

Video Lecture (YouTube)

Intellectuals and the State in the Warring States Period:

Were the *fajia* thinkers traitors to their class?

One of the most notable features of Warring States-period (Zhanguo 戰國, 453-221 BCE) political discourse is the extraordinary self-confidence of intellectually active “men-of-service” (shi 士). Having positioned themselves as collective possessors of the Way 道, these intellectuals claimed recognition as moral guides for both rulers and society at large. A major way in which they asserted their superiority over rulers was by proliferating historical (and quasi-historical) narratives that uniformly cast rulers as recipients of their advisers’ wisdom.

In this lecture, Yuri Pines, Lipson Professor of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, explores the counter-discourse aimed at undermining intellectuals’ authority. Two texts stand out for their systematic assault on fellow intellectuals. The *Book of Lord Shang* (*Shangjunshu* 商君書) was arguably the earliest major text to turn the tables on intellectuals who sought appointment on the basis of perceived moral superiority. But it was Han Feizi 韓非子 who most mercilessly exposed the moralizers’ fallacies and their abuse of history. The assault by the authors of these texts on their fellow intellectuals created a paradox, though. Why did they adopt the stance of “class traitors”?

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