

Pre-Confucian China

Although there is evidence of advanced civilization in China in very ancient times, actual recorded history begins with the Shang dynasty, in the fourteenth century B.C.E. Available evidence indicates that this was an advanced civilization. For example, art from this period is quite sophisticated, even according to modern standards. This dynasty ended with the invasion by more primitive Chou people who, according to tradition, established the Chou dynasty in 1122 B.C.E.

Although more primitive artistically and culturally, the Chou were a powerful and determined people. They conquered huge portions of China by sheer force and might. Not having the means to administer all of the conquered territory as one central state, the Chou delegated administrative power to friendly chiefs and nobles, providing parcels of land in exchange for the friendship and cooperation of these newly endowed landholders. Apparently, this feudal system worked quite well during the early Chou period, as each vassal had considerable freedom and power within his own territory, and this seemed well worth the taxes and the military conscription owed the king in return for these privileges. Although there is nothing to indicate that the first half of the Chou period was anywhere near as advanced as the earlier Shang period, it was a time of relative peace and security within the structure of the new feudal system. And because of this peace it came to be regarded later on as a “golden period” in China’s early history.

This peace was relatively short-lived, however. It was only the might of the Chou kings that prevented the vassals and the oppressed serfs from rebelling. As time went on, it was recognized that the kings did not really have the strength to control all of the conquered land, even through the device of feudalism. There came to be greater and greater unrest in the country. Feudal lord turned against feudal lord, and serfs rebelled when they thought the lords sufficiently weak and ineffectual. As neighboring states became weakened by war and strife they were attacked by larger and more remote lords.

By 770 B.C.E. things had degenerated to the point where a coalition of feudal lords were able to launch a successful attack on the Chou capital in the west. They killed the king and usurped his power. From this date on the Chou kings were puppets controlled by the coalition of feudal lords who happened to be in power at the time. Power was constantly shifting hands, and war and strife were the order of the day during the two centuries immediately prior to Confucius’ birth. Violence and intrigue characterized the political scene and expediency took the place of morality. Cheating and trickery provided the basis for the intrigues that functioned in lieu of political government. The costs of these intrigues and the resulting wars are almost unimaginable in terms of poverty, suffering, and death.

Confucianism

It is in the context of this severe crisis crippling China in the centuries immediately preceding the birth of Confucius and Lao Tzu that these philosophers must be viewed. And granted this context, it is not at all surprising that they should be reformers. For Confucius, born in 551 B.C.E., it was obvious that the



Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate, 1623

problems of the people stemmed from sovereign power exerted without moral principle and solely for the benefit of sovereign luxury. Small wonder, then, that he urged social reforms that would allow government to be administered for the benefit of all the people. This could be done, he urged, if the members of the government were of the highest personal integrity, understood the needs of the people, and cared as much for the welfare and happiness of the people as the did for themselves.

“Do unto others as you would have done unto you,” represents a brilliant and daring principle of reform in the context of the pre-Confucian China just outlined. It is a principle resulting from reflections on the conditions required for an ideal society. The attitude underlying these reflections regards knowing humanity as more important than knowing nature. If people cannot know and regulate themselves, how can they hope to know and control all of nature. Confucius did not look for the basis of human goodness and morality outside of human beings. Within humanity itself is to be found the source and structure of human goodness and happiness. It is this attitude that makes Confucianism a humanism rather than a naturalism.

Confucius lived from 541 to 479 B.C.E., but some of the ideas of Confucianism are derived from earlier times, while others were not developed until later. According to tradition, Confucius drew inspiration from the Five Classics, and the expression of his thought is contained in the Four Books. The Five Classics are as follows: (1) *Book of Poetry (Shih Ching)*, a collection of verses from the Chou period; (2) *Book of History (Shu Ching)*, a collection of records, speeches, and state documents from 2000 to 700 B.C.E.; (3) *Book of Changes (I-Ching)*, a set of formulae for explaining nature, widely used for purposes of divination (traditionally attributed to Wen Wang 1100 B.C.E.); (4) *Book of Rites (Li Chi)*, a collection of rules regulating social behavior. This was compiled long after Confucius, but may well represent rules and customs from much earlier times; (5) *Spring and Autumn Annals (Ch'un Ch'iu)*, a chronicle of events from 722 to 464 B.C.E.

