# 1    Chinese Philosophy

Over the last two decades, interest in Chinese philosophy has grown significantly among Anglophone scholars, students and interested lay public: more excellent translations of original texts have been produced; scholarly journals highlighting the field established; successful international conferences organised; and monographs and anthologies published. The field has broadened in its engagement across disciplinary boundaries, in studies that bring together philosophical perspectives with historical, archaeological, religious or anthropological approaches. Just as important, dialogue across Western and Chinese philosophical traditions is burgeoning, fuelled in part by the conviction that Chinese philosophy can make significant and insightful contributions to contemporary debates.

*An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy* examines major philosophical concepts, themes and texts in early Chinese philosophy, paying special attention to the period between the fifth and the second centuries BCE, the earliest time from which we have a substantial collection of texts expressing a plethora of views. We may think of this period as one where we begin to see the origins of Chinese philosophy. The extant texts from this period incorporate key elements of philosophy: presentation of and reflection on worldviews, unmasking of assumptions, argumentation and justification of ideas and debates on values and ideals. The primary aim of this book is to introduce a representative overview of key philosophical ideas and debates proposed by thinkers of the time and which continue to be relevant today. 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.

This book is introductory in a few ways. First, it covers representative ideas, themes and debates so that these fundamental aspects of Chinese philosophy

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may inform further investigations into more complex and lesser-known areas. Second, it seeks to capture the spirit of the classical Chinese texts, but it cannot replace close reading of these texts. Good translations are available of many texts and recommendations are included in the list of suggested readings at the end of each chapter. If it is not possible to read more complete translations of the texts, readers should at least obtain a reliable compendium of primary sources such as William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom's *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (vol. 1: 1999). Finally, the discussions here focus on the foundational elements of Chinese philosophy, that is, from a period where there is a reasonable volume of texts up to and including ideas from Chinese Buddhism. Buddhist ideas and practices were introduced into China in the first century CE and Buddhism was established only from the sixth century as a distinctive tradition (i.e. different from its Indian origins and not simply fitted within what the Chinese traditions had to offer). Therefore, it is important to include it in this introduction to the field, especially as it shaped the subsequent development of Chinese intellectual history.

The book attempts to achieve a balance between articulating the general spirit and approach of Chinese philosophy as a disciplinary field and identifying the more distinctive features of each of the traditions within the field. Confucian, Mohist, Daoist, Legalist and Buddhist traditions feature in our discussions. It will also examine parallels and divergences across traditions, at times focusing on disagreements between certain representative figures. Understanding the disagreements is at least as important as recognising the distinctive ideas of each tradition; this approach draws attention to both contrasts and common elements of those traditions as they evolved alongside others.

## Thinkers, Texts and Traditions

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 Zhou dynasty (1122–221 BCE). During this extended period of turmoil, many men who had previously lived in privileged circumstances were forced to seek alternative means of living. These men had views about the causes of the unrest and proposed solutions for rectifying it. Confucius and many of his followers, sometimes described as scholar-officials (*shi*), competed with others for the ear of those in power (Hsu 1965: 34–7). The urgency of the political and social unrest shaped the views 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.  (chapter 33, trans. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, 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 (e.g. Fung 1952: 132–69). The term "*jia*" (literally "house"; meaning "group") referred to the doctrinal groups the early thinkers were associated with. We need to be wary of how the "groups" are classified. Approximately two centuries after the Warring States period, Sima Tan (d. 110 BCE), a historian of the Han court, categorised the different lines of thought into six groups, often translated as the "six schools of thought."[1] This classification in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*) proved to be extremely influential, dominating the study of Chinese thought for centuries to come. The six groups (*liu jia*) were:

(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 (Disputers concerned with names). Thinkers categorised in this group discussed topics relating to the correspondence between language and reality;
(5) *Fa* school: comprised by the Legalists, who emphasised penal law (*fa*) as a primary instrument of social control;

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[1] Sima Tan had started on the project to compile a chronicle of Chinese history. He did not complete the project, although his son, Sima Qian (c. 145 BCE–c.86 BCE) did. Entitled *Shiji* (*Records of the Grand Historian*), the work covers over two thousand years of Chinese history up until the rule of Emperor Wu (156–87 BCE) in the Han dynasty.

