006).

**Lineages, Arguments, Forms**

Debate and argument are central to pre-Qin Masters Literature. This resonates well with the modern assumption that the multistate system of the Warring States Period, during which an increasingly small number of hegemonic states vanquished weaker states and engaged in constant warfare over territory, resources, and power, fostered intellectual debate, much as the city-states in Ancient Greece enabled the blossoming of classical
philosophy and created political ideologies and practices like Athenian democracy. Modern Chinese scholars have proverbially called this period a time of “A Hundred Schools Competing In Argument” (baijia zhengming 百家爭鳴), a slogan used by the Communist Party in the “Hundred Flowers Campaign” of 1956 to encourage criticism from the people, which later led to the identification and persecution of opponents and enemies. In the West, the popularization of the notion of the “Axial Age” (Achsenzeit) has further encouraged this view, as it has projected the model of the rise of Greek philosophy unto Warring States China. The German philosopher Karl Jaspers argued that around the “axis” of 500 BCE, the world’s foundational philosophical and religious systems, which still determine our present, emerged simultaneously in the absence of direct mutual influence (Roetz 1993; Bellah and Joas 2012).

Pre-Qin Masters Texts are rife with agonistic debate. During the fourth and third centuries BCE, a “playing field,” a rather limited set of shared and contested conceptual vocabulary emerges. The acts of defining, redefining, sharing, and deriding keywords come to take a central place in Masters Literature. Although the definition of key concepts became a systematic philosophical enterprise and pedagogical method only with Song Neo-Confucianism and works like Beixi ziyi 北溪字義 (Chun’s Explications of Terms) by Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130–1200) disciple Chen Chun 陳淳 (1159–1223), gestures of definition are strategic in pre-Qin Masters Texts. Confucius’s definitions in the Analects are often elliptic, suggestive, and playful, using puns and targeting the particular interlocutor or situation rather than aiming for a universal statement. Definitions in Laozi, in contrast, usually take the form of pointed redefinitions and rejections of received wisdom; this happens through grammatical negation, so pervasive in the text, but also through ridiculing one’s opponents’ values (Laozi 18, 19), or through rejecting the very act of definition (Laozi 25).

Some key concepts are shared beyond intellectual contention: the way (dao 道), vital energy (qi 氣), virtue (de 德), or heaven (tian 天); they became so central to the Chinese tradition that the first two are now part of the English lexicon. We also know of alternatives that were less successful, such as Taiyi 太一 ("Great Unity"), the ultimate origin of the cosmos and a celestial deity for the pole star, a concept akin to “the way.” It appears from the Late Warring States Period on in texts from various intellectual camps, but failed to gain the universal appeal of Dao (Cook 2012: 324–340). Other concepts were shared but contested, though not rejected. One example is “human nature” (xing 性); it is a “new” term that appears only twice in the Analects but became a focal point of contention in Mencius, Zhuangzi, and Xunzi during the fourth and third centuries BCE. Still other keywords were dismissed as the wrong-headed ideas of one’s opponents, such as Confucian “benevolence” (ren 仁); or ridiculed and widely rejected, such as Mohist “universal love” (jian’ai 兼愛).
Confucians, Mohists, Persuaders

The Spring and Autumn Period, during which Confucius lived, saw the decline of the Zhou royal house and the Bronze Age aristocracy and the rise of a new class of “servicemen” (shi 士). Regional rulers, who would eventually usurp titles and privileges formerly reserved for the Zhou ruling house, became prominent and bolstered their states through territorial expansion and annexation, military mobilization, and administrative centralization. The adoption of iron technology during the Warring States led to the rapid growth of agricultural production and military capacity and the replacement of the traditional warrior nobility with large mass infantry armies engaged in ever more frequent wars between and within states. Rather than relying on birth and wealth, the “servicemen” derived their status from the services they provided to the rulers of the various states. Often they constituted the lower level of the social elites, but some rose to the highest offices. Many master figures belonged to this class of “servicemen,” which eventually gained a reputation for moral authority and leadership.