The Four Books are (1) *Analects of Confucius (Lun Yu)*, which are sayings of Confucius to his disciples, collected and edited by them; (2) *The Great Learning (Ta Hsueh)*, teachings of Confucius containing his suggestions for governing. This work reflects Hsun Tzu's development of Confucian thought; (3) *Doctrine of the Mean (Chung Yung)*, teaching attributed to Confucius concerning the regulation of life; (4) *Book of Mencius (Meng Tzu)*, an elaboration of some Confucian principles by Mencius, an early commentator of Confucius.

The essence of the Confucian teaching contained in this literature is expressed in the teaching that by developing one's inner humanity a person can become great in personal conduct and private life, as well as in relations with others. When all individuals do this, goodness will abound and happiness will be achieved.

In addition to the development of Confucianism by Mencius (ca 371—289 B.C.E.), further elaborations on the teachings of Confucius are found in the *Hsun Tzu*, attributed to Hsun Tzu (ca. 320—238 B.C.E.). Hsun Tzu emphasized the need for the Confucian virtues by pointing to the evil inherent in human nature. Thus, whereas Mencius emphasized the need to practice the virtues of humanity, righteousness, and filial piety in order to preserve human goodness, Hsun Tzu claimed that they must be practiced to root out the evil inherent in human beings and replace it with goodness.

Taoism

The desperate conditions of the times also provide an explanatory context for the rise of Taoism, which emphasized the need to look beyond the promises and treaties of human beings for a source of peace and contentment. Lao Tzu, born late in the sixth century B.C.E., urges a simple and harmonious life, a life in which the profit motive is abandoned, cleverness discarded, selfishness eliminated, and desires reduced. In the context of a China in which greed and desire were bringing about nearly unimaginable hardship and suffering, a philosophy emphasizing the need to return to nature's way would understandably find a ready following. Yang Chu's (ca. 440—ca. 366 B.C.E.) claim that he would not exchange even a single hair for the entire profits of the entire world makes sense against the background of graft and corruption

that resulted from preoccupation with profit. Lao Tzu, who lived earlier than Yang Chu, felt that so long as human actions were motivated by greed and avarice there was no hope for peace and contentment. Consequently he advocated the principle that only those actions which were in accord with Nature should be undertaken.

Taoism, the philosophy of the natural and the simple way initiated by Lao Tzu, received a foundation of metaphysical monism from Chuang Tzu (fourth century B.C.E.). This philosopher also sharpened the emphasis on the natural way as opposed to the artificial and contrived way of persons. In fact, it was a revival of Chuang Tzu's metaphysical doctrines of naturalism that provided the common ground for Taoism and the Buddhism that developed in China during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

Mohism

Although Confucianism and Taoism were to become the most influential of the early philosophies of China, they were by no means the only philosophies of the day. Mohism, which received its main direction from Mo Tzu (468—376 B.C.E.), shared the Confucian interest in advocating the increased welfare of humanity itself, and also agreed that the measure of human welfare was people rather than Nature or the Spirits. But Mo Tzu felt that the Confucian emphasis on cultivating humanity was too vague and general for actually bringing about an improved human condition. He argued that the way to improve the human condition was to tend to the immediate welfare of the people. The slogan of the school became "promote general welfare and remove evil." The criterion advocated for measuring human happiness was utility. Ultimately, according to Mohism, value was to be measured in terms of benefits to the people. Benefits, in turn, could be measured in terms of increased wealth, population, and contentment.

Although Mo Tzu saw himself in opposition to Confucius, probably thinking of himself as a practical reformer and Confucius as an idealistic dreamer, the long-run effect of his philosophy was to strengthen Confucianism by adding external sanctions and criteria to the internal sanctions and criteria advocated by Confucius. The result was a humanism with a utilitarian flavor and a greater practical emphasis. The special strength of this combination was due to the moral emphasis of Confucianism which served as a corrective to utilitarianism, while utilitarianism added a practicalness to Confucian morality.

