

REVIEW

Ian Johnston, *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. lxxxii + 944 pp.

Reviewed by
Moss Roberts

Kudos to Ian Johnston and Columbia University Press for publishing this pioneering, bi-lingual edition of the *Mozi*, a comprehensive annotated reference work that is a welcome resource for warring states scholarship. The introduction and translations (with variants and possible alternatives) provide a companion to a difficult text. Johnston's achievement should help to restore this crucial warring states philosophical school to its rightful place in studies of Chinese thought. All this notwithstanding, I would hesitate to call this *Mozi* a definitive critical edition, for reasons given in the course of this review. (I follow Johnston's usage: Mozi for the man, *Mozi* for the text.)

The translator sees himself as part of a "second wave" of content-oriented *Mozi* scholarship, building on an earlier more text-oriented wave. (p. xi) So we have to address this matter of content in particular. Johnston intends to serve both philosophical and sinological readers, and has by and large attained this goal.

The introduction reviews the complex textual history, walks the reader through the main parts and ideas of the work (most helpful for students and teachers not engaged in the early China field), and also includes what other warring states writers say about the Mohists. Johnston moreover is generous in acknowledging his debts to the work of other scholars.

As the translator rightly says the *Mozi* "is unquestionably one of the most important books in the history of Chinese philosophy." (p. xvii) He also says that the *Mozi* has been "sadly neglected" in China for over two millennia and in foreign scholarship as well. Nonetheless, neglect of the *Mozi* is something to be investigated and not merely accepted as a given in the landscape of Chinese culture and Western Sinology. This is a question that Johnston raises occasionally but does not pursue in any systematic way.

What explains neglect in China, and is neglect in the West merely a reflection of Chinese intellectual tendencies, as Johnston suggests, or

are other issues at stake? Is there something subversive in the *Mozi* that accounts for this “neglect,” and is “neglect” in fact the right word? Post-Freudians know that “neglect” can often mean “repressed.” And to push a little further, have too many Western Sinologists over-identified with a kind of Chinese cultural essentialism, especially the dominance of Confucian and neo-Confucian thought and its link to the imperial house and the imperial bureaucracy, or with Taiwan as the “real” China, culturally speaking? For example, Confucianism is built around the concept of *ren* 仁; the Japanese samurai ethic around the concept of *yi* 義 (honor / righteousness). The *Mozi* retains *ren* but lowers its status, while *yi* in the *Mozi* is a paramount dominant ethical term and connected to Heaven, upon which all other virtues depend. Mencius, Mozi’s severest critic restored *ren* to the top of the value hierarchy and placed *yi* in its custody. (Ultimately, Mencius’ formula *renyi* came to mean something like “civilized values.”)

Since the ten “core” philosophical chapters have already been ably translated before him, Johnston hews rather closely (perhaps too closely) to traditional renderings, and does not explore some of the philological issues and their philosophical implications. His presentation of the core doctrines (as he calls them), the heart of the book, valuable as it is for its thoroughness, does not break new ground. For example, he translates the key phrase *shang xian* 尚賢 “exalt the worthy,” following Watson’s “honor the worthy.” However something more polemical is involved in this slogan. *Shang* means to put on top, place above, appoint to office. Mozi urges rulers to promote the worthy however humble and lowly their background, and dismiss the incompetent however well born or connected. This is part of Mozi’s program of severing the connection between *jia* 家 and *guo* 國, a direct challenge to Confucius’ use of *jia* as model for *guo*, the very basis for the doctrine of *ren*—family of man > universal humanitarianism.

Of course, Confucius recognized that talent without social backing has to be included in appointments to office, but he will not abandon the family-state combination and gives pride of place to the *junzi* 君子 for this reason. The *zi* stands for a kind of idealized son of the ruler in this combination. Just as Mozi uses a stern and judgmental *yi* to correct the too-sentimental, too family-oriented *ren*, so he uses *xian*-worthy to correct this family preference in appointments, including *junzi* in a larger string of terms for public servants. Sometimes, he uses *junzi* sarcastically. In this respect Mozi is almost on the same page with the Socrates of the *Republic*, who proposed that governors be separated from all private and personal interests.

Let us turn for a moment from political thought to logic and science. Since this is a complete *Mozi*, Johnston has tackled all the daunting techni-

cal chapters on walled city defense, and on language, logic, and science. Here Johnston has made significant gains but there remain unsolved problems and translations that might be reconsidered or adjusted slightly.