Pre-Qin Masters Literature of all colors is marked by a discomfort with the present, the sense of a world out of tune and in need of rectification. Ruthless pursuit of power and wealth and acts of brazen pretense or violence on the part of local rulers and clans were a driving force behind the debates preserved in Masters Texts. Confucius and his followers sought remedy in the models of the Zhou founders, in particular King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. Sensing a strong distance from Western Zhou institutions, the Ru cherished the careful transmission and interpretation of actions and words of kings and ministers of antiquity as guidelines for the present and future. Confucius was born in the small dukedom of Lu, in the Shandong peninsula, which King Wu had bestowed on his younger brother, the Duke of Zhou. It was a state particularly proud of preserving Zhou culture. Confucius’s biography is paradoxically buried in the rich and fanciful lore developing around his person that accompanied his canonization in the Han. He was a teacher, especially of Zhou ritual traditions preserved in Shangshu 尚書 or Shujing 書經 (Classic of Documents) and Shijing 詩經 (Classic of Poetry), and thus embodied learning and sagehood; he was surrounded by disciples and contemporaries engaging him in dialogue; despite encounters with rulers of various states, he lacked a successful official career and thus became a model for retreat from political life during turbulent times, a choice often embraced by the unappreciated scholar who “does not meet his time” (bu yu 不遇) and finds no match in a worthy ruler (see also Chapter 27). He appears as a master beyond the world of writing, mainly of the word (in the Analects and much of Confucius lore), but also, since at least Mencius, as a master author, the compiler-author of the later “Confucian Classics” and in particular Chunqiu 春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals), whose terse annalistic prose supposedly encoded the master’s indirect praise and blame of historical events as a moral guide for the future and a model for textual exegesis (see also Chapters 12, 13).
Masters (zi)

Because Confucius eventually became the “Master of Masters,” he is both the most exemplary and the most exceptional master (Fingarette 1972). By the Han, he appears as the fountainhead of various textual traditions in the bibliographical chapter of the Han shu, which laments the fragmentation of his legacy due to the divergent transmissions of his disciples. Although by the Han Dynasty Confucius appears in many texts as an established (or ridiculed) authority figure, the most canonical recension of his teachings is the Analects, a collection of anecdotes in twenty books written in terse and often suggestively cryptic style that casts the master as the center of “scenes of instruction” (except for Book 10, which shows the master in silent action, thereby reinforcing the point that words must match actions). It was probably compiled as an authoritative Confucius collection during the Western Han in the context of the canonization of Confucius and the establishment of a State Academy devoted to the teaching of the Classics associated with him.

In the Analects, Confucius appears as a charismatic master blessed with vision, wisdom, and humor, imagining the good life as structured by family hierarchies and virtuous state authority modeled on the Zhou past. To reach his full potential endowed by Heaven, the “superior person” or “noble man” (junzi 君子) must cultivate himself through ritual, study, and timely action. He becomes a useful part of society through proper ritual performance—ranging from daily rituals to state events of cosmological importance—and through the study of canonical texts and the understanding of historical precedents. The Analects celebrate the vision of an alternative community where individuals can lead a happy life governed by each member’s focus on the propriety of words and effective action according to one’s social role.

The “scene of instruction” is the seminal format of Masters Literature. Not only was it probably the earliest form of the emerging genre—unlike Greek philosophy, which emerged from the poetry and prose treatises of the pre-Socratics—it was one of its most influential formats. It emphasizes the master’s intimate physical presence and showcases his teachings in the most “embodied” (though highly stylized) way possible in texts.

