

# On Han Fei's Enlightened Ruler



Ahyoung Lee  
City University of  
Hong Kong

**Date: 3 March 2023**

**Time: 2:00 pm (HKT)**

**Venue: Online (This talk will be held via ZOOM)**

**Speaker: Ahyoung Lee, City University of Hong Kong**

## Abstract

Recently, some students of Chinese philosophy have attempted to renew our understanding of the *Hanfeizi*, most of which tend to rely heavily on the idea of “enlightened rulers” (*mingzhu* 明主), in marked contrast to the conventional view of Han Fei as one of the staunch apologists for absolutism in early China. This talk aims to repudiate the revisionist understanding of the enlightened ruler as Han Fei’s ideal ruler, who is fully committed to the public good, on the ground of its incompatibility with the text’s core propositions, namely the centrality of mediocre rulers, the improbability of moral cultivation, and the danger of emulation. Rather, for Han Fei, the enlightened rulers are fundamentally mediocre in their character, at the center of which lies self-interestedness that, as part of human nature, cannot and does not have to be transformed. It is imperative that the ruler’s private interest converges with the public interest in that establishing and maintaining political order is in his best interest because it is the most effective way to secure his power and ultimately ensure his safety. Therefore, Han Fei’s enlightened rulers do not pursue the public interest as an end in itself but merely as a means to seek their own interests.

## Short Biography

**Ahyoung Lee** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Public and International Affairs of the City University of Hong Kong. With an academic background in political science and Chinese classics, her research interest centers on political philosophy, comparative political theory, and history of political thought. She is currently working on her dissertation on the conception of the (common) people, and the political relationship between the ruler and the ruled in the context of pre-Qin China.