CHAPTER ONE

Early China

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Origins: Old and New Stone Ages
Early Bronze Age: Shang
Later Bronze Age: Western Zhou
Iron Age: Eastern Zhou
Iron Age: Birth of Chinese Philosophy
Early Chinese Thought in Historical Perspective

Bronze vessel of the Shang dynasty. The little elephant on top forms the handle of the lid. Wine was poured through the spout formed by the big elephant's trunk.
[The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.]
ORIGINS: OLD AND NEW STONE AGES

Human life in China goes back several hundred thousand years to “Beijing (Peking) man” (*Homo erectus*), whose remains were first found on the North China plain but have since been found in other areas as well. Beijing man was about 5 feet tall and had a smaller cranial capacity than modern humans. Beijing man was similar to “Java man” and to varieties of *Homo erectus* found in Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. These early humans lived by hunting deer and other animals and by fishing and gathering. Men were slightly larger than women, and there was probably a division of labor by gender, with women doing the gathering. Nothing is known of their language capability, social relations, or beliefs, but we do know that they made chipped stone tools and cooked with fire. Bashed-in skulls suggest that they ate brains in some circumstances.

Large-brained modern human beings (*Homo sapiens*), who first evolved 100,000 years ago in Africa, entered China about 50,000 years ago, supplanting Beijing man. They used fire. They made tools with finer stone blades. The history of progress during the Old Stone Age is dimly perceived through successive layers of tools found in archaeological sites, and distinctive regional variations in the tools have been noted. They buried their dead. Population remained sparse, however, for humans were still subject to ecological constraints of the kind that today maintain a balance, for example, between deer and wolves in Alaska.

The New Stone Age or Neolithic in China dawned in the sixth millennium B.C. Of the thousands of Old Stone Age cultures in the world, only a few developed the combination of agriculture, pottery, domesticated animals, and better-polished stone tools that we characterize as the “New Stone Age.” Better tools were useful both for hunting and for agriculture. Perhaps it was women, gathering while men hunted, who discovered how to plant and care for seeds and gave crops the constant attention they required from planting to harvest. New Stone Age people stored dry food in baskets and liquids in pottery jars. The greater production of food led to denser populations, and they built permanent settlements in clusters near their best fields. These changes transformed the prehistoric world as science is transforming our own.

Agriculture began in China between 5600 and 4000 B.C. in the basin of the southern bend of the Yellow River. This is the northernmost of East Asia’s four great river systems (see Map 1–1). The others are the Yangzi River in central China, the West River in southern China, and the Red River in what is today northern Vietnam. All drain eastward into the Pacific Ocean. In recent millennia, the Yellow River has flowed through a deforested plain, cold in winter and subject to periodic droughts. But in the sixth millennium B.C., the area was warm and moist, with forested highlands in the west and swampy marshes to the east. The bamboo rat that today can be found only in semitropical Southeast Asia lived along the Yellow River.

Millet was the chief crop of China’s agricultural revolution. Yam and taro may have been grown almost as early on China’s southeastern coast, an extension of agriculture in Vietnam. Rice cultivation began in south China (and in what is today Vietnam and Thailand). Wheat, in time, entered China from the West.
Origins: Old and New Stone Ages

Map 1–1  The four great river valley civilizations to c. 1000 B.C. By c. 2000 B.C., urban life was established along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, the Nile River in Egypt, the Indus and Ganges rivers in India, and the Yellow River in China.

New Stone Age Chinese cleared land and burned its cover to plant millet, cabbage, and, later, rice and soybeans. When soil became exhausted, fields or whole villages were abandoned. Tools were of stone: axes, hoes, spades, and sickle-shaped knives. The early Chinese domesticated pigs, sheep, cattle, dogs, and chickens. Game was plentiful and hunting continued to be important to the village economy. In excavated garbage heaps of ancient villages are found the bones of deer, wild cattle, antelopes, rhinoceroses, hares, and marmots. Grain was stored in pottery painted in bold, geometric designs of red and black. This pottery gave way to a harder, thin black pottery, made on a potter’s wheel, which spread west along the Yellow River and south to the Yangzi. The tripodal shapes of Neolithic pots prefigure later Chinese bronzes.