To give a few instances of interpretations that might be questioned: (p. 390 [Canons and Explanations A.21]) *li, xing zhi suoyi fen* 力形之所以奮 probably means “strength is what energizes / the body” rather than “force is what moves a body.” This is more logical in the context of A.20 just above it (“Courage is the means whereby the will dares to act.”); A 20 to 21 goes from thought to action. Also *fen*, which is translated “move,” rather suggests internally generated / motivated action than externally caused “Newtonian” movement. Again, A. 22 *bu ke bi* 不可必 probably means “cannot be guaranteed,” rather than “separated,” that is, the combination of the physical and the mental that constitutes being fully alive cannot be permanent; this seems more likely than “a constant association that cannot be *separated*.” (p. 392) Comparing this with 46.4–6, one can see how important motivation and attitude, right thinking as the basis for action, are in Mozi’s philosophy, whether or not recognized and rewarded. (p. 644)

Another case: A 18 “to give an order is not to do what is done” is not clear in English. The Chinese reads: *ling, buwei suo zuo ye* 令不為所做也, which to me means that orders are not issued for what is [normally] done. And *ling, fei shen fu xing* 令非身弗行 is translated “if it is not something one would do oneself it should not be done.” (p. 388) Does this mean that those who give orders give them to those doing what they (the order givers) don’t do themselves? Clearer and simpler perhaps would be: if an order is issued to the wrong person it won’t be carried out.

One last case: the title of the third Epitome, *Suo Ran* 所染, is translated “On Dyeing.” The theme is how rulers are subjected to all kinds of influence. Here *Suo Ran* should be rendered, perhaps simply as “Being Dyed / Affected / Subjected to Influence.” The translation ignores the effect of the *suo*. Strictly speaking there is no passive voice in Chinese, but there are approximations to it and these should be heeded in contexts of this kind.

Most of the Canon passages are translated well enough, a few perhaps insufficiently precisely rather than incorrectly. Another round or two of outside reader comment and more fine-tuned English would have improved these highly specialized sections. Let’s return to the *Mozi*’s philosophical questions, since these are of more general interest.

Johnston notes that the *Mozi* launches an extensive critique of Confucian values. What he does not fully go into is the crucial fact that this is a strong critique mounted from within the Confucian camp. (p. lxxxi) If the Daoist critique is total and external, the Mohist critique is perhaps even

more subversive (and thus neglected) for being internal. For example, Daoists subordinate *tian* 天-heaven to *dao* 道 (Way), but the *Mozi* retains *tian* as its supreme concept. Indeed the *Mozi* retains other Confucian value terms, like *xiao* 孝-filial piety, *ren*-humane, and *yi*-righteous, as well as *tian*-heaven, while reinterpreting and re-ordering them in ways that Confucians would not accept. (The *Mozi* is less friendly to *de* 德-virtue and *li* 禮-ritual, two key *Analects* terms.) In the case of *tian*, the *Mozi* speaks of heaven's *zhi* 志 or *yi* 意 (purpose or intent) and eschews *ming* 命-mandate, a favorite Confucian term for political authority, especially in the *Mencius* Book 5. This shift leads to a redefinition of *tian* that is of polemical and political importance: if heaven transmits to man via its *zhi* instead of its *ming* then Mozi puts heaven out of the exclusive reach of the ruler, objectifying and demystifying it, while making it accessible to any man—pointing toward a concept of law.

The mandate works in a very different way: it transfers heaven's authority to the ruler, who incorporates its authority exclusively in his person, keeping it from anyone else, or at any rate from ordinary people, and thus silencing it as a separate independent voice. A mandate empowers its holder and belongs to him alone; only in a crisis can it be revoked and transferred to a contender. Intent (*zhi*) by contrast remains with heaven while the ruler is bound to fulfill it, comply with its dictate; but he does not possess it like a mandate, which he can use as he sees fit.

Mozi likens heaven to the measuring tools of a craftsman, compass or square, tools that anyone can use and confirm. Mozi in making heaven objective and transparent and thus accessible reveals the anti-authoritarian potential in this concept: there is something higher than the *tianzi* Son of Heaven (monarch). And since it is an articulate heaven, a message-bearing heaven with a voice of its own, rather than the silent heaven of the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, the Mohist ruler can be held to account at any time, not only in a crisis of mandate-change. A ruler's actions can be measured against its commandments, however banally benevolent or utilitarian the commandments may seem.

