1 Chinese Philosophy

An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy examines the major philosophical concepts, themes and texts in early Chinese philosophy, roughly from the time of Confucius in the sixth century BCE to the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE). This is the period of the origins of Chinese philosophy insofar as the extant texts reveal elements of reflective and systematic thinking. The philosophies discussed here are a representative selection of intellectual debates of early China. The aim is not to present a comprehensive and exhaustive survey of Chinese philosophical themes and texts, an encyclopaedic task. Rather, the topics covered in this book are selective and representative of the field. In this way, we may engage at a deeper level with a number of prominent issues debated by thinkers of the time, and which have continuing relevance today.

This book attempts to achieve a balance between articulating the general spirit and style of Chinese philosophy as a disciplinary field, and identifying the more distinctive features of each of the philosophies. The doctrines discussed include Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, Legalism, Theory of Names (by the Mingjia and Dialecticians) and Buddhism. Discussions will focus on concepts, themes, conceptual frameworks, elements of philosophical reasoning, argumentative devices in the selected traditions, and on debates and disagreements between them. Understanding the disagreements is at least as important as recognising the distinctive ideas of each tradition, as it draws attention both to contrasts and common elements of those traditions as they evolved alongside others.

Although Buddhism was introduced into China toward the end of the period of our concern, it would be remiss not to include some discussion of its key concepts. Buddhism went through various transformations from the time it was introduced into China and gradually began to take on a distinctive character, that of *Chinese* Buddhism, from around the sixth century. It also became an influential doctrine and shaped the subsequent development

of Chinese philosophy. Many of its features found their way into existing Chinese traditions, especially Daoism and Neo-Confucianism. However, in order to keep the volume to a manageable size, it has not been possible to include a discussion of Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism was a development of Confucian doctrines and was a prominent philosophical movement from the tenth century, although some of its origins may be traced as far back as Han Confucianism. Many of the discussions by Neo-Confucian thinkers focus on metaphysical and meta-philosophical issues and it is unfortunate that these cannot be included. In order to include discussions of Neo-Confucianism we would have had to cover at least another eleven centuries of Chinese philosophy. Hopefully, the discussions in this volume will provide readers with a good understanding of the fundamental conceptual frameworks and concerns of Chinese philosophy and thereby equip readers to understand later developments in Chinese philosophy.

A second objective of this volume is to capture a sense of intellectual debt and cross-influences between the traditions. While some attention has been given to chronology, the primary concern is the coherent presentation of philosophical themes. In other words, thematic coherence takes priority over chronological order. For instance, the *Yijing* (*The Book of Changes*) is discussed relatively late in the volume because of the influential interpretations of it by thinkers during the Han Dynasty. Yet, many of the ideas were nascent in earlier discussions.

Some attempt is made to compare the features of Chinese philosophy with parallel aspects of western philosophy. However, the aim of such comparisons is to elucidate the characteristics of Chinese philosophy rather than to present and account for differences in the two fields as such. Attention is also given to contemporary debates in the field of Chinese philosophy by modern and contemporary scholars who work in China and beyond. Many of these scholars are enthused by insights in the different philosophies and committed to demonstrating their relevance to the contemporary world. Their interest in Chinese philosophy extends beyond the study of the texts themselves, and toward issues of pragmatic import. These scholars are both inheritors of these traditions and contributors to them.

This book should be read in conjunction with a close reading of the primary texts. If it is not possible to read more complete versions of the texts, readers should at least obtain a reliable compendium of primary sources such as Wm Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom's *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (Vol. 1: 1999) or Wing-tsit Chan's *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1963a).

Origins of Chinese Philosophy

Prolonged unrest in China during the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu*) period (722–476 BCE) and the Warring States (*Zhanguo*) period (475–221 BCE) brought an end to the feudalistic Zhou dynasty (1122–221 BCE). During this extended period of turmoil, many men who had previously lived in privileged circumstances were displaced and forced to seek alternative means of living. Many of them had views about the causes of the unrest and proposed solutions for rectifying it. The Spring and Autumn period saw the rise of scholar-officials (*shi*), men who gave advice to those in power and who were identified by loyalty to their ministers (Hsu 1965). Confucius and many of his pupils were part of this phenomenon (Hsu 1965: 34–7). Although the *shi* had been displaced from their previous privileged positions, they had rapidly regained social status and established themselves as a distinct social and cultural elite. Those who were capable made themselves indispensable to their ministers and began to play more active roles than the ministers (Hsu 1965: 8). As a result, there was much competition among those in power to attract the most capable advisers (Hsu 1999: 572–83).