School of Names

The School of Names had its early development in the work of Hui Shih (380—305? B.C.E.) And Kung-sun Lung (b. ca. 380 B.C.E.). The main interest of philosophers of this school was in the relationship between language and reality. Their motivations appears to have been primarily theoretical, as these logicians were interested in knowledge for its own sake rather than for its utility. This interest in knowledge for its own sake makes the school unique, and caused it to be the source of ridicule by members of the other schools. But despite the opposition between the logicians and the other philosophers of China at this time, the investigation of the relations between words and things and the concern with knowledge for its own sake served as an important antidote to the excessive practicalness of the other philosophers. It served to keep alive an interest in theory, and the studies in the relations between words and things became useful later in both Taoism and Confucianism as they sought a metaphysical basis for their social philosophies.

Yin-Yang

The *Yin-Yang* school, concerned with cosmogony and cosmology, also was influential in the time of early Confucianism and Taoism. Since no individual philosophers connected with this school are known it is not possible to provide specific dates. But most likely this school goes back to late Shang or early Chou times in its beginnings, and continues to be important until long after Confucius.

The beginnings of the *yin-yang* speculation are contained in a natural curiosity about the workings of nature. For an agrarian people living very close to nature and feeling the rhythms of its workings, nothing could be more natural than to speculate about the principles, or “inner workings,” of nature’s functions. There were two questions implicit in this early curiosity about nature. On the one hand, there was the question about the structure of the universe: what is the organization or plan of the universe? On the other hand, there was the question about the origin of the universe: Where did the universe come from, and how did it originate?

The theory of the Five Agencies is essentially an answer to the question about the structure of the universe. The *yin-yang* theory is essentially an answer to the question of the origin of the universe. According to early versions of the Five Agencies theory, the five powers of the universe that control the functioning of nature are symbolically represented by Wood, Fire, Metal, Water, and Earth. The combinations of these powers determine the workings of the universe. For example, when the power represented by Wood is dominant it is spring. When the power of Fire dominates it is summer. Autumn represents the ascendancy of Metal, and winter results when Water is dominant. In late summer Earth is dominant. The important thing about the Five Agencies theory is that it was an attempt to explain the functions of nature by appeal to inner principles, or powers, which are really the forces responsible for the manifestations of nature.

According to the *yin-yang* theory, the universe came to be as a result of the interactions between the two opposing universal forces of *yin* and *yang*. The existence of the universe is seen to reside in the tensions resulting from the universal force of non-being, or *yin*, and the universal force of being, or *yang*. Whatever is experienced simultaneously has being and lacks being; it comes into being and passes out of being. But this is just to say that it is being pulled between the forces of *yin* and *yang*. The changing world that is experienced—that is characterized as nature—can exist only when there is both being and non-being, for without being there is no coming-into-being, and without non-being there is no passing-out-of-being. Hence *yin*, the negative, and *yang*, the positive, are required as a source of nature.

Both the Five Agencies theory and the *yin-yang* theory were influential in the rise of Neo-Confucianism. In the formulations of various later thinkers these theories underwent metaphysical interpretations and found their place in a general theory of existence.

Legalism

The other early school of considerable importance is that of Legalism. The most important philosopher of this school is Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 B.C.E.), though the school itself is several hundred years older. The basic presupposition of this school is that people are basically evil, and consequently the authority of laws and the state are required for human welfare. This school is opposed to the Confucian inasmuch as Confucius emphasized morality and goodness over laws and punishment as a means for promoting human happiness, whereas the Legalists advocated law and authority. But the long-term effect of the Legalist emphasis was to add a dimension of legality to morality, making the law a vehicle for morality. In this way the Legalist school added a considerable measure of strength to Confucianism.

Early Medieval Developments

In early Medieval times, Hui-nan Tzu (d. 122 B.C.E.), a relatively late Taoist, developed a cosmology according to which the unfolding of *Tao* produced successively space, the world, the material forces, *yin* and *yang*, and all the things. According to this theory *yin* and *yang* become the principles of production and change among all the things of the world. Tung Chung-shu (176—104 B.C.E.), a late Confucianist, also referred to the *yin* and *yang* as the principles of things. According to him, all activities are due to the forces of *yin* and *yang*, which manifest themselves through the Five Agencies.