(6) *Dao-De* school: comprised by thinkers who emphasised the way (*dao*) and power (*de*) in debates in metaphysics and political and social philosophy as well as in practice. (Fung 1948: 30–1)

Sima Tan's classification of the six schools of thought was 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). These six categories are not merely descriptive. For Sima, each of the first five groups is deficient in some way, with the *dao-de* group being at the apex, espousing exemplary doctrine and practice. It is clear that this classification was driven by his own beliefs.

Understanding this classification helps to demonstrate how there is no straightforward way to make the connections between thinkers, texts and traditions. In Sima Tan's case, his polemical stance had been transmitted through the centuries as an authoritative, historical account of debates during the Warring States period, perhaps because it received official sanction, and perhaps its title contains the words "Records" and "History," amongst other reasons.

Quite a few of the texts discussed in this book bear the name of the alleged founder of a particular tradition, but this should not be taken as an indication of any of the following: that the text was authored by the founder, that the named founder was actually the person who initiated the tradition, or that participants in a tradition, as we know of them today, promoted their ideas in the belief that they were proponents of that tradition. Some of the texts, such as the *Analects* of Confucius and the Daoist *Daodejing*, are compiled collections written by different hands. Some others, such as the *Zhuangzi*, were heavily edited after their composition or compilation. Many were lost or destroyed during the period of unrest leading up to the establishment of the first empire, the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE), and during the reign of its emperor, Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE). During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), official court-sponsored histories were written and existing texts classified, compiled and edited. The Han rewriting of many pre-Qin texts gives us reason to pause when attributing ideas to particular pre-Qin thinkers.

Another factor that complicates our discussion of Chinese philosophy is the commentarial tradition in Chinese intellectual history. Commentators

would provide comments on and interpretations of the ideas and topics in texts. The comments are extensive, often offering a passage-by-passage commentary and exceeding the length of the original text. For complex reasons which varied from text to text, particular commentaries came to dominate the interpretation of the text, hence becoming the orthodox view of how the text was to be read and understood. One example of this is the commentary on the *Analects* written by Zhu Xi (1130–1200), a thinker whose ideas significantly shaped the neo-Confucian tradition. Zhu Xi's commentary on the *Analects* was so influential that it overshadowed a much earlier, important commentary by He Yan (195–249). Similarly, Wang Bi's (226–49) commentary on the *Daodejing* and Guo Xiang's (d. 312) commentary on the *Zhuangzi* dominated the understanding of these two texts, respectively. Indeed, there are questions on how much of the extant *Zhuangzi* text has been edited and reorganised by Guo Xiang.

The discovery of texts in unearthed tombs further compounds the difficulty of making thinker–text–tradition connections. Some collections of texts have been dated to parallel periods as those in our study, including the Mawangdui silk manuscripts in 1973, from a tomb sealed in 168 BCE (which includes a version of the *Yijing* and a set of known but unseen Daoist texts such as the *Yellow Emperor's Four Canons*); Guodian bamboo strips in 1993, dated to approximately 300 BCE (including many Confucian texts as well as versions of the *Daodejing*); and those held at the Shanghai Metropolitan Museum, dated to approximately 300 BCE (comprising primarily Confucian texts, including the *Yijing*). Together with other caches of unearthed texts, these collections, containing previously unknown or unseen texts as well as versions of extant texts, present fresh angles and approaches (as in the *Yellow Emperor's Four Canons* and the Guodian *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, for instance), casting new light on existing issues and debates. They have also challenged our understanding of Chinese philosophy in a major way: for example, the Guodian corpus contains texts aligned with both Confucian and Daoist traditions. This collection of texts has prompted the question of why they would be part of the same "library" if, as we have come to understand, there is longstanding hostility between proponents of the Confucian and Daoist traditions. Of course, its owner could have been interested in learning broadly. However, the Guodian's *Daodejing* (*Laozi C*) does not seem to reject values associated with the Confucians, in the way the received version does. Was the Confucian-Daoist hostility a later development or fabrication? If so,

how should we think about what has been until now the *basic* categorisations of "Confucianism" and "Daoism"? The ideas of lineages, traditions and Chinese intellectual history more broadly must now be approached with greater caution.

