Beyond the Troubled Water of Shifei: From Disputation to Walking-Two-Roads in the Zhuangzi, Lin Ma and Jaap Van Brakel. Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. Pp. xxiv + 283. $85.00. ISBN13: 978-1-4384-7483-0.

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One of the most important challenges for scholars of Chinese and comparative philosophy is adopting a methodology for engaging with source texts in a way that enables us to accurately reflect the intentions of the authors, acknowledge the linguistic, historical, and philosophical context of the text in question, avoid unconscious modern, Western, or other provincial biases that may be projected on the text, and fruitfully develop the ideas in the text, among other interpretively virtuous constraints. In the present volume, Lin Ma and Jaap Van Brakel outline such a methodology—explored in detail in their *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy* (2016)—and then apply it to interpretations of the central classical Chinese philosophical concepts of *shi* 是 ("this", "right") and *fei* 非 ("not-this", "wrong"), with particular emphasis on the use of the terms in the Daoist anthology, the *Zhuangzi* «莊子». Along the way, Ma and Van Brakel traverse substantial interpretive and philosophical territory, offering a novel interpretation of the contemporary debate over the concept of truth in early Chinese philosophy, exploring numerous non-English translations of crucial texts about *shi* and *fei*, as well rejecting the fact-value distinction both in our interpretations of Chinese texts and in general. In this way, the book is an ambitious exercise in Chinese and comparative philosophy.

After a useful introduction which outlines the chapters in the book, Ma and Van Brakel briefly sketch their methodology. In so doing, they describe what they take to be the necessary preconditions for the interpretation of any text (1), which are supported primarily by the

Wittgensteinian idea of family resemblance (210 FN1). For interpretation to be possible, one must assume family resemblance across forms of life and across all general concepts. That is, both forms of life and general concepts must be assumed to be mutually recognizable without positing that any universal essence or concept lies beneath them. This leads into another necessary precondition: the rejection of the ideal language hypothesis, which holds that there is a language of universal concepts that reflects the "fundamental structures of reality" (3). Using the notion of family resemblance instead, we ought to posit quasi-universals, which map general concepts from two different traditions or languages onto one another on the basis of family resemblance. The authors effectively apply these ideas to the concepts of *shi* and *fei* throughout the book. They argue that we should not say that *shi* means "this", "right", or "true" depending on the context while assuming that "truth" or "rightness" are universal concepts. Rather, we should say that *shi* shares a family resemblance relationship with a general sense of 'rightness' understood in both a normative and descriptive sense.

Chapters 2 through 7 motivate Ma and Van Brakel's interpretation of *shifei*. Chapter 2 discusses the recent scholarly debate over the concept of truth in Chinese philosophy—a candidate interpretation of *shi*—and ultimately concludes that ascribing the notion of truth to early Chinese philosophers is a Western, modern conceptual projection, or a "transcendental pretense" (23). Rather than attempt to find the concept of truth in early Chinese texts on the assumption that it is a universal concept which ought to be there, we should try and find family resemblances across concepts from ancient and modern traditions on the assumption that they are not the same concept, but are distinct, though may share some overlapping similarities. Instead of understanding *shi* as "true", the authors argue in chapters 3 and 4 for understanding it as a generic notion of rightness that bridges the gap between facts and values. Chapter 5 attempts to

clarify the significance of collapsing the distinction between facts and values in our interpretation of early Chinese texts by discussing Hilary Putnam's arguments in favor of collapsing the distinction for philosophy generally. Chapter 6 continues to develop the authors' conception of *shi* as "rightness in the sense of fitting" by exploring Nelson Goodman's rejection of the fact-value distinction, and his discussion of a general sense of rightness, which he prioritized over the concept of truth. In chapter 7, the authors explore non-English translations and interpretations of *shi* and *fei*, with a particular emphasis on its usage in book 2 of the *Zhuangzi* ("Qiwulun"), further supporting their interpretation of it as a general notion of rightness in the sense of fitting.