Early cultivators wove fabrics of hemp and learned to produce silk from the cocoons of silkworms fed on mulberry leaves. They lived in wattle-and-daub pit-dwellings with wooden support posts and sunken, plastered floors. Their villages were located in isolated clearings along slopes of river valleys. Archaeological finds of weapons and remains of pounded earthen walls suggest tribal warfare between villages. Little is known about their religion, though some evidence suggests the worship of ancestral spirits. They practiced divination by applying heat to a hole drilled in the shoulder bone of an ox or the under-shell of a tortoise and then interpreting the resulting cracks in the bone. They buried their dead in cemeteries with jars of food. Tribal leaders wore rings and beads of jade.
The traditional history of China tells of three ancient dynasties:

- 2205–1766 B.C.  
  Xia
- 1766–1050 B.C.  
  Shang
- 1050–256 B.C.  
  Zhou

Until early in the twentieth century, modern historians thought the first two were legendary. Then, in the 1920s, archaeological excavations at “the wastes of Yin” near present-day Anyang uncovered the ruins of a walled city that had been a late Shang capital (see Map 1–2). Other Shang cities have been discovered.
more recently. The ruins contained the archives of the department of divination of the Shang court, with thousands upon thousands of “oracle bones” incised with archaic Chinese writing. The names of kings on the bones fit almost perfectly those of the traditional historical record. The evidence that there actually was a Shang has led historians to suggest that the Xia may also have existed. Perhaps the Xia was a late Neolithic red-pottery kingdom or tribal confederation; some scholars tentatively identify a site just south of the Yellow River at Erlitou as the Xia capital. Did the Xia develop black pottery, bronze, and the earliest, still-missing stage of Chinese writing?

The characteristic political institution of Bronze Age China was the city-centered state. The largest was the Shang capital which frequently moved and lacked the monumental architecture of Egypt or Mesopotamia. The walled city contained public buildings, altars, and the residences of the aristocracy, and was surrounded by a sea of tribal villages. By late Shang times, several such cities were spotted across the North China plain. They were ruled by royal and noble clans. The Shang kings possessed political, economic, social, and religious authority. When they died, they were sometimes succeeded by younger brothers and sometimes by sons. The rulers of other city-states acknowledged their authority.

The military aristocracy went to war in chariots, supported by levies of foot soldiers. Their weapons were spears and powerful compound bows. Accounts tell of armies of 3,000 or 4,000 troops and of a battle involving 13,000. The Shang fought against barbarian tribes and, occasionally, against other city-states in rebellion against Shang rule. Captured prisoners were enslaved.

Three notable features of Shang civilization were writing, bronzes, and the appearance of social classes. Scribes at the Shang court may have kept records on strips of bamboo, but these have not survived. What survived are inscriptions on bronzes and the oracle bones. Some bones contain the question put to the oracle, the answer, and the outcome of the matter. Representative questions were: Which ancestor is causing the king's earache? If the king goes hunting at Qi, will there be a disaster? Will the king's child be a son? If the king sends his army to attack an enemy, will the deity help him? Was a sacrifice acceptable to ancestral deities?

What we know of Shang religion is based on the bones. The Shang Chinese believed in a supreme “Deity Above,” who had authority over the human world. Also serving at the court of the Deity Above were lesser natural deities—the sun, moon, earth, rain, wind, and the six clouds. Even the Shang king sacrificed not to the Deity Above but to his own ancestors, who interceded with the Deity Above on his behalf. Kings, while alive at least, were not considered divine but were the high priests of the state.

In Shang times, as later, religion in China was often associated with cosmology. The Shang people observed the movements of the planets and stars and reported eclipses. Celestial happenings were seen as omens from the gods above. The chief cosmologists also recorded events at the court. The Shang calendar had a month of 30 days and a year
of 360 days, and adjustments were made periodically by adding an extra month. The calendar was used by the king to tell his people when to sow and when to reap.

Bronze appeared in China about 2000 B.C., 1,000 years later than in Mesopotamia and 500 years later than in India. Its origins are debated. Archaeological sites stretching from the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East across central Asia suggest that bronze made its way east over the course of the third millennium B.C. But the Shang may have developed bronze technology independently: Shang methods of casting were more advanced than those of Mesopotamia, and the designs on Shang bronzes emerge directly from the preceding black-pottery culture. Bronze was used for weapons, armor, and chariot fittings, and for a variety of ceremonial vessels of amazing fineness and beauty.
The Chinese system of writing dates back at least to the Shang dynasty (1766–1050 B.C.) when animal bones and tortoise shells (the so-called oracle bones) were incised for the purpose of divination. About half of the 3,000 characters used in Shang times have been deciphered. They evolved over the centuries into the 50,000 characters found in the largest dictionaries today. But even now only about 3,000 or 4,000 are in common use. A scholar may know twice that number.