It was in this climate of widespread patronage of ideas and learning that we see the beginnings of systematic inquiry in China. The scholar-officials offered their visions for rectifying society. The urgency of the political situation shaped the theories of this period; many of the discussions focused on morality, political society and good governance. The *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist text composed between the fourth and third centuries BCE, describes the proliferation of ideas at that time:

> The empire is in utter confusion, sagehood and excellence are not clarified, we do not have the one Way and Power…There is an analogy in the ears, eyes, nose and mouth; all have something they illuminate but they cannot exchange their functions, just as the various specialities of the Hundred Schools all have their strong points and at times turn out useful. However, they are not inclusive, not comprehensive; these are men each of whom has his own little corner. (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter 33, trans. Graham 2001: 275)

Scholars have adopted the phrase *baijia zhi xue* (Hundred Schools of Learning) to characterise the diversity of ideas and the spirit of debate of the time.[1] The term '*jia*' (literally 'house'; meaning 'group') referred to the doctrinal groups the early thinkers identified with. However, the classifications of doctrine

(*xue*) were largely unsystematic during the early period of Chinese intellectual history. Sima Tan (died 110 BCE), a historian, was among the first to categorise the different lines of thought in early China. He simplified their doctrines under six categories:

(1) *Yin-Yang school*: grounded in a belief in two major principles *yin* (female) and *yang* (male) and applied in particular to cosmology;
(2) *Ru school*: the school of the literati, the scholars. Confucians were included in this group;
(3) *Mo school*: the Mohist school, a close-knit organisation of soldiers and craftsmen with strict discipline, founded by Mozi;
(4) *Ming school*: the Mingjia. Thinkers categorised in this group discussed topics relating to the correspondence between language and reality;
(5) *Fa school*: comprised by the Legalists, emphasised punishments (*fa*) as a primary instrument of social control;
(6) *Dao-De school*: comprised by thinkers who emphasised the way (*dao*) and power (*de*) in debates in metaphysics and political and social philosophy. (Fung 1948: 30–1)

Sima Tan's classification of the six schools of thought was rather haphazard. He identified three of them (*yin-yang*, *fa* and *dao-de*) according to their doctrinal commitments, one according to the social profile of its adherents (*ru*, the literati), one according to the name the group had given itself (*mo*, following the name of their founder), and one according to the area of inquiry (*ming*: names). This complexity, present from the beginning, remains an important feature of Chinese intellectual debate. Against the background of many competing views, argumentation and justification of ideas were important, as was thinking that synthesised a range of perspectives. In the following section, we attend to a number of distinctive features of Chinese philosophy.

Features of Chinese Philosophy

Self Cultivation

The early Chinese thinkers believed the purpose of learning was to better oneself and society. They discussed different concepts of self cultivation (*xiushen*). The Confucians believed that learning and the cultivation of virtue were aspects of the same process. For them, the cultivated person was a person who

could legitimately lead the people. This belief has had a broad influence in Chinese society. An important and lasting legacy of this belief is the institution of the Civil Service Examinations, a system for the recruitment of top scholars for the civil service. This system was founded on the belief that scholars of the classical texts will also be adept practitioners of good government and was in place for over 1300 years, from the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE) to the Qing (1644–1911 CE).

While belief in the unity of wisdom and virtue has strong Confucian overtones, thinkers of the other schools also deliberated on the topic of *xiushen*. In the *Mozi* text, associated with Mohism, there is an entire chapter devoted to *xiushen*. There, its author discusses the development of a commitment to benefit the world (Schwartz 1985: 158). Philosophical Daoism, associated with the texts *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*, advocated intuitive and experiential grasp of *dao*, leading to a way of life unsullied by conventional practices, beliefs and expectations. Self cultivation in this tradition involves undoing many of the effects of socialisation and nurturing one's life according to the axioms of non-conditioned action (*wuwei*) and spontaneity (*ziran*). There were also religious Daoists, especially during the Han Dynasty, who were preoccupied with attaining immortality; they interpreted *dao* in religious and mystical terms. For them, *xiushen* involved esoteric practices, rigorous discipline of the body and explorations in alchemy (Robinet 1997; Kohn 1993). Yang Zhu (c. 350 BCE) who is often described as an 'egoist', promoted a philosophy of 'each for himself' (*weiwo*). His idea of nurturing the self, which included attention to the body, was to keep the self unadulterated from corrupting influences in society.[2] Even the Dialecticians, who debated seemingly abstract topics relating to language and its connection with reality, were concerned to provide practical advice to those in power (Graham 1989: 75–95).