Perhaps this all has something to do with the "neglect" of the *Mozi*, which boldly asserts that all men recognize society's hierarchy of authorities but do not recognize that heaven has authority over the ruler. This separation of heaven from man is the heart of the matter, for it creates a philosophically strategic space between heaven and earth for the ghosts of justice to occupy and patrol. The ghosts enforce heaven's intentions, they are virtual law enforcement agents, omniscient and omnipotent. For heaven to enforce its authority in this fashion is another grave challenge to Confucian thought, which is based on ancestor worship and lineage continuity and thus recognizes no trans-human authority such

as *dao* or *fa* 法 (law), nor any general concept of *gui* 鬼 “the dead.” The Confucians recognize the elite, privileged dead, those with a ‘home,’ an ancestral temple. Mozi’s concept of the dead as agents of justice powerfully influenced Chinese literature.

Thus Mozi has removed ultimate political authority from kingdom rulers and assigned it to heaven, by transforming the doctrines and terms of the Confucians. As Johnston translates the key passage: “Heaven’s intention must be complied with. Compliance with Heaven’s intention is the standard (*fa*) of righteousness (*yi*).” (p. 260) Mozi makes *yi* a central term, neither subordinate to *ren* nor linked to social obligations but redefined upwards in relation to heaven and thus closer to the Biblical term “righteousness,” which refers to a relation of man to God and works better in the *Mozi* than in the *Analects* or the *Mencius*.

Mozi’s doctrine of transparency of heaven may explain the prevalence of the word *ming* (originally moonlight / skylight) throughout the text. *Ming* as an epistemological term is hardly found in the *Analects* and generally not popular with Confucians, who favor *zhi* 知 -knowledge. The famous *Da Xue* formula *ming de* “illustrious virtue” probably means to make virtue as luminous and visible as the heavenly bodies.

To translate *ming* in the title of the “Ming Gui” chapter Johnston chooses “percipient ghosts.” Since it is the ghosts to whom Mozi assigns the task of enforcing heaven’s authority and instructions, the ghosts have to be aware of everything going on in the human world, the eyes and ears of heaven as it were. Johnston also accepts “understanding” for *ming*, which is the more conventional translation. What also needs to be brought out however is that since *ming* suggests lights in the sky, in this context it is about making something obscured by doubt—the existence and efficacy of ghosts—public and visible to all. So perhaps this tricky title might be rendered “Making ghosts as visibly existent to all as the heavenly bodies are.” This fits with a transparent heaven. The “Ming Gui” chapter says that disorder in the world is the result of uncertainty about the fact that ghosts reward virtue and punish crime. (p. 278) Spelled out, “Ming Gui” could be rendered “Proving the Existence and Function of Ghosts.”

Bringing ghosts into the center of his political tableau is a bold move and a profound challenge to the Confucian theory of Fate (*ming*, also mandate). Fate is unknowable, but ghosts make for a morally logical interaction between human behavior and its consequences under heaven. Mozi’s theory resembles the theory that Job’s comforters offer to him: God would never punish unless there was good reason. Moreover there is another way in which the theory of ghosts challenges the Confucian practice of ancestor worship. After all, when heaven recruits ghosts to

police the *tianxia* it must follow the same principle as the ruler in selecting worthies to serve in his government: no favoritism, no relatives. Whoever has ability, however humble, gets appointed and empowered, i.e., *shangxian*.

There is populism in Mozi's concept that undermines the special powers of elite ancestors. Common folk have no means to feed and retain the services of their forebears, who are accessible only through the temple. Underlying this is the transfer of power from the hereditary clans to the state and from the state to the *tianxia*. Mozi, like the Confucius of the *Analects*, is groping toward a universal value system. As shorthand, Mozi uses *tian*, Confucius uses *ren*-humanitarianism.

One of the primary terms that Mozi uses, one not found in Confucian usage, is *jian ai*. This is "the cornerstone of Mohism" and rightly understood by Johnston as a critique of *ren*, the cornerstone concept of the *Analects*. (p. xliii) The *Mozi* retains *ren* but *ai* and *jian ai* are superior to *ren* as value concepts since they are attributes of heaven while *ren* remains social. (For Confucius of course the social takes priority over the heavenly / or the religious.)

Johnston retains "universal" for *jian* and "love" for *ai*. However, these translations, though conventionally accepted, do not do full justice to the Chinese. Johnston recognizes this in his own analysis of the terms, but decides to follow tradition. (p. xliii) After all, *dao* and *ren* could both be called universal.

