

Book Reviews

The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China. By Shang Yang. Edited and translated by Yuri Pines. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Pp. viii + 351. \$60.00.

We must applaud the appearance of a new translation by Yuri Pines of the *Shangjun shu* 商君書 (*Writings by Lord Shang*, or *Book of Lord Shang*, in Pines's rendering), as the early China field needs serviceable translations, *always*. For readers new to the field, however, the interpretive materials attached to the translation will likely receive equal or more attention, especially as those framing materials consist not only of a lengthy Introduction but also of the brief essays appended to each chapter of translation. These materials suggest that Pines has not fully succeeded in “thinking away modernity,” and presentist presumptions colour his analysis of the text at hand. One example: Pines asks, in essence, why Shang Yang did not advocate mass education (pp. 92–94), to pursue more thorough military indoctrination? Perhaps I have mistaken Pines's precise tone when he begins to think out loud in print—Is this a rhetorical question designed to prod the uninitiated?—but it seems that Pines is oblivious to literacy rates in antiquity, and forgets that mass education is a concept of recent invention fashioned for the social engineering of the modern citizen. (In the United States, it appeared *after* the Civil War, when republican sentiments began to yield to more democratic ideals.) In the pre-industrial state, there was no need for mass numbers of subjects to be “educated,” and a lucky few enjoyed literacy and numeracy (and far fewer, the sort of high cultural literacy that it would take to read the *Shangjun shu*).

A more fundamental problem with the Introduction is Pines's continual assertions that the *Shangjun shu* is a marvellous, if underrated, text. Few will concur with such a judgement, I suspect, for several reasons: First, the *Shangjun shu* shares many ideas and even passages with many other early texts, including the *Sunzi bingfa* 孫子兵法, *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策, *Han Feizi* 韓非子, *Xunzi* 荀子, and even the *Mozi* 墨子.¹ Pines's propensity to argue for the *Shangjun shu*'s earlier date and, by implication, inherent superiority cannot be squared with his own bold assertion (adopted from David

¹ For example, the slogan “elevating the worthy” (p. 193) is found in both the *Mozi* and the *Xunzi*. Chapters 10–12, on battle engagements, share much with the *Sunzi* and so on. Yao and Shun, along with other sages, are lauded for their impartiality; cf. the *Documents* classic, “Yao dian” chapter.

Schaberg, who followed William Boltz) that, “it is impossible to date pre-Han texts with any degree of accuracy” (p. 41).² Furthermore, the book is highly repetitive, and at several key points it contradicts itself (as Pines occasionally notes).³ Worse, some of the *Shangjun shu* pronouncements seem downright silly. For example, the *Shangjun shu* insists that all plans for battle should be made in the ancestral temple (i.e., by the ruler himself), rather than by the field commander confronting and adjusting to unexpected or shifting realities on the ground (p. 181). We all recognize the pattern: the diligent scholar comes to love the text he has pored over for years, and, sadly, he must hype the virtues of the text, if he is to persuade a reputable publishing house to take it on.⁴ Generally speaking, this form of special academic pleading elicits nothing more than an indulgent smile, but here it prompts unsubstantiated or excessive claims, such as Pines’s claims to find Chapter 6 of the *Shangjun shu* “arguably the richest intellectually” of the corpus (p. 157), and Chapter 7 “arguably the single most sophisticated model of the genesis of the state in the entire corpus of traditional Chinese texts” (p. 166). To say that Chapter 6 “explores fundamental issues of human nature” (p. 157) astonishes, as the chapter mainly advises the ruler to block “people” (unspecified as to rank or status) from self-interested pursuits. Talk of “the One” does not elucidate matters here, nor does the chapter’s treatment of human motivation go beyond the perfunctory.⁵

Turning to the translation itself, I searched, in vain, for an indication of *which edition* of the *Shangjun shu* the translator was using, *which commentary*, and *why*. (Given the frequent repetitions, I much prefer the truncated version of “highlights” offered by the Commercial Press c. 1916,⁶ but the presumption that newer is better is widespread.)⁷ Still, it is curious that Pines does not ascribe the sheer messiness of

² E.g., Introduction (p. 34) and Chapter 1 (p. 120).

³ One irresolvable contradiction concerns the role that custom is to play in the ruler’s policy-making.

⁴ That said, the “neglect” of the book, due to small-minded Confucians, is *not* apparent when we read Yan Lingfeng’s 嚴靈峯 *Zhou Qin Han Wei zhuzi zhijian shumu* 周秦漢魏諸子知見書目 (Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1977), vol. 4, pp. 277–301. A flurry of interest was registered during the Tang, and then huge interest by the Han Learning advocates in the Qing and the Republican era.