For the early thinkers, it was not simply that intellectual inquiry had to have practical outcomes. More importantly, the pursuit of learning incorporated a sense of morality. This meant that conceptions of morality were often articulated in dynamic and situational terms in order to capture the developmental nature of self cultivation. As we will see in the following chapters, discussions of ethics in Chinese philosophy almost always engage with issues at the level of practical application; these may differ from stage to stage or vary from person to person according to ability. This does not mean that Chinese philosophers did not consider abstract matters. There was much speculative thought, including the contemplation of logical puzzles (especially

by the Dialecticians), metaphors, analogies and suggestive imagery. Overall, however, less attention was paid to discussions about universal or normative standards and principles. The overwhelming emphasis on experience and practice in discussions of ethics may have instigated Immanuel Kant's disparaging view of Chinese philosophy:

> Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient…Their teacher Confucius teaches in his writings nothing outside a moral doctrine designed for the princes…and offers examples of former Chinese princes…But a concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese…In order to arrive at an idea…of the good [certain] studies would be required, of which [the Chinese] know nothing.[3]

But we must understand that the approach to ethics in Chinese philosophy does not begin with the task of deciding on right or good moral principles, in Kant's words, 'to arrive at an idea of the good'. From the perspective of self cultivation, an 'idea of the good' is a static concept and therefore inadequate to capture the needs of people at different developmental phases.[4] Furthermore, individuals develop their moral capacities at different rates and to different extents. The early Chinese thinkers recognised that while there are norms of action and behaviour, these must invariably be adapted to their contexts of application by particular individuals. For them, the basic problem was not to devise norms or standards for action but how these could be applied by different people in different situations. The primary moral question in Chinese philosophy is not, What ought I to do? but What is the best way to live?

Understanding the Self: Relationships and Contexts

In Chinese philosophy, an individual is essentially a relationally constituted and situated self. This means that there are many factors that shape the self, including its relationships with significant others and its experiences within its historical, cultural, social and political contexts. Rarely, if ever, is an individual expected to act as an independent, detached moral agent, or judged according to an idealised paradigm of independent selfhood. According to the picture of self in Chinese philosophy, relationships and environments largely determine an individual's values, thoughts, beliefs, motivations, behaviours and actions.

In a brief survey of the different doctrinal groups in Chinese philosophy, we see that this general feature is embodied in the different philosophies. Pre-Confucian discussions focused on the responsibilities of the ruler, the Son of Heaven (*tianzi*), who was the authoritative representative of Heaven (*tian*) to the people. Early Confucian and Mohist debates focused primarily on human relationships in the socio-political context. Later Confucians (during the Warring States and Han periods) also discussed the relationship between Heaven (*tian*), Earth (*di*) and humanity. Daoist thinkers looked beyond human relationships in their consideration of *dao*. Discussions in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, two major Daoist texts, drew on analogies between the human and natural worlds. The texts emphasise the importance of understanding all entities, processes, events, causation and energies in their contexts. In the Han dynasty, cosmological thinking, which holds that there are connections between the cosmic and human realms, was a popular theme expounded on by both Confucians and Daoists. The *Book of Changes*, a text used for divination and whose composition is dated at around the ninth century BCE, was reinterpreted during this time to reinforce claims about continuities and correspondences in the human, natural and cosmic worlds (Schwartz 1985: 358–70). As we shall see, the pictures of self-realisation in the different philosophies are dramatically different and often the cause of deep disagreement. Nevertheless, they share a similar fundamental picture of life and existence. This is the view that individuals are inextricably relational and are contextually situated. In the chapters that follow, we examine the manifestations of this conception of life: good relationships are central to a good life, as is a stable society within which the individual negotiates his relationships with others.

From a contemporary perspective, the concept of self as primarily related to others and embedded in its environment raises concerns about the status of the individual. For instance, would a self conceived in this way be overwhelmed by its relationships: the aim in one's life might become an unbearable juggling task of being a mother, a daughter, an employee, a teacher, an aunt, a niece, and a wife? This is a picture of self created and determined almost entirely by its roles.[5] Similar concerns are raised in conjunction with Confucian or Chinese societies embodying a collectivist outlook, as contrasted with the situation in individualist societies which allow for and encourage responsibility, creativity and other expressions of the self (see the discussion in Tu 1972: 192–3). There is some basis for the concern

that Chinese philosophy in general tends to focus on collective interests rather than individual interests, although we must resist the tendency to characterise ideologies in a dichotomous way, either as individualist or collectivist. It is inaccurate to say that the different Chinese philosophies do not attend to matters relating to the interests of individuals. They do consider details pertaining to particular individuals and events, but there is often a sense that it is exceedingly difficult to isolate matters that pertain only to one individual's interests.

We will see in the discussions that follow that instead of either 'collectivist' or 'individualist' Chinese philosophy tends to assume interdependence between entities or individuals. There are many discussions about the overlaps between individual interests and common interests, reminding us that it is artificial to think solely in terms of either self-interest or servitude to others. This applies to relationships among humans, human relationships with natural entities, and the place of humanity in its social and natural environments. It is not that Chinese philosophy does not have a conception of individual achievement. Rather, an individual's achievements, ingenuity, resourcefulness, as well as malfunctions and deficiencies, are only properly understood in light of a person's place in the conditioning environment. However, this is not to say that the environment takes precedence over individuals, as individuals may alter their contexts. In this way, neither the individual nor the whole has primacy over the other.