That the Taoist Hui-nan, and the Confucianist Tung Chung-shu, should both make use of the *yin* and *yang* and Five Agencies theories shows that these philosophies were coming closer together at this time,

finding a common ground of explanation. The revitalization of both of these philosophies as a result of their meeting and the resulting cross-fertilization had to wait for many centuries, however, until the catalyst of Buddhism had been introduced. In fact, it was not until around 900 A.D., with the rise of Neo-Confucianism, that the meeting of Confucianism and Taoism prepared by Hui-nan Tzu and Tung Chung-shu bore fruit in the form of a vigorous new philosophy.

Buddhism

Although Buddhism was introduced into China from India prior to the end of the first century A.D., it remained almost entirely without influence until after the fifth century. All of the different Buddhist schools of philosophy were introduced into China, but only those which could be reconciled with the principles of either Taoism or Confucianism became forces in shaping the Chinese mind. The realistic philosophies of Vaibhāṣika and Sautrāntika which supported Theravāda Buddhism failed to take hold in China because of their insistence on the momentary and fleeting character of reality. The idealism of the Yogācāra philosophy did not suit the practical emphasis of the Chinese temperament, but thanks to a thousand-year tradition of Taoist yoga, the Yogācāra emphasis on meditative practice was well received. Similarly, though the Madhyamika skepticism of ordinary knowledge was too radical for the Chinese, they welcomed its emphasis on the undivided nature of reality, an emphasis which reinforced the traditional vision of the unity of all things.

The Buddhist school of uncompromising idealism, emphasizing the reality of “Consciousness-only,” found its counterpart in the Hua-yen school of Chinese Buddhism. But here ideational causation became a universal or total causation, according to which all the elements of reality are perfectly real and reflect each other. The universe is a grand harmony of conscious and unconscious, pure and impure, simple and complex. The Indian disjunction, “either conscious or unconscious,” had become the conjunction “both conscious and unconscious.” The Grand Harmony, the harmony of all opposites in the universe, is possible because each of the ultimate elements of which the universe is composed contains within itself all of the differing aspects and tendencies in the world.

The T’ien-t’ai school of Buddhism, which has its beginnings around the beginning of the seventh century A.D., evolved what it called the “Round Doctrine.” The school began with the teaching of the non-being of all reality. From this doctrine of the Void, wherein things are held to be unreal, they moved to the position that things have temporary existence. From the temporary existence of things, they moved to the position that things in their temporary existence represent the true state of Being. The “roundness” of the doctrine consists in the fact that these three—the void, the temporary, and the true—constitute the fullness of existence. Ultimately all three are identical.

The other two schools of Chinese Buddhism that flourished are the Pure Land school, which is primarily religious, and the Ch’an (Zen) school. The Ch’an school is really a method of meditation rather than a philosophy, but it is underwritten by the philosophical attitude that through the negation of opposites, reality is affirmed in its true nature. The meditation involves negating both production and extinction; arising and ceasing; annihilation and permanence; and unity and plurality. But this negation is simply an aspect of affirming the presence of the true nature of all things. The enlightenment marked by coming to see all things in their true nature is the aim of the Ch’an meditation.

Neo-Confucianism

The tendency to synthesize opposing features of metaphysical views, so clearly evident in Chinese Buddhism, was the most significant factor in the rise of Neo-Confucianism. Chinese philosophers had tended to be highly critical of Buddhist philosophies ever since their introduction to China. They objected to the emphasis on overcoming suffering and death, which to them seemed little more than selfish escapism. The monastic aspect of Buddhism which involved the renunciation of the family and society seemed wrong-headed, since it was clearly impossible that human beings could ever escape society. They were also critical of the Buddhist emphasis on metaphysics which regarded all things as

empty of reality. To regard all things—including food and clothes—as unreal, and yet to depend on them were contradictory, they said. But perhaps the deepest difference between the Chinese philosophers and the Buddhist schools that were introduced to China was the emphasis on social and moral reality as fundamental by the Chinese, as opposed to the consciousness and metaphysical reality emphasized by the Buddhists.

