The Hanfeizi 韓非子 is one of the most ignored works of classical Chinese thought. Its immeasurable influence on early Chinese political and philosophical spheres led it to become the principle text behind the Qin 秦 dynasty’s original unification of the Middle Kingdom. Subsequently, many of its policies survived through the Latter Han 漢 dynasty and throughout Chinese history. However, recent scholarship, both in the English and Chinese speaking worlds, has largely overlooked the historical impact of this work. JIANG Chongyue’s close investigation of the philosophy of the Hanfeizi happily breaks this trend. Comparing the work with other pre-Qin texts as well as Western thinkers (particularly Plato and Aristotle), Jiang also draws on arguments made by contemporary Chinese and Western commentators on the Hanfeizi.

The book begins with a discussion on the Hanfeizi’s authenticity, looking first at whether or not Hanfeizi himself actually wrote the text. Jiang starts by focusing on dating the author’s birth, as we only have a record of his death. Considering two major arguments, Jiang concludes there is not enough evidence to support either claim. He then moves into a more detailed study of the authenticity of the Hanfeizi itself. Scholars have proposed that inconsistencies in the text suggest it was not entirely written by Hanfeizi. Jiang looks at both sides of the debate and concludes that so-called “inconsistent” passages actually fit with the text.

In the second chapter, Jiang develops his analysis of the text to claim that “according to my understanding, there is a system [in the Hanfeizi] … that includes several parts, all of which revolve around and are developed according to one or more central concepts” (45). He appropriately titles this chapter “The Mutually Complementing and Contradictory Relationship between Laws, Methods, and Position.” Jiang begins by criticizing claims by Donald Munro and Max Weber that classical Chinese thought lacks an appreciation for logic. Jiang maintains that these scholars are simply unaccustomed to the Chinese style of thinking and thereby fail to see its logical consistency. He
explains that Chinese thinkers do not present logical analysis in the overt manner of their Western counterparts. This type of argument, quite common in Chinese scholarship, is unnecessary. It is precisely this difference in content and form that attracts contemporary Western philosophy professors to Chinese thought and allows the two cultures to learn from one another. Attempts to argue that classical Chinese philosophy is similar to Western philosophy shows a lack of confidence in the former, and often precludes the most important contributions it may make to broader understanding. Chinese and Western thought can and should have the same mutually complementary relationship that Jiang finds between laws, methods, and position. (In fact, there have been recent trends in this direction as scholars in China carry out comparative philosophy without trying to measure Chinese and Western thought. Philosophers such as Bái Tóngdòng 白彤東 and Yáng Guóróng 楊國榮 teach and publish comparative material that neither draws Chinese thought into the Western realm nor attempts to make arguments overtly “Chinese” in nature.)

The next section in this chapter deals with laws, fa 法, directly. Jiang notes that while fa is generally understood as written law or statutes, these were often born from unwritten rules and customs, which are also types of fa. He looks closely at the Spring and Autumn period understanding of fa, which is closely linked to xíng 刑 (“punishment,” “torture,” or “cut”). After continuing to outline fa and xíng, Jiang moves onto method, shù 術, which he explains as similar to dào 道 (“way,” “course,” “method”). Shù is a technical political term and “abbreviation for the method of names and forms” (62). Jiang explains that “names” here means (political) positions or theories, and that “forms” refers to ability. Method is about matching those who have necessary skills with the appropriate jobs. Going the other way, it can also be seen as doing what is required by one’s position. Jiang then goes on to explain position, shì 勢, giving a complex litany of potential understandings: “position,” “power,” “potency,” “force,” “circumstance,” “situation,” “natural power,” “strategic advantage,” “political purchase,” and so on. Dividing shì broadly into natural and human categories, he defines “manmade shì” as “using fa to compensate for the shortcomings or inadequacy of the simple [natural] shì of governing” (71). Overall, he sees the relationship between fa, shù, and shì as in conflict and yet indispensible to one another. “In the Hanfeizi, fa needs shù to compensate for its inadequacies, shù needs fa to make up for its insufficiencies, and shì needs fa to offset its shortcomings” (71). Jiang also explains that for Hanfeizi the goal of all three is to strengthen the ruler’s power. He then shows how the tensions between them form the opposite side of their complementary relationship.

This discussion leads into a comparison between Hanfeizi’s thought and that of the Confucian and Mohist traditions. In a manner typical of Jiang’s strongest contributions to contemporary scholarship, he uses comparison with the Hanfeizi to tease out thought-provoking aspects of Confucian thought. For example, he shows that Mengzí 孟子 and Kongzí 孔子 are relatively uninterested in, and even go so far as to denounce, fa (here, rules or standards) in politics. Jiang then compares the Hanfeizi to Indian and ancient Greek political philosophy in meticulous detail. In one representative and noteworthy section, Jiang examines each one of the four types of government Plato mentions in the Republic in relation to the Hanfeizi.

The third chapter of the book, titled “The Theoretical Foundation of Hanfeizi’s Political Thought,” investigates “human nature” (renxing 人性) and morality in the