Mozi and his followers arguably “created” Masters Literature as they refuted Confucius’s received wisdom with their spiteful attacks. But there are salient similarities: the Confucians and Mohists were probably the only pre-Qin “schools” posited by Han scholars that indeed existed as an institution and developed lineages and branches; they both rely on retrospective ideals, however different, and frequently invoke the authority of sage kings of antiquity; and they could be slandered or praised together (e.g., in Zhuangzi or by Han Yu). We know little about Master Mo, but tradition presents him as an expert craftsman and military strategist, and modern scholars have celebrated him as the one master figure of lower class. Ten core doctrines, preserved in three versions possibly representing three branches of the Mohist school (Chapters 8–39), contain the fundamental Mohist teachings, while the “Dialectical Chapters” feature treatises on language and logic probably produced by the school of “Later Mohists” (40–45); the last part of Mozi includes treatises on defensive warfare and military technology, a famed forte of the school. The Mohists were expert in taking the role of the opponent.
castigating the loss of human and material resources invested in Confucian ritual and music and exalting frugality. They believed in the use of rewards and punishment to instill moral behavior and shared a deep anxiety over social order. They thus posited, uniquely in Masters Literature and the Chinese tradition as a whole, the importance of absolute standards, natural laws, and the necessity of universal love regardless of social difference. Unlike Confucius’s vision—which relied, suggestively, on constant striving and learning, but also on the power of spontaneous, naturalized action and effect, embodied in the sage emperor Shun of high antiquity, who supposedly ruled the realm through “nonaction” (wu wei 無為) simply by taking his ritually proper seat facing south (Analects 15.5)—the Mohist cosmos is filled with activist, even coercive, powers. Sages appear as creators of human inventions and conveniences, and spirits and ghosts actively reward or punish human behavior (Puett 2001). In tune with the claim to universal standards, most of the Mohist corpus (except for the “Dialogues,” Chapters 46–51) consists of systematized treatises on statecraft and human life, though at times put into the disembodied mouth of the master in a remnant form of the “scene of instruction.” The Mohists died out in the Western Han, and Mozi was recovered from the Daoist Canon, where it had survived, through the painstaking work of Qing philologists. The rather repetitive and systematic argumentative style in the Mozi corpus certainly lent itself to the philologists’ attempts to fix corrupted passages based on parallelism.

Fourth- and third-century BCE followers of Confucius took up the Mohist challenge. Mengzi (latinized as Mencius) allegedly studied with a disciple of Zisi 子思, Confucius’s grandson. He came from Zou, close to Confucius’s hometown, and was for some time associated with the Jixia Academy, sponsored by the rulers of the powerful state of Qi. Many master figures were at some point associated with the academy, which became, in later cultural imagination, a model of vibrant intellectual exchange under government patronage. Unlike most other Master Texts, Mencius (late fourth century BCE) is less layered and more clearly datable to Mencius’s approximate lifetime and that of his immediate disciples. Mencius consists largely of anecdotes featuring the master in conversation with rulers and other contemporaries, but the arguments are much longer and sustained than in the Analects. We see a shift from “scenes of instruction” to “scenes of persuasion,” a focus away from the charismatic master figure to weak and conflicted ruler figures in need of subtle transformative persuasion for the moral good. Mencius operates in a new intellectual milieu: he is surrounded by other master figures like Mozi, Yang Zhu 楊朱, or Gaozi 告子. Against this diversification of the intellectual stage, Mencius establishes Confucius as the authoritative master (and also author of Chunqiu) and himself as the second master upholding Confucius’s legacy, thus creating the concept of a “Ru-lineage.” Various Ru lineages developed strongly divergent interpretations of the teachings of Confucius and engaged in debates beyond the horizon of Confucius’s teachings.

The debates about “human nature,” which only emerged in the fourth century BCE, illustrate the novel challenges. Mencius argues that humans are endowed with an inborn potential towards virtue rather than being motivated by self-interest, as Yang Zhu argued. In his argument with Gaozi, he uses analogies and striking philosophical metaphors, such
as comparing innate goodness to the grain of “willow wood,” which fulfills its nature by becoming a beautiful utensil, and the natural gravity of “water,” which obeys natural law in flowing downwards. For Confucius, the match between inner intention and outward manifestation in action was still unproblematic, but Mencius was troubled by the possibility of a mismatch between the two. Claiming that human nature is inherently good gave him the confidence that good inner intention would lead to virtuous outer manifestation. This problem of depth and interiority occupied him also on the level of the human body—he claimed that a person’s real intention could only be gleaned from the pupils—and on the level of textual exegesis of the Classics—he warned that one should not “harm” a poet’s deeper intention by clinging to the literal surface meaning of a poem (Mencius 4A.15 and 5A.4). Although Mencius is famous for justifying the assassination of tyrants, he often adopts an oblique approach of Socratic midwifery (“maieutics”), guiding the ruler gradually toward understanding his mistakes through pointed indirect analogies.