Chapter 8 turns its focus to the *Zhuangzi* directly, and begins by critiquing existing relativist and skeptical interpretations of the text. The argument proceeds similarly to previous ones, holding that relativism and skepticism, when treated as universals or transcendental pretenses, are doomed to fail as descriptions of early Chinese texts. Rather, the authors argue for interpreting Zhuangzi as a heavily qualified skeptic not about knowledge (*zhi* 知), which he frequently employs positively, but about *shifei*, or about the meaning of words (127). Chapter 9 sets up the concept of a "stance", taken from philosopher Bas Van Fraassen's "empirical stance", as well as discusses a fruitful comparison between Zhuangzi and Wittgenstein (drawing on Billeter). The final chapter develops a Zhuangist critique of the debates between the Ruist and the Mohists, arguing that assumptions of shared linguistic community coherence against which disagreements arise could be doubted for Zhuangist (and Wittgensteinian) reasons. This suggests that perhaps the Rusits and Mohists do not truly disagree, but only think that they do. The book ends with an Appendix containing helpful notes documenting the authors' views on a number of important issues in *Zhuangzi* scholarship, such as the core terms and ideas of Zhuangist thought,

textual issues concerning chapter authenticity, as well as Zhuangzi's relationship with contemporary philosophers such as the Later Mohists.

The book excels at mindfully urging caution in Western interpretations of early Chinese thought, and lays a detailed guide for doing so in a way that does not make problematic assumptions about the universality of concepts. The language of using family resemblance as a starting point, as well as the notion of a quasi-universal, is usefully employed throughout the book in avoiding projections of Western conceptual priorities onto early Chinese thinkers. Concluding, for example, that *shifei* ignores the fact-value distinction, or that Zhuangzi's skepticism is about *shifei* rather than about knowledge, much less propositional knowledge in a Western sense, exemplify clear methodological improvements on some previous, less methodologically careful interpretations that the authors discuss.

That being said, there seems to be a tension between the Ma and Van Brakel's stated resistance to employing Western concepts in interpretations, on the one hand, and the myriad Western philosophical concepts they employ in their own methodology and interpretations, on the other. They claim, for instance, that "[it] is a good idea to avoid Western (philosophical) concepts and paradigms in comparative and Chinese philosophy," (9). But the authors themselves go on to utilize many Western concepts, including the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance, quasi-universals, the ideal language hypothesis, Nelson Goodman's sense of "rightness", Hilary Putnam's rejection of the fact-value distinction, Wittgensteinian language games, Van Fraassen's notion of a "stance", and more. Of course, the authors explain *why* it makes sense to elicit these concepts by offering arguments in favor of their utility. But their reliance on these ideas to some extent undermines their interpretive convictions as well as their

rejections of rival interpretations (often on the grounds of those interpretations' reliance on Western philosophical concepts).

One example of this tension comes from the conclusion of their discussion of Zhuangzi's skepticism. The authors write, "the labels of relativism and skepticism are not helpful (because of the multifarious meanings) and irrelevant (because they are not classical Chinese concepts) to promoting our understanding of the *Zhuangzi*," (110). But Ma and Van Brakel admit later on in the chapter that a qualified skepticism *can* be ascribed to Zhuangzi, so long as it is a skepticism "that concerns the meaning of words," rather than knowledge (127). So here, the authors heavily qualify and contextualize a notion of skepticism that fits the Zhuangist context, and offer it as an interpretation in spite of skepticism's multifarious meanings and non-Chinese origins. But then what is the problem with calling Zhuangzi a skeptic, provided that we do so with sufficient care and contextualization about what we mean by "skeptic"? In spite of their stated aversion to Western concepts, the authors' own methodology and interpretation seems to demonstrate instead that what really matters in our interpretations of early Chinese texts is not whether or not the concepts we utilize in our interpretations are Western, but whether or not they are sufficiently contextualized, argued for, lacking in transcendental pretenses, and meet other interpretive constraints. In this way, Ma and Van Brakel offer us a very strong framework for cleaning up our concepts to be successfully employed in our interpretations of early Chinese texts, but viewing this methodological feat as an attempt to de-Westernize Chinese philosophy interpretations seems an unnecessary burden.