We should keep these cautionary notes in mind as we work through this book. There are, however, a couple of caveats. For stylistic reasons, the discussions in the book sometimes associate particular thinkers with specific ideas. Readers should assume that phrases such as "Mencius believed that *x*" indicate that the source of the idea is to be found in the *Mencius*, where Mencius is sometimes presented as the spokesperson for the idea. There is no suggestion that Mencius was without doubt the author of the text. Second, in spite of the concerns about traditional categories such as "Confucianism" and "Daoism," the chapter divisions in the book are made primarily on the basis of doctrinal affiliation, for reasons of accessibility. The discussions in the chapters will indicate, where appropriate, gaps created by the use of these categories, so that readers are aware of their limitations.

We turn our attention next to a number of prominent features of Chinese philosophy.

## Features of Chinese Philosophy

### Self-Cultivation

The early Chinese thinkers believed that the transformation of the self was the answer to the unrest of the time. They discussed different methods of self-cultivation (*xiushen*) in relation to their respective visions of ideal society. The Confucians believed that cultivation involved discipline and rigour in both reflection and practice. It was believed that, in the process of cultivation, a person would learn from the past, observe human behaviour, reflect on his or her interactions with others and provide and gain mutual support from those who are like-minded. These practices would enable him or her gradually to develop an appreciation of relational attachment, obligations and responsibilities that arise from his or her particular place or roles in society; and understand the importance of taking a stance on matters, whether in relation to one's superior or against the sway of the common people. There were differences among the various Confucian thinkers concerning the resources that were available to humanity: were humans born

with moral sensibilities and capabilities? What kinds of social structures would best engender self-cultivation?

In the Mohist text, the *Mozi*, there is an entire chapter devoted to self-cultivation. There, its author discusses the cultivation of a commitment to benefit the world (Schwartz 1985: 158). The Mohist standard of benefit – improvement of collective welfare – was sometimes understood as antithetical to the Confucian vision due to its (perceived) lack of interest in close relational ties. Texts of the Daoist tradition such as the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* advocated intuitive and experiential grasp of *dao*, as opposed to life submerged within conventional practices, beliefs and expectations. The instruments of acculturation, including norms and prohibitions, as well as language itself, are held suspect. Self-cultivation in this tradition involves undoing many of the effects of socialisation and nurturing one's life according to the axioms of nonconditioned action (*wuwei*) and self-so-ness (*ziran*). The *Zhuangzi*, for example, provides many images of skilled craftsmen – among them wheel-makers and cicada-catchers – who have rejected conventional forms of learning and pursuits and who exhibit delightful mastery of their craft. There were also religious Daoists for whom *xiushen* involved esoteric practices, rigorous discipline of the body and explorations in the use of alchemy (Kohn 1993; Robinet 1997). Yang Zhu (c. 350 BCE), who Mencius described as an egoist, was said to have promoted a philosophy of "each for himself" (*weiwo*). His idea of nurturing the self, which included attention to the body, was to keep it unadulterated from corrupting influences in society (Graham 1989: 53–64).[2] Even the Legalists, who were concerned about the maintenance of the power of the ruler, gave cultivation a central place in their program. For them, it was critical for the ruler to develop strategies and skills especially to manage the officials on whom the ruler was dependent.

For the early Chinese thinkers, cultivation was necessary because it equipped individuals with the skills and capabilities to deal with situations as they arose. It seems that they were deeply aware of the need to be *responsive* and were therefore focused on the practicalities of life. As we will see in the following chapters, in the early Chinese texts, considerations about how best to resolve a situation may differ from one individual to another, or

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[2] Mencius (a Confucian thinker) was a harsh critic of Yang Zhu, noting the latter's unwillingness to shoulder social and civic responsibilities. See the discussion in Graham 1989: 53–64.