Mencius is an example of how recently excavated texts have changed our understanding of the early Ru lineage in particular. The discovery of a lost text Wuxing 五行 (Five Virtues/Phases) in tombs at Mawangdui (ca. 168 BCE) and Guodian (ca. 300 BCE) has sparked feverish interest in uncovering the history of a Zisi-Mencius lineage, mentioned in Xunzi as propagators of such a theory and elaborated by Song Neo-Confucians invested in strengthening the ties between Mencius and Confucius in their creation of an orthodox Confucian lineage. Several Guodian texts associated with Zisi have led some scholars to claim them as parts of a lost Master Zisi text. While debates remain inconclusive (Cook 2012: 110–121), the excavated texts have allowed us to flesh out the figure of Zisi (credited with the transmission of Zhongyong 中庸 [Doctrine of the Mean], one of the Four Books), to uncover a much richer and more unexpected repertoire of Confucian intellectual stances during the Warring States Period, and to better appreciate the material, bodily approaches to Confucian self-cultivation with their connection to medical and physiological discourses (Csikszentmihályi 2004).

Our traditional understanding of the early Ru lineage is dominated by Xunzi’s polemics against Mencius. He was from Zhao, served at the Jixia Academy in Qi and obtained high office at home in Zhao and as a magistrate of Lanling in Chu, where he lived out his life. Xunzi, largely datable to the period around Xunzi’s lifetime, shows the diversification of textual culture in the third century BCE: for the first time, we see expository essays in the first person working systematically through central themes such as heaven, ritual, music, learning, names, or human nature. Xunzi’s contribution to the notion of authorship in early China (see Chapter 24) is most evident in his famous first-person argument against Mencius in “Human Nature is Evil” (“Xing e” 性惡). Despite the provocative title, the essay makes a case for the creativity and agency of humans (Puett 2001: 64–73), giving human ritual, social, and political institutions a major role in shaping human community and creating order. Yet Xunzi also appears in the guise of a traditional persuader in chapters delivering pragmatic political advice, and even couches his praise of former kings and vision of governance in programmatic, sometimes propagandistic verse in “Working Songs” (“Cheng xiang pian” 成相篇) and “Rhapsodies” (“Fu pian” 賦篇). His call
for strong government lived on in Qin and Han ideology, informed by “legalists” like Han Fei, Xunzi’s disciple. Eventually Xunzi lost out to Mencius, whose humanistic optimism became the core of Neo-Confucianism.

The Ru lineage had conflicted connections to the world of professional persuaders during the Warring States. Known by various names, these itinerant orators traveled from court to court offering their persuasion skills, like many master figures. The bibliographical chapter in Han shu recognized them as a “School of Strategists” (zonghengjia 縱橫家). Their amoral, sometimes immoral use of persuasion for strategic advantage and often explicit catering to the rulers’ lust for territory, wealth, and power set them apart even from Masters Texts that reject moral rules such as Laozi, Zhuangzi, or Han Feizi. We can grasp their world in the brilliant persuasion vignettes in Zhanguo ce 戰國策 (Intrigues of the Warring States), Sima Qian’s biographies of famous persuaders, essays on the art of persuasion in late Warring States and early imperial texts, and the vast compilations of historical anecdotes serving as repertoire of exempla for speeches (Schaberg 2011). Ru traditionalists certainly abhorred the persuaders for their opportunistic brilliance, but both shared a belief in the power of the word. Sima Qian emphasizes this in his biography of Confucius’s disciples (Shiji 67) by crediting Zigong’s extraordinary political success to his persuasions and, two chapters later, by praising the persuader Su Qin as a man of prolific learning and pragmatic wisdom in an attempt to save him from the bad reputation of his craft (Shiji 69.2277).
Lao-Zhuang, Huang-Lao, Statecraft Specialists

While Sima Qian connects Confucius’s legacy to the world of orality, he endows his *Laozi* lineage, in which he includes Zhuangzi, Shen Buhai 申不害, and Han Fei in a collective biography, with the prerogative of writing (*Shiji* 63). He is unclear about who this “Laozi” might have been, but his three suggested candidates are all associated with scribal expertise. The legend that a border guard had Laozi jot down a book on the “Way and Virtue” (*Daodejing* 道德經) before leaving westwards fits Sima Qian’s interest in dramatized notions of authorship under duress. For him Han Fei, a stutterer stunning the king of Qin (and later First Emperor) with his writing skills, is the pinnacle of writerly virtue, and Han Fei’s “Difficulties of Persuasion” (“Shui nan” 說難) is the only piece of writing by a pre-Qin master included in Sima Qian’s history.