Characters developed from little pictures. Note the progressive stylization. By 200 B.C., the writing had become standardized and close to the modern form of the printed character.

Characters were formed several other ways. In one, a sound element was combined with a meaning element. Chinese has many homophones, or words with the same sound. The character 疑, for example, is read t'ai and means “elevation” or “to raise up.” But in spoken Chinese, there are other words with the same sound that mean “moss,” “trample,” a “nag,” and “idle.” Thus

- Sun + moon = bright 明
- Mouth + bird = to chirp 啼
- Woman + child = good 好
- Tree + sun = east 東

It was a matter of convention that the sun behind a tree meant the rising sun in the east and not the setting sun in the west.

Table by author; calligraphy by Teruko Craig.

**LANGUAGES OF EAST ASIA**

The two main language families in present-day East Asia are the Sinitic and Ural-Altaic. They are as different from each other as they are from European tongues. The Sinitic languages are Chinese in all of its varieties, Tibetan, and Burmese. Vietnamese and Thai may be Sinitic or, though heavily influenced by Chinese, may originally be from another language family. Within Chinese are several mutually unintelligible dialects. Standard Chinese, based on the Beijing dialect, is further from Cantonese (the language spoken in Guangzhou; formerly, Canton) than Spanish is from French. Ural-Altaic languages are spoken to the east, north, and west of China. They include Japanese, Korean, Manchurian, Mongolian, the Turkic languages, and, in Europe, distantly, Finnish and Hungarian.
Among the Shang, as in other early river valley civilizations, the increasing control of nature through agriculture and metallurgy was accompanied by the emergence of a highly stratified society in which the many were compelled to serve the few. A monopoly of bronze weapons enabled aristocrats to exploit other groups. A hierarchy of class defined life in the Chinese city-state. The king and the officials of his court lived within the walled city. Their houses were spacious, built above the ground, that rested with roofs supported by rows of wooden pillars that rested on foundation stones. Their lifestyle was, for ancient times, opulent: They wore fine clothes, feasted at banquets, and drank wine from bronze vessels. In contrast, a far larger population of agricultural workers lived outside the city in cramped pit-dwellings. Their lives were meager and hard; archaeological excavations of their underground hovels have uncovered only earthenware pots.

Nowhere was the gulf between the royal lineage and the baseborn more apparent than in the Shang institution of human sacrifice. One Shang tomb 39 feet long, 26 feet wide, and 26 feet deep contained the decapitated bodies of humans, horses, and dogs, as well as ornaments of bone, stone, and jade. When a king died, hundreds of slaves or prisoners of war, together with some who had served the king during his lifetime, might be buried with him. Sacrifices were also made when a palace or an altar was built.

**HUMAN SACRIFICE IN EARLY CHINA**

By the seventh century B.C., human sacrifice had become less frequent, but it still happened. This poem was composed when Duke Mu of the state of Qin died in 631. The poem suggests that despite religious belief and the honor accorded the victims, they may not have gone gladly to the grave. Note the identification of Heaven with “that blue one,” the sky.

Today it is believed honorable to die in war for one’s nation. How is that different from dying to serve one’s lord in the afterlife?

“Kio” sings the oriole
As it lights on the thorn-bush.  
Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?  
Yen-hsi of the clan Tzu-chu.  
Now this Yen-hsi  
Was the pick of all our men;  
But as he drew near the tomb-hole

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Kio” sings the oriole</th>
<th>His limbs shook with dread.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As it lights on the thorn-bush.</td>
<td>That blue one, Heaven,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who went with Duke Mu to the grave?</td>
<td>Takes all our good men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yen-hsi of the clan Tzu-chu.</td>
<td>Could we but ransom him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now this Yen-hsi</td>
<td>There are a hundred would give their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the pick of all our men;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But as he drew near the tomb-hole</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Later China

4000 B.C. Neolithic agricultural villages

1766 B.C. Bronze Age city-states, aristocratic charioteers, pictographic writing

771 B.C. Iron Age territorial states

500–300 B.C. Age of philosophers

221 B.C. Qin unifies China

LATER BRONZE AGE: WESTERN ZHOU

The Zhou people, during the centuries of Shang rule, lived to the west in the valley of the Wei River, a tributary of the Yellow River, and near the present-day city of Xian. Culturally closer to the Neolithic black-pottery culture, they were less civilized and more warlike than the Shang. References to the Zhou in the Shang oracle bones indicate that the Shang had relations with them—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile. According to the traditional historical record, the last Shang kings were weak, cruel, and tyrannical. By 1050 B.C., the Shang had been debilitated by campaigns against nomads in the north and rebellious tribes in the east. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Zhou made alliances with disaffected city-states and swept in, conquering the Shang.