according to the situation, or they might take into account the particular people one happens to be interacting with. This may help explain why not many of the thinkers justified their claims primarily through the use of principles. Here, the suggestion is not that these thinkers did not consider theoretical or conceptual issues; there was much speculative thought, including the contemplation of logical puzzles (especially by the Mingjia), as well as the use of metaphors, analogies and suggestive imagery. Nor was it the case, more specifically, that ethical principles did not figure in their thinking about moral issues. Rather, their discussions tend to focus on concrete events, and it could be that Immanuel Kant, having noticed this feature of their discussions, disparaged them as mere "examples":

> 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]

Kant's observations (that the Confucian texts offer many examples) are right, although his conclusion is questionable. He assumes that there is only one approach to moral deliberation, which necessarily begins with the determination of "an idea of the good." For the early Chinese thinkers, the differences from one situation to another mattered, and the examples demonstrated a range of possible and alternative ways to handle a situation. Familiarity with existing norms and possibilities, understanding limits and constraints and practising one's responses in different situations – elements of cultivation – helped a person to understand the alternatives available to him or her in light of his or her capabilities. From this point of view, simply to know moral principles or even to be committed to them was practically inert. As the *Mozi* tells us, even if a blind person can articulate the difference between black and white, he does not know black, because he cannot select black objects from white ones.

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[3] Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Kant und die Religionen des Osten*. Beihefte zum Jahrbuch der Albertus-Universität, Königsberg/Pr. (Kitzingen-Main: Holzner Verlag, 1954), pp. 104, translated by Julia Ching (1978: 169). Ching focuses on fundamental differences in the structures and dynamics of early Chinese philosophy and Kantian philosophy.

### Relationships and Contexts

In the texts we examine, an individual is conceived of essentially in relational terms and as a situated being. An individual's uniqueness rests only partly in the individual's possession of those characteristics which set him or her apart from other individuals. It also derives from the individual's place within the contextual environment and the relationships the individual has therein. The resulting picture of self is complex, with many factors shaping it, including its relationships with significant others and its experiences within its historical, cultural, social and political contexts. In ethical terms, 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. This has important implications for how we understand decision-making processes, choice and responsibility.

In the different traditions in Chinese philosophy, this view of self is expressed in a range of ways. Confucian and Mohist debates focused primarily on human relationships in the sociopolitical context. They disagreed on whether close affective ties should occupy a central place in social life, with the Mohists being particularly mindful of the implications of such an arrangement. Both Mohists and Confucians also appealed to heaven (*tian*), sometimes as the ground of human morality and sometimes simply to set out the way things naturally were. Especially during the Han period and beyond, Confucian discourse incorporated a tripartite relationship between heaven (*tian*), earth (*di*) and humanity. This encompassing vision placed humanity in a position of responsibility, that is, to realise the dictates of heaven on earth.

Daoist thinkers looked beyond human relationships in their consideration of *dao*. Discussions in the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* drew on analogies between the human and natural worlds. The texts emphasise the importance of understanding all entities, processes, events, causes 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 as well as in syncretic texts such as the *Huainanzi*. The *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*), a text used for divination, was reinterpreted during this time to reinforce claims about continuities and correspondences in the human, natural and cosmic worlds (Schwartz 1985: 358–70). From around the fifth century, some strands of

Chinese Buddhist philosophy developed a distinctive view of an individual self as "empty" (*kong*). Yet, paradoxically because the self is empty, its distinctiveness arises as a result of its interdependent relationships with other entities. These traditions offer different views of what was "out there," the world as we know it, and how individuals should orientate themselves in the world. In these accounts, metaphysical, epistemological and ethical elements are integrated. As we will see, the pictures of self-realisation in the different philosophies are dramatically different and often the cause of deep disagreement.

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, within the human sphere, would a self conceived in this way be overwhelmed by its relationships? Might the aim in one's life be 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 (see Tu 1985: 51–66). Similar concerns have been raised in conjunction with Confucian or Chinese societies embodying a collectivist outlook, as contrasted with societies that place more weight on the individual and which allow for and encourage responsibility, creativity and other expressions of the self (see de Bary 1991; 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 the conception of relational and situated self simply as collectivist. It is inaccurate to say that the different Chinese traditions 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 an individual or to draw clear lines of responsibility on that basis.

We will see in the discussions that follow that instead of being "collectivist," 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, as well as the place of humanity in its social and natural environments. It is not that Chinese philosophy does not have a conception of individual