*Laozi* consists of eighty-one short rhythmic and rhymed sections in two parts. Despite variants and difference in sequence from the received text, the *Laozi* versions excavated at Guodian and Mawangdui show that the text was remarkably stable by 300 BCE. Though it possibly contains an ancient core of an oral wisdom tradition (LaFargue 1994), it appears as a heavily layered text that polemicizes against Confucian values on a logical level (with frequent negations like “The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” 道可道非常道 [*Laozi* 1]); on a conceptual level (e.g., rejecting Confucian ideas like “benevolence” [*ren*] and “rightness” [*yi*]); and, most importantly, on a rhetorical level: unlike *Ru* texts that abound with people, places, and historical specificity, *Laozi* lacks protagonists and is a textual collage of aphorisms in which an anonymous first-person voice utters words of gnomic wisdom on the natural way, the counterintuitive power of nonaction, and the art of controlling oneself and others.

The credit for creating an actual “Master Laozi” figure goes to *Zhuangzi*, which features the old sage in “scenes of instruction,” alongside a new set of counterintuitive master figures such as cripples and convicts, eloquent mythical creatures, and skulls. In comparison to the texts in the *Ru* lineage, *Zhuangzi* is a messy text, containing “Inner Chapters” (1–7) dating to the time of the putative master (fl. second half of fourth century BCE); “Outer Chapters” (8–22) by his followers, including more radically “primitivist” thought and Yang Zhu materials from the Qin-Han transition; and a final layer of “Syncretist (or Miscellaneous) Chapters” (23–33) from the second century BCE when the text was compiled (Graham 1989: 172–174). The little we know about the historical Zhuangzi is based on the extravagant Zhuangzi figure featured in *Zhuangzi* and is a programmatic metaphor for the ideal recluse seeking fulfillment in exuberant, unperturbed life. There is Zhuangzi the crazy recluse, refusing to serve as prime minister of Chu, preferring to “drag his tail in the mud” just as the 3,000-year-old turtle in the temple would have preferred to drag his tail in the mud rather than being killed and having its shell honored as sacred; Zhuangzi the iconoclast who violates mourning customs and voluptuously welcomes death; and Zhuangzi the brilliant thinker infatuated with serious argument and its parody (mirrored in his ambivalent friendship
with Hui Shi), one who speaks in rhapsodic effusions and indulges in fictionalized scenarios through parables, dreams, and spirit travels.

Zhuangzi’s Core Chapters are fascinated with perspective and drastic changes in scope, moving between the limited world of frogs in a well to the cosmic proportions of the giant peng bird in no time. These sudden vertiginous changes capture a world beyond human cognition; the implied speaker erases distinctions, praises the useless, and delights in the counterintuitive. This anarchic streak coexists, paradoxically, with a strong belief in positive body knowledge and a “secondary spontaneity” gained through tireless practice, expressed in anecdotes about the sublime skill of craftsmen like Wheelwright Bian and Butcher Ding. Zhuangzi was popular wherever intense reflection and the absurdity of human life (and sometimes humor) met; it influenced phenomena as diverse as medieval “metaphysical learning” or “arcane learning” (xuanxue 玄學), Chan Buddhism, and Matsuo Bashō’s haiku (Qiu 2005).

Although Zhuangzi differs dramatically from Laozi in its acceptance of death and noisy rejection of political engagement, Han scholars grouped them into a Lao-Zhuang lineage, now commonly distinguished from later Daoist religious movements as the philosophical underpinnings of Daoism. But the most popular form of Daoism during Sima Qian’s time was Huang-Lao, drawing on the authority of Laozi and the Yellow Emperor and merging Laozi’s thought with the “legalism” of statecraft specialists. This short-lived blend of authoritarian government, self-cultivation, medicine, and Yin-Yang cosmology was hard to grasp until the discovery of four apparently related texts among the Mawangdui silk manuscripts, which give advice for the aspiring hegemon.