In most respects, the Zhou continued the Shang pattern of life and rule. The agrarian-based city-centered state continued to be the basic unit of society; it is estimated that there were about two hundred of them in the eighth century B.C. The Zhou social hierarchy was not unlike that of the Shang, with kings and lords at the top, officials and warriors below them, and peasants and slaves at the bottom. Slaves served primarily as domestic servants. Being backward themselves, the Zhou assimilated Shang culture, extending without interruption the development of Chinese ideographic writing. The Zhou also maintained the practice of casting bronze ceremonial vessels, though their vessels lacked the fineness that set the Shang above the rest of the Bronze Age world.

The Zhou kept their capital in the west but set up a secondary capital at Luoyang, along the southern bend of the Yellow River (see Map 1–2). They appointed their kinsmen or other aristocratic allies to rule in other city-states. The Chinese term (fengjian) used to characterize this system of decentralized aristocratic rule is sometime translated as “feudal.” This is not inappropriate since such appointments were largely in the gift of the Zhou king, and military support, as needed, was expected in return. Later Chinese historians would contrast the decentralized Zhou system with the highly centralized “bureaucratic” (junxian) system of the dynasties that followed.

Blood or lineage ties were essential to the Zhou pattern of rule. The Zhou king was the head of the senior branch of the family, and he performed the sacrifices to the
Deity Above for the entire family. The rankings of the lords of other princely states, which, for want of better terms, are usually translated into the titles of English feudal nobility—duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron—reflected their degree of closeness to the senior line of Zhou kings.

One difference between the Shang and the Zhou was in the nature of the political legitimacy each claimed. The Shang kings, descended from shamanistic (priestly) rulers, had a built-in religious authority and needed no theory to justify their rule. But the Zhou, having conquered the Shang, needed a rationale for why they, and not the Shang, were now the rightful rulers. Their argument was that Heaven (the word for the supreme being that gradually replaced “Deity Above” during the early Zhou), appalled by the wickedness of the last Shang king, had withdrawn its mandate to rule from the Shang, awarding it instead to the Zhou. This concept of the Mandate of Heaven was subsequently invoked by every dynasty in China down to the twentieth century. The ideograph for Heaven is related to that for man, and the concept originally had human, or anthropomorphic, overtones. In the later Zhou, however, although it continued to have a moral will, Heaven became less anthropomorphic and more of an abstract metaphysical force.

IRON AGE: EASTERN ZHOU

In 771 B.C., the Wei valley capital of the Western Zhou was overrun by barbarians. The explanation of the event in Chinese tradition calls to mind the story of “the boy who cried wolf.” To please his favorite concubine, the infatuated Western Zhou king repeatedly lit bonfires signaling a barbarian attack. His concubine would clap her hands in delight at the sight of the army assembled in martial splendor. But the army tired of the charade, and when invaders actually came, the king’s beacons were ignored. The king was killed and the Zhou capital sacked. The heir to the throne, with some members of the court, escaped to the secondary capital at Luoyang, 200 miles to the east and just south of the bend in the Yellow River, beginning the Eastern Zhou period.

The first phase of the Eastern Zhou is sometimes called the Spring and Autumn period after the classic history by that name, and lasted until 481 B.C. After their flight to Luoyang, the Zhou kings were never able to reestablish their old authority. By the early seventh century B.C., Luoyang’s political power was nominal, although it remained a center of culture and ritual observances. Kinship and religious ties to the Zhou house had worn thin, and it no longer had the military strength to reimpose its rule. During the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., the political configuration in China was an equilibrium of many little principalities on the north-central plain surrounded by larger, wholly autonomous territorial states along the borders of the plain (see Map 1–3). The larger states consolidated the areas within their borders, absorbed tribal peoples, and expanded, conquering states on their periphery.