⁵ To be fair, Pines in rare cases acknowledges that “the promise” of a chapter is “not realized” (e.g., p. 193).

⁶ Zhang Zhichun 張之純, *Pingzhu zhuzi jinghua lu* 評註諸子菁華錄 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1916?), vol. 14 of 22.

⁷ See Pines, p. 199, for example. Pines talks of a “much more sophisticated approach” taking shape in the late Republican period and blossoming in post-Deng era (pp. 33–34), in the People’s Republic and in Japan. But he is very short on specifics.

most *Shangjun shu* versions to either its comparatively early date or to its neglect by later activist editors (unlike most other masterworks).⁸ And since all the chapters relate to one another, one wonders why Pines felt compelled to interleave Chapters 4, 5, and 20, but not other chapters on a single theme. So while others may find Pines's decision to reformat the text illuminating, I find it merely places obstacles in comparing Pines's text in English with a classical Chinese version. That said, I would stress that Pines's translation is accurate, if hardly stylish, and it seldom leads the reader far astray.

Our versions of the *Shangjun shu* differ dramatically. Pines (6.2, p. 159) talks of “accumulating [water]” (suggesting reservoirs of drinking water), whereas my commentary plainly talks of “providing enough water to irrigate the fields” (12/4a). In 6.4 (p. 160), Pines translates, “In the generations of old, there were men-of-service (*shi*) who did not have enough clothes to warm their skin or enough food to fill their bowels; they exerted their four limbs and injured their five internal organs above, but they behaved ever more **broad-heartedly**; this is because of name (repute)” (12/4b). My commentary leads me to read instead, “In earlier generations, there were men-in-service (*shi*) who did not have enough clothes to warm themselves, enough food to eat their fill, yet they nonetheless worked so energetically that they harmed their internal organs, in order to **increase their celebrity and renown. This was not due to a constant in human nature. They acted for reputation.**”

A second contrast will illustrate the striking effects that stem from seemingly minor word choices:

Pines's translation: “The capital of persuading *shi* is their mouth [*sic*]; the capital of reclusive *shi* is their **mind**; the capital of brave *shi* is their [fighting] spirit; the capital of **skillful artisan *shi*** is their hands; the capital of merchant and peddler *shi* is their bodies. Hence, for them, All-under-Heaven is just one home, and they move across it with their bodies as their capital. **The people's capital is accumulated in their bodies, and they can empower themselves anywhere abroad; carrying their accumulated capital, they flock to any place as if to their home: even for Yao and Shun it would be difficult [to make this situation orderly].**” (6.6, p. 162)

My translation: “The main resource of persuaders is the mouth. The main resource of reclusive gentlemen is **ideas**. The main resource of brave fighters is courage. The main resource of those with specialized skills is the hand. The main resource of merchants and traders is the body. **If the Son of Heaven**

⁸ See note 4 above.

houses all these men at his court, surrounding himself with such, and supporting them—well, even Yao and Shun would find that difficult to rule under these conditions.” (12/5b)

Clearly, Pines’s version of the *Shangjun shu* is preoccupied with outward migration from the state, whereas the version I consulted describes a ruler overburdened with expensive clients in the capital. But when two editions can convey such different messages, it seems ludicrous to date chapters on the arguments they advance.

Finally, the translation exhibits numerous infelicities that Columbia University Press editors could and should have prevented. For example, Pines’s edited English tends to conflate plural and singular. When the subject is “the rulers” of many states, for example, Pines translates, “their army is comparable to that of their neighbors” (6.3, p. 159); apparently, the many rivals have but one army among them. I dearly wish an editor had given Pines a style guide for the use of brackets and parentheses as well. In the vast majority of cases, no brackets are needed. “[The purpose of] the law is to care for the people” can be rendered by “The law is to care for the people” (p. 121). The curious sprinkling of brackets and parentheses proves downright distracting, as when Pines writes, “The ability of the well-governed state to fully utilize its land resources and to cause the people to die [for its sake] is due to the name (repute) and benefit that it brings [to the people]” (p. 160). Why did an editor not urge Pines to write plainly, “Now those who rule a kingdom well can maximize the land’s strength and cause people to die willingly in battle, so long as the way to achieve a reputation coincides with the way to achieve other benefits”?

In preparing this review, I have turned to Duyvendak’s translation, which holds up well but is not widely available.⁹ Pines’s translation draws from Duyvendak—and rightly so. But it is good to think that we now have a more available translation of the *Shangjun shu*, a work that, despite its rather pedestrian recommendations, certainly merits more attention than it has hitherto received. So, onward and upward, and thanks to Yuri Pines!

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⁹ J. J. L. Duyvendak, *The Book of Lord Shang: A Classic of the Chinese School of Law* (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1928).