Huang-Lao and the Masters grouped under Sima Tan’s “legalism” label had similar goals: creating a strong state based on bureaucratic structures governed by law and embodied in the figure of a supreme ruler. Theorists of the bureaucratic state appeared in Qin in the fourth century BCE with the figure of Shang Yang (d. 338 BCE), the prime minister of Qin whose policies initiated the centralization and militarization of the state, which eventually resulted in Qin’s unification. In the book attributed to him, Shang Yang propagates the rule of law through a system of rewards and punishments and the building of a bureaucracy directed against the privileges of the nobility; even the ruler is expected to act according to law.

The most prolific and articulate spokesman of the statecraft specialists was Han Fei, an aristocrat from the state of Han, who studied under Xunzi, served the King of Qin, and was later slandered and forced to commit suicide in 233 BCE (Goldin 2013). In Han Feizi, the connection to the Laozi lineage, which Sima Qian pointed out, is evident: two chapters commenting on Laozi passages impose a coercive interpretation of Laozi’s “nonaction” to create a self-regulating state based on laws. Han Feizi is the longest pre-Qin Masters Text and is remarkable for its interest in rhetoric, as evident in chapters on the art of persuasion and the large body of anecdotes, exempla for use in argument-making, which make up a third of the text.
Encyclopedic Compendia

Lüshi chunqiu 呂氏春秋 (Mr. Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals, 239 BCE) and Huainanzi 淮南子 (139 BCE) transcend any school affiliation. They have been categorized as “syncretic” or “eclectic” (za 杂), but are actually “synthetic,” since they are carefully arranged compendia of contemporary knowledge about mankind, governance, and the cosmos written as guidebooks for an aspiring ruler. Both were compiled at a court that allegedly gathered thousands of scholar-retainers, testifying to the monumental ambition of the enterprise. Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (d. 235 BCE) was born into a merchant family, rose to the position of minister, and was eventually forced to commit suicide by King Zheng of Qin, later the First Emperor (r. 221–210 BCE). His compendium opens on twelve monthly “Almanacs,” followed by “Examinations” (13–20) and “Discourses” (21–26). The central theme is how to create harmony between Heaven, Earth, and Mankind and how to correlate natural cycles with the actions of the ruler and his administration. It promises to reveal the principles leading to order and anarchy, survival and destruction. Huainanzi emerged from debates at the court of Liu An 劉安 (ca. 179–122 BCE), Prince of Huainan and the grandson of the founding Han emperor. He was a prolific writer of rhapsodies and was also known for his commentary on “Li sao” 離騷 (“Encountering Sorrow”), and he composed the postface to his compendium, which he presented to Emperor Wu in rhapsody form (Kern 2014). Eight “Core Chapters” are devoted more specifically to the Way and its workings, while the following twelve “Branch Chapters” show applications and illustrations of the basic principles laid out in the first part.

Most of the themes in these compendia are not new, combining Huang-Lao and Legalist governance with Confucian values and Yin-Yang cosmology, but the systematic integration of knowledge and the epistemological vision of a book that promises to encompass, and to almost embody, the cosmos is startlingly novel. Liu An puts it most poignantly:

Place this book in a hairbreadth space: it will obstruct nothing.

Extend it to the world: it will fill it all!

(Zhang 2013: 2200)

In their grasp for knowledge of the world, both compendia also represent Masters Literature as a repository of the practical sciences of the calendar, agriculture, medicine, and divination, similar to the way the Masters category expanded in post-Han bibliographies.

Han Masters and Scholar-Officials

Han Masters Literature has received scarcer attention, because it appears less philosophically appealing and more historically specific than the body of pre-Qin Masters Texts. Yet, we must remember that Masters Texts continued to be written into the fifth
Masters (zi 子)

century CE, although the genre changed considerably during the early empires in terms of the social position of its authors, its occasions and forms, and its place in the changing literary landscape.