To defend themselves against the more aggressive territorial states, and in the absence of effective Zhou authority, smaller states entered into defensive alliances.
The earliest alliance, in 681 B.C., was directed against the half-barbarian state of Chu, which straddled the Yangzi in the south. Princes and lords of smaller states elected as their hegemon (or military overlord) the lord of a northern territorial state and pledged him their support. At the formal ceremony that established the alliance, a bull was sacrificed. The hegemon and other lords smeared its blood on their mouths and before the gods swore oaths to uphold the alliance. That the oaths were not always upheld can be surmised from the Chinese expression “to break an oath while the blood is still wet on one’s lips.” During the next two centuries, alliances shifted and hegemons changed. At best, alliances only slowed down the pace of military aggrandizement.

The second phase of the Eastern Zhou is known as the Warring States period after a chronicle of the same name treating the years from 401 B.C. to 256 B.C. By the fifth century B.C., all defensive alliances had collapsed. Strong states swallowed their weaker neighbors. The border states grew in size and power. Interstate stability disappeared. By the fourth century B.C., only eight or nine great territorial states remained as contenders. The only question was which one would defeat the others and go on to unify China.
Three basic changes in Chinese society contributed to the rise of large territorial states. One was the expansion of population and agricultural lands. The walled cities of the Shang and Western Zhou had been like oases in the wilds, bounded by plains, marshes, and forests. Game was plentiful, and hunting, along with the pasturage of sheep and cattle, supplemented agriculture. But in the Eastern Zhou, as population grew, wilds began to disappear, the economy became almost entirely agricultural, and hunting became an aristocratic pastime. Friction arose over boundaries as states began to abut. These changes accelerated in the late sixth century B.C. after the start of the Iron Age. Iron tools cleared new lands and plowed deeper, raising yields and increasing agricultural surpluses. Irrigation and drainage canals became important for the first time. Serfs gave way to independent farmers, who bought and sold land. By the third century B.C., China had about twenty million people, making it the most populous country in the world, a distinction it has never lost.

The second development was the rise of commerce, which further disrupted the formerly stable agricultural economy. Roads built for war were used by merchants. Goods were transported by horses, oxcarts, riverboats, and the camel, which entered China in the third century B.C. The products of one region were traded for those of another. Copper coins joined bolts of silk and precious metals as the media of exchange. Rich merchants rivaled in lifestyle the landowning lower nobility. New outer walls were added to cities to provide for expanded merchant quarters. Bronze bells and mirrors, clay figurines, lacquer boxes, and musical instruments found in late Zhou tombs give ample evidence that the material and artistic culture of China leaped ahead during this period, despite endemic wars.

The third change that benefited larger states was a new kind of army. Cavalry armed with crossbows replaced the war chariots of the old aristocracy that had been practical only on level terrain. Most fighting was done by conscript foot soldiers. The upstart armies of the territorial states numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Against these, little states were helpless. The old nobility gave way to professional commanders. The old aristocratic etiquette, which affected behavior even in battle, gave way to military tactics that were bloody and ruthless. Prisoners were often massacred.

Change also affected government. Lords of the new territorial states began to style themselves as kings, taking the title that only Zhou royalty had enjoyed previously. At some courts, the hereditary nobility began to decline, supplanted by ministers appointed for their knowledge of statecraft. To survive, new states had to transform their agricultural and commercial wealth into military strength. To collect taxes, conscript soldiers, and administer the affairs of state required records and literate officials. Academies were established to fill the need. Beneath the ministers, a literate bureaucracy developed. Its members were referred to as shi, a term that had once meant “warrior” but gradually came to mean “scholar-bureaucrat.” The shi were of mixed social origins, including petty nobility, literate members of the old warrior class, landlords, merchants, and rising commoners. From this class came the philosophers who created the “one hundred schools” and transformed the culture of China.
Shang bronzes are breathtakingly beautiful, but they also have an archaic strangeness. Like Mayan stone sculpture, they are products of a culture so far removed from our own as to be almost incomprehensible. By contrast, the humanism of the Confucian writings and poetry of the Eastern Zhou (771–256 B.C.) speaks to us directly. However much the philosophies of these centuries grew out of the earlier matrix of archaic culture, they mark a break with it and the beginning of what we think of today as the Chinese tradition.