Conceptions of Harmony

Social harmony and stability were critical issues for the early thinkers in China. The period of the 'Hundred Schools', when Chinese philosophy first flourished in China, was a period of social unrest that lasted for over five centuries. The thinkers deliberated on the institutions, methods and processes that could ensure a more stable and peaceful existence. The Confucian vision of an ideal society sees good relationships as fundamental to social stability. The family was a microcosm of the state, which was the macrocosm encompassing edifying human interrelations, guided by institutions and governed by a benevolent (*ren*) sage king. The Mohists disagreed with the Confucian vision. They were worried that the Confucian focus on close relationships would inculcate partiality rather than altruism. They argued that, from the state's point of view, it was necessary to nurture general concern of each

person for everyone else. The Confucian approach, which advocated the cultivation of special relationships, is effectively a system that fosters particular loyalties. According to the Mohists, the outcome, writ large, is war between families and states. The Mohists were convinced that the means to achieve harmony was through standardisation. They believed that it was important to have standards (*fa*) in order to ensure consistency in the way people were treated. In other words, standards were important institutions that contributed to socio-political stability. The Legalists shared these views about standards although they had very different conceptions of their purpose and implementation. While the Mohists sought to 'standardise' or normalise altruism, the Legalists conceived of it as an instrument by which to control the people. Their ultimate commitment was to maintain the power of the ruler. Uniformity was also important in the project of the Dialecticians, which grew out of early Mohist concerns. The Dialecticians aimed to ensure unity of doctrines and beliefs by settling disagreements. They believed that the root of disputes lay in improperly defined concepts and their applications, and that disputes would be settled if the connections between terms and their referents were clarified.

Among the early thinkers, the Daoists stand apart in their hesitancy about social order and uniformity. Daoist philosophy embraces multiplicity and plurality, often reflecting on natural kinds and events in the natural world in order to cast doubt on anthropocentric and reductive interpretations of events and processes. The Daoist philosophical texts express a sense of chaotic unpredictability in phenomena; numerous events defy attempts by humans to classify, control and manipulate. The *Zhuangzi* even seems to celebrate the messy cacophony of differences between individuals and views. Nevertheless, harmony remains an important end in Daoist philosophy. However, unlike the other philosophies, it does not hold that the elimination of individual differences is a prerequisite for harmony within the whole. According to the Daoist picture, attempts by other thinkers to systematise and unify difference actually caused fragmentation and dislocation. By contrast, the Daoists viewed harmony as a lively interchange between different points of view. In spite of its fundamental divergences from the other schools of thought, Daoist philosophy seeks an eventual coming-together in plurality. Passages in the *Daodejing* make frequent references to the all-embracing perspective of *dao*. In the *Zhuangzi*, there is also a particular concern that attempted solutions do not impose a false unity of multiplicities. There are many philosophically

significant features of the holistic point of view in Chinese philosophy. From the perspective of the whole, relationships between individuals, beings and groups are not reducible. That is, the whole is not merely the sum of its parts; a proper account of it must include consideration of individuals, their relationships with others, and their place in the whole.

Conceptions of Change

Chinese philosophy posits continuities and correspondences between individual entities. This approach is articulated to different extents within the different schools. We see its clearest manifestation in the debates during the late Warring States and Han dynasties, when much effort was put into articulating systems of correspondences between cosmic and natural events (such as eclipses, earthquakes, positions of the planets, climate, weather and seasons), and events in the human world including those relating to human health, social institutions and political leadership. *The Book of Changes* was re-interpreted during this period and its assumptions associated with divinatory practices were explored. *The Book of Changes*, as its name implies, focuses on change and how its effects can extend across different realms. It holds that change is not a discontinuous, isolable phenomenon. Whether directly or indirectly, individuals may be affected by changes in their environments. This means that individuals are exposed to much that is beyond their immediate control. Likewise, their impact and influence on others can extend beyond what is immediately obvious or directly quantifiable. This is the theory of *ganying*, mutual resonance. The notion of mutual resonance crystallises the concept of interdependent selfhood, capturing the susceptibility of individuals to factors external to their being and beyond their immediate control, as well as their power to affect others. But the apparent fragility of the individual must not be interpreted solely in negative terms. Effects of change may also be positive. Furthermore, because of the myriad possibilities in mutual transformation, individuals should not merely seek what is only in their self-interest. The well-being of others whom they stand in relation to, and the robustness of their wider environment, are very likely to be constitutive of the good of individuals.

The concept of change is very closely linked to that of harmony. As we have discussed in the previous section, harmony may be thought of in different ways in Chinese philosophies: conformity, unity in purpose, cooperation, integration, order, stability and balance. Of course, these approaches capture