The image of the itinerant advisor associated with many pre-Qin masters gave way to the profile of the scholar-official, who produced texts informed by the exigencies of the court and the State Academy. Lu Jia's 陸賈 (ca. 228–ca. 140 BCE) Xinyu 新語 (New Discourses) consists of twelve memorials written at the request of Emperor Gaozu 高祖 (r. 202–195 BCE), and Jia Yi's 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) Xinshu 新書 (New Writings) contains many memorials submitted to Emperor Wen 文帝 (r. 180–157 BCE); Chunqiu fanlu 春秋繁露 (Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals), attributed to Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179–ca. 104 BCE) and reflecting his expertise in the chronicle and its Gongyang commentary, represents the new exegetical literature produced by Han scholars in the context of the rise of textual scholarship and the State Academy established under Emperor Wu.

Thriving textual exegesis also produced distinctive forms of classicism. Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE), serving partly during the interregnum of Wang Mang’s 王莽 rule, modeled his Fayan 法言 (Model Sayings) on the Analects and emulated the Yijing 易經 (Classic of Changes) with his Taixuanjing 太玄經 (Classic of Supreme Mystery). Yang Xiong’s attempt to turn the rhapsody genre to purposes of political remonstration and his later rejection of these “youthful” illusory attempts show the changed literary landscape of the Han: many authors of Masters Texts also wrote rhapsodies, a novel and ambivalent genre caught between imperial entertainment and political and moral remonstration.

With the Eastern Han and Wang Chong 王充 (27–100 CE), a voracious polymath who never served in higher office but was the author of the longest Han Masters Text, Lun heng 論衡 (Balanced Discourses), the great age of sagely authors creating canonical works for posterity was over (Puett 2007). Wang Chong saw his “discourses” (lun 論) as a weak form of writing compared to the creations of the sages of antiquity like Confucius, but he believed that in his time brilliant “literary scholars” (wen Ru 文儒) could still produce superb writing, as opposed to “mundane scholars” (shi Ru 世儒) caught in sterile exegesis (Lun heng jiaoshi, 1150–1151).

The “discourse” genre carried the waning ambitions of Masters Literature into the medieval period. With Cao Pi’s 曹丕 (187–226) “Discourse on Literature (“Lun wen” 論文) in Dian lun 典論 (Normative Discourses) (not to forget, a Masters Text listed in the “Confucian” category), writing became a business of labor division, with authors endowed with individual talent but reduced to excellence in specialized literary genres. Cao Pi singles out for praise his advisor Xu Gan’s 徐幹 (171–218) Zhong lun 中論 (Discourses on the Mean) as a comprehensive achievement and a text capable of establishing its author’s teachings and name.

Just as Yang Xiong renounced his earlier rhapsodies to write emulated Classics, Xu Gan turned away from writing in the belles-lettres genres of his time, such as shi poetry, eulogies, or encomia, to write a Masters Text at the end of his life (Makeham 2002: xxxv).
By that time, the genre of Masters Literature had grown old, and some of its central themes—personal integrity, observation of the cosmos, response to injustice, authenticity of word and action—came to be voiced in new genres for novel times.

**Epilogue: Masters as Catalysts**

Of the four categories of traditional bibliography, the Masters have arguably catalyzed the most influential set of intellectual debates, with public ramifications in the modern period. They have enabled fierce debates over the existence and nature of a “Chinese philosophy” and inspired methodological discussions about comparative and globalized intellectual history. Excavated texts have stimulated manuscript studies, questions of transmission, tradition, and loss of cultural memory, as well as debates over notions of authority, orality, and authorship.

The Masters, in particular forms of Confucianism, have also impacted contemporary public affairs and political developments, triggering discussions about human rights, “Asian values,” and Confucian family ethics (credited with the spectacular economic performance of Southeast Asian and East Asian countries) and about the future of democracy in East Asia.

After Confucius received severe beating during most of the twentieth century for everything that was considered reactionary and destructive in the Chinese tradition, he has recently emerged as a prime national icon of Mainland China. Rituals at Confucian temples have been reinstated; television shows feature a new brand of popular educators like Yu Dan, bringing Confucius’s message close to viewers’ hearts and minds; the Olympics in Beijing in 2008 showed Confucian scholars singing the opening lines of the *Analects* and a supposed descendant of Confucius carrying the Olympic torch; and the hundreds of recently established “Confucius Institutes” across the world, financed through the PRC government, promote Chinese culture through language teaching and research support and are considered China’s new form of soft power and global influence. Masters Literature has become the source of national identity, cross-cultural dialogue, comparative reflection, and global marketing and is alive and well at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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