The philosophical revolution of Iron Age China, we note, had parallels in other parts of the globe. In South Asia, there rose Hinduism and Buddhism. In the eastern Mediterranean, there appeared Greek philosophy and the monotheistic Judaism from which would later develop the world religions of Christianity and Islam. The simultaneity of their appearance was striking. Confucius, Laozi, the Hebrew prophets, Buddha, and Socrates, if not exact contemporaries, were born within a few hundred years of each other in the first millennium B.C. The founders of these great philosophies and religions based their teachings on intensely personal experiences that cannot be analyzed in historical terms. Yet we can examine their historical contexts and note certain similarities.

1. All of the philosophical and religious revolutions occurred in or near one of the original river valley civilizations: the Yellow River, the Nile, the Tigris–Euphrates, and along the Indus and Ganges. These areas contained the most advanced cultures of the ancient world. They had sophisticated agriculture, cities with many literate inhabitants, and specialized trades and professions. In short, they had the material preconditions for breakthroughs in religion and thought.

2. Each revolution was born of a crisis in the ancient world. The appearance of iron meant better tools and weapons and, by extension, greater riches and more powerful armies. Old societies began to change and then to disintegrate. Old aristocratic and priestly codes of behavior broke down, producing a demand for more universalized rules of behavior, that is to say, for ethics. The very relation of humans to nature and to the universe seemed to be changing. These conditions led to new visions of social and political order. The similarity between the Chinese sage-king, the Jewish Messiah, and Plato’s philosopher-king is more than accidental. Each, responding to a crisis in the ancient world, would restore order in a troubled society by reconnecting ethics to history.

3. What distinguished the visions embodied in the new religions and philosophies was their universalism. Each held that its doctrines were true for all people and times. Because of this, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam became missionary religions, and Greek and Chinese philosophies could spread far beyond their countries of origin. Confucianism eventually spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan—countries with customs quite different from those of China. It could provide a basis for social ethics and law in those countries because its moral teachings transcended particular Chinese institutions.
4. The number of philosophical and religious revolutions can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. The reason is not that human creativity dried up after 300 B.C. but that subsequent breakthroughs and advances tended to occur within the original traditions, which, absorbing new energies, continued to evolve. This is demonstrated in China by developments within Confucianism during the Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) and Song (960–1279 A.D.) dynasties. Once a cultural pattern was set, it usually endured. Each major culture was resistant to others and rarely displaced. In China, the greatest challenge to Confucianism was Buddhism, which won a permanent position in the culture. But Confucianism kept or regained its primacy.

Most of the one hundred schools of the Zhou—if, in fact, there were that many—are unknown today. Many writings disappeared in the book burning of the Qin dynasty (256–221 B.C.). But even apart from the three major schools of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, enough have survived to convey a sense of the range and vitality of Zhou thought:

**Rhetoricians.** This school taught the arts of persuasion to be used in diplomatic negotiations. Its principal work instructed the rulers of territorial states by using historical anecdote. A practical work, it was popular for its humor and lively style.

**Logicians.** This school taught logic and relativity. For example, one proposition was: “The south has no limit and has a limit.” Another was: “A white horse is not a horse.” That is to say, the concept of horse is not the same as the concept of white horse.

**Strategists.** *The Art of War* by Sunzi became the classic of military science in China and is studied today by guerrillas and in military academies around the world. It praises the general who wins victories without battles and also talks of supplies, spies, propaganda, and organizing states for war.

**Cosmologists.** This school described the functions of the cosmos in terms of *yin* and *yang*, the complementary negative and positive forces of nature, and in terms of the five elements (metal, wood, earth, fire, and water). Its ideas were later absorbed by other schools.

**Mohists.** Mozi (470–391 B.C.) was an early critic of Confucius. His goals were peace, wealth, and the increase of population. He taught an ethic of universal love—to overcome a selfish human nature. He preached discipline and austerity and was critical of whatever lacked utility, including music, other arts, elaborate funerals, wasteful rites, and, above all, war. To achieve his goals, Mozi argued for a strong state: Subjects must obey their rulers, who, in turn, must obey Heaven. Heaven will punish evil and reward good. To promote peace, Mozi organized his followers into military units to aid states that were attacked.
Confucius was born in 551 B.C. in a minor state in what is today Shandong Province in north China. He probably belonged to the lower nobility or the knightly class, because he received an education in writing, music, and rituals. His father died when Confucius was young, so he may have known privation. He made his living by teaching. He traveled with his disciples from state to state, seeking a ruler who would put
his ideas into practice. Although he may once have held a minor position, his ideas were rejected as impractical. He died in 479 B.C., honored as a teacher and scholar but having failed to find a ruler to advise. The name Confucius is the Latinized form of Kong Fuzi, or Master Kong, as he is known in China.