"Love" is an emotional overused term with a Christian ring to it, but *ai* can also mean "cannot bear to part with, or to spare." This is closer to a kind of protectiveness; Johnston mentions "care" as a possible translation. Everyone is familiar with the king's phrase in Mencius: "begrudging (*ai*) the ox." Perhaps "tender concern" or "jealously guard" would more faithfully render *ai* in the Mohist formula "Heaven loves the people."

Jian as "universal" poses even greater problems. The graph shows a hand clasping two stalks of wheat, hence a clear visual reference to the number two in *ren*. A power external to the two stalks binds them equally. *Ren* (from self to other) is based on extension of familial love outward into society, a purely social ideal of humanity as family, family of man. *Ren* is based on the family as the primary site of social morality; *Jian ai* is based on a conjoining of two (or more) unrelated categories as subject to heaven's intention. This fits Mozi's subversively anti-Confucian idea of treating another man's father with filial piety in the expectation of reciprocity, a dramatic gambit that preserves and yet diffuses the idea of *xiao*-filial piety, reconfiguring the hierarchy of terms. Perhaps all-encompassing care would fit *jian ai* better, suggesting indifference to propinquity.

Johnston does not seem to appreciate the polemical force of the *Mozi's* formulations or the degree of antagonism with the *Mencius*. He tries to reconcile the concepts of *jian ai* and *ren*. But we know that *ren* has been demoted by Mozi to a social virtue from a universal one because he says that heaven *ai*-protects and *li*-benefits mankind and desires righteousness (*yi*) but never says that heaven desires *ren*-humaneness for mankind. It is left for the *Mencius* to restore *ren* as the leading value term by placing it before *yi*, thus reversing Mozi's philosophical shift and restoring the value term hierarchy of the *Analects*. In time *ren-yi* came to be a set term, meaning more than its parts: "civilized values." (pp. xxlvi, xlvii, 234)

Ren is the extension of family values; hence Mozi's lowered interest in the term. He challenges the priority of the family as the political and moral model institution for the state. As mentioned above, this may remind some readers of Plato's *Republic*, which requires governors to sever connections to their families, a sacrifice for the public good that would have appalled Confucius. The *Mozi* has affinities with Hobbes, as Johnston notes, but the affinities with Plato are stronger still, particularly with regard to the core question of the relation of the family to government and society. Plato wants both severed. Mozi too wants family and government (*jia* and *guo*) severed, and family values to be exercised by diminishing emphasis on one's own family. It is the virtue of the *Mozi* that it struck at the sacredness of family and its connection to government, even if the dominant Confucian culture did not appreciate the questions raised.

Dividing ruler and heaven, dividing *jia* and *guo*, uniting unrelated categories (*jian*) are three complementary concepts at the center of Mozi's thought. This is anathema to Mencius.

Johnston is puzzled by the vehemence of Mencius' attack on the *Mozi*. Johnston seems to be more comfortable with the Mo-Kong than the Mo-Meng relationship. "Mencius' attack [on Mozi] was vigorous, unfair, and influential." (p. xxxv) Johnston comes to his author's (or school's) defense but does not bring out the urgency of the underlying issues.

It should be observed however that Mencius is striving for a universalism of his own, via the doctrine of human nature (*renxing* 人性), a term that significantly plays no role in the *Mozi*, because Mozi is a dedicated behaviorist. Human nature for Mencius is an internal construct of social values and has nothing to do with instinct or appetite; it is explicitly anti-biological (Book 6), something like Chomsky's theory of man's innate power to generate language. Mozi seeks the universal beyond (not within) man in a transcendent or trans-human principle: *yi* as *fa*, righteousness as law.

For Mencius human nature is an implant of nature that is by tropism responsive to royal virtue; hence for Mencius there can be no authority

higher than the virtuous (if not then existing) ruler; heaven is silent and speaks only through the ruler. Mozi demolishes this idea with his concept of *tianzhi*, or heavenly purpose. No ruler can appropriate it and yet it is universally accessible. Even the humble carpenter can test if a ruler is in compliance with its main dictate: *li*-benefit for the people. No wonder the *Mencius* begins with a denunciation of the concept of *li*-benefit. Benefit and *yi*-righteousness are in contradiction (*Analects* 4.16). For Mozi is moving away from virtue and toward law, a position that the legalists will carry much further.

To sum up, Johnston's *Mozi*, whatever its minor imperfections, is a great benefit to all readers of English who wish to deepen their knowledge of Chinese thought. At the same time it is an all-important reference and foundation for that smaller readership professionally engaged in research and teaching about Chinese thought. No single review can encompass its complexities. It should stimulate many reviews and discussions, articles and panels. Johnston and Columbia University Press are to be congratulated.