Granted these differences, and the accompanying critical attitude of the Chinese philosophers toward Buddhism, the rise of Neo-Confucianism is not hard to understand. It represents the attempt of the philosophers from the tenth century on to counteract Buddhism with a more comprehensive and superior philosophy. And granted the synthetic tendency of the Chinese philosophers, it is not difficult to predict that the new philosophy would incorporate features of Buddhism along with features of Taoism and Confucianism. Furthermore, granting the preoccupation with social and moral reality that characterized earlier Chinese philosophy, it is not surprising that Confucianism should have the primary role in this reconstruction.

Although the beginnings of Neo-Confucianism can be traced to Han Yu (768–824), it was not until Sung times that a comprehensive and definitive formulation was achieved. It was during the Sung period (960–1279) that the School of Reason of the Ch'eng brothers (Ch'eng Hao, 1032–1085, and Ch'eng Yi, 1033–1108) arose, and the great synthesis of Chu Hsi (1130–1200) was achieved. The school of Mind, which leaned in the direction of idealism, also originated during this period. Its most illustrious philosophers are Lu Chiu-yuan (1139–1193) and Wang Yang-ming (1473–1529). The third phase of the development of Neo-Confucianism is represented by the Empirical school of the Ching period (1644–1911).

The key concept in the Reason school of Neo-Confucianism is that of the Great Ultimate (*T'ai-chi*). This Great Ultimate is the ultimate reality and underlies all existence. It is the reason or principle inherent in all activity and existence. Through activity it generates *yang*. Upon reaching its limit, activity becomes tranquil, and through tranquility the Great Ultimate generates *yin*. When tranquility reaches its limit, activity begins, the one producing the other as its opposite.

This reversal of opposites is a notion of Taoism, where it is held that reversal is the way of the Great Way, the Tao of the universe. Through the interaction between *yin* and *yang* the five agencies come into being, the ten thousand things in the universe are produced, and the seasons run their course.

The Great Ultimate, which produces all things and determines their functions, is a combination of stuff (*ch'i*) and principle (*li*). The nature of things is the result of what they are and how they function. The stuff of which they are made is their matter, or *ch'i*, and their function is their principle, or *li*. When *ch'i* and *li* are in harmony, things are in order and there is a grand harmony. Since the Great Ultimate represents a harmony of *ch'i* and *li*, order is the law of the universe. It remained for Chu Hsi to observe that the Great Ultimate is nothing but the principle of ultimate goodness, to transform this pervasive metaphysics into a groundwork for a social and moral philosophy.

The Reason school was dualistic in positing matter (*ch'i*) and reason (*li*) as the ultimate realities. Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) was monistic in his emphasis, holding that alone reason is ultimately real. He did not deny the reality of external things, but emphasized that it is only through consciousness, or reason, that a person becomes aware of things. Thus mind is the primary reality.

The essential character of mind, according to Wang Yang-ming, is its capacity for love. In its pristine goodness the human mind forms a unity with heaven and earth and consequently the ideal person views all things as one and extends a universal love to all things. This universal love is the basis for all existence and all relationships.

In the Ch'ing period (1644–1911), Wang Yang-ming's idealism came to be tempered with the empiricism of the Empirical School of Tai Chen. Chu Hsi had emphasized the superiority of principle, or reason, over matter. Tai Chen (1723–1777) objected to this emphasis, claiming that neither matter nor principle should be considered superior to the other, since reality is not separated in this way. In reality, there is no separation between principle and matter. In the transformations of matter, principle is

manifested, and the orderliness of transformations is due to principle. But there is no transformation without order, and there is no order without transformation. At best these two—matter and principle—are just two different ways of looking at reality.

In the Empirical School, there is a return to the empirical and the particular, a greater concern with the position of the individual in society, and less emphasis in speculative metaphysics. In this respect, the third phase of Neo-Confucianism is closer to earlier Confucianism.

In summing up the development of philosophy in China it could be said that Confucianism represents the *yang* of Chinese philosophy, whereas Taoism represents the *yin*. Philosophy, as everything else, has its *yin* and *yang*, and finds perfection in the Grand Harmony of these two opposing principles. In China it was Neo-Confucianism that sought the harmony of all principles, drawing upon the various earlier philosophies.

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