We know of Confucius only through The Analects, his sayings collected by his disciples, or perhaps by their disciples. They are mostly in the form of “The Master said,” followed by his words. The picture that emerges is of a man of moderation, propriety, optimism, good sense, and wisdom. In an age of cruelty and superstition, he was humane, rational, and upright, demanding much of others and more of himself. Asked about death, he replied, “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?”

1 Asked about how to serve the spirits and the gods, in which he did not disbelieve, he answered, “You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?”

CONFUCIUS DEFINES THE GENTLEMAN

For over two thousand years in China, the cultural ideal was the gentleman, who combined knowledge of the ancient sages with an inner morality and outer propriety.

How does the injunction “to repay an injury with straightness” compare to the Christian injunction to turn the other cheek? Which do you think is more appropriate?

The Master said, “I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words.”

“When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time.”

The Master said, “Yu, shall I tell you what it is to know. To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge.”

The Master said, “Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to take offence when others fail to appreciate your abilities?”

Someone said, “Repay an injury with a good turn. What do you think of this saying?” The Master said, “What, then, do you repay a good turn with? You repay an injury with straightness, but you repay a good turn with a good turn.”

Lin Fang asked about the basis of the rites. The Master said, “A noble question indeed! With the rites, it is better to err on the side of frugality than on the side of extravagance; in mourning, it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality.”

The Master said, “The gentleman agrees with others without being an echo. The small man echoes without being in agreement.”

The Master said, “The gentleman is at ease without being arrogant; the small man is arrogant without being at ease.”

The Master said, “There is no point in seeking the views of a gentleman who, though he sets his heart on the Way, is ashamed of poor food and poor clothes.”


1This quotation and all quotations from Confucius in this passage are from Confucius, The Analects, trans. by D. C. Lau (Penguin Books, 1979).
Confucius described himself as a transmitter and a conservator of tradition, not an innovator. He idealized the early Shang and Zhou kings as paragons of virtue and particularly saw early Zhou society as a golden age. He sought the secrets of this golden age in its writings. Some of these writings, along with later texts, became the Confucian classics, which through most of subsequent Chinese history, had an authority not unlike that of Scripture in the West. Five of the thirteen classics were the following:

1. *The Book of Changes.* (also known as the *Classic of Divination*). A handbook for diviners, it was later seen as containing metaphysical truths about the universe.
2. *The Book of History.* Documents and speeches from the early Zhou, some authentic. Chinese tradition holds that it was edited by Confucius. It was interpreted as the record of sage-kings.
3. *The Book of Poetry.* Some three hundred poems from the early Zhou. Representing a sophisticated literary tradition, they include love songs as well as poems of friendship, ritual, and politics. Many were given political and moral interpretations in later times.
4. *The Book of Rites.* Rituals and rules of etiquette. Rites were important to Confucians, both as a support for proper behavior and because they were seen as corresponding to forces within nature.
5. *The Spring and Autumn Annals.* A brief record of the major occurrences from 722 B.C. to 481 B.C. in the state where Confucius was born. In the Chinese tradition, this book was edited by Confucius and reflects his moral judgments on historical figures of that era.

Basing his teachings on these writings, Confucius proposed to end the turmoil of his own age by returning to the good old ways of the early Zhou. When asked about government, he said, “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son.” (The five Confucian relationships were ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, older brother–younger brother, and friend–friend.) If everyone fulfilled the duties of his or her status, then harmony would prevail. Confucius understood the fundamental truth that the well-being of a society depends on the morality of its members. His vision was of an unbroken social harmony extending from the individual family member to the monarch.

But a return to the early Zhou was impossible. China was undergoing a dynamic transition from hundreds of small city-states to a few large territorial states. Specialized classes were emerging. Old rituals no longer worked. It was thus not enough to stress basic human relationships. The genius of Confucius was to transform the old aristocratic code into a new ethic that any educated Chinese could practice. His reinterpretation of the early Zhou tradition can be seen in the concept
of the junzi. This term literally meant “the son of the ruler” (or the aristocrat). Confucius redefined it to mean a person of noble behavior with the inner virtues of humanity, integrity, righteousness, altruism, and loyalty, and an outward demeanor and propriety to match.

This redefinition was not unlike the change in the meaning of gentleman in England from “one who is gentle-born” to “one who is gentle-behaved.” But whereas gentleman remained a fairly superficial category in the West, in China, junzi went deeper. Confucius saw ethics as grounded in nature. The true junzi was in touch with his own basic nature, which, in turn, was a part of the cosmic order. Confucius expressed this saying: “Heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me.” Confucius’s description of his own passage through life goes far beyond the question of good manners: “At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the line.”

Confucius often contrasted the gentleman with the small or common person. The gentleman, educated in the classics and cultivating the Way (dao), understands moral action. The common people, in contrast, “can be made to follow the path but not to understand it.” Good government for Confucius depended on the appointment to office of good men, who would serve as examples for the multitude: “Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good. The virtue of the gentleman is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it is sure to bend.” Beyond the gentleman was the sage-king, who possessed an almost mystical virtue and power. For Confucius, the early Zhou kings were clearly sages. But Confucius wrote, “I have no hopes of meeting a sage. I would be content if I met someone who is a gentleman.”

Confucius’s preoccupation with the gentleman also explains his rejection by twentieth century Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries. The dictum that a gentleman does not seek profit or engage in physical labor clashes with modern needs and ideas of equality. Confucius’s view of women was equally regressive: They were difficult to get along with and were enemies of virtue. In the Analects, a collection of the sayings of Confucius that was almost like a play with an all male cast, he lamented, “I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who is as fond of virtue as he is of beauty in women.”

Confucianism was not adopted as the official philosophy of China until the second century B.C., during the Han dynasty. But two other important Confucian philosophers had appeared in the meantime. Mencius (370–290 B.C.) represents an idealistic extension of Confucius’s thought. His interpretation was accepted during most of subsequent history. He is famous for his argument that humans tend toward the good just as water runs downward. The role of education, therefore, is to uncover

2Analects, 1979.
and cultivate that innate goodness. Moreover, just as humans tend toward the good, so does Heaven possess a moral will. The will of Heaven is that a government should see to the education and well-being of its people. The rebellion of people against a government is the primary evidence that Heaven has withdrawn its mandate. At times in Chinese history, only lip service was paid to a concern for the people. In fact, rebellions occurred more often against weak governments than against harsh ones. But the idea that government ought to care for the people became a permanent part of the Confucian tradition.

The other influential Confucian philosopher was Xunzi (300–237 B.C.), who represents a tough-minded extension of Confucius’s thought. Xunzi felt Heaven was amoral, indifferent to whether China was ruled by a tyrant or by a sage. He believed that human nature was bad or, at least, that desires and emotions, if unchecked and unrefined, led to social conflict. So he emphasized etiquette and education as restraints on an unruly human nature, and good institutions, including punishments and rewards, as a means for shaping behavior. His ideas exerted a powerful influence on thinkers of the Legalist school.

Daoism

It is often said that the Chinese were Confucian while in office and Daoist in their private lives. Daoism offered a refuge from the burden of social responsibilities. The classics of the school are the Laozi, dating from the fourth century B.C., and the Zhuangzi, dating in part from the same century and in part from a century or two later.

The central concept is the Dao, or Way. It is mysterious, ineffable, and cannot be named. It is the creator of the universe, the sustainer of the universe, and the process or flux of the universe. The Dao functions on a cosmic, not a human, scale. As the Laozi put it, “Heaven and Earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage (in accord with the Dao) is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.”

What does it mean to be a sage? How does a human join the rhythms of nature? The answer given by the Laozi is by regaining or returning to an original simplicity. Various similes describe this state: “to return to the infinite,” “to return to being a babe,” or “to return to being the uncarved block.” To attain this state, one must “learn to be without learning.” Knowledge is bad because it creates distinctions, because it leads to the succession of ideas and images that interfere with participation in the Dao. One must also learn to be without desires beyond the immediate and simple needs of nature: “The nameless uncarved block is but freedom from desire.”

---

If the sage treats the people as straw dogs, it would appear that he is beyond good and evil. But elsewhere in the Laozi, the sage is described as one who “excels in saving people.” If not a contradiction, this is at least a paradox. The resolution is that the sage is clearly beyond morality but is not immoral or even amoral. Quite to the contrary, by being in harmony with the Dao, the sage is impeccably moral—as one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Laozi Tells of the Way of the Sage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The way that can be spoken of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is not the constant way;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The name that can be named</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is not the constant name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The spirit of the valley never dies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is called the mysterious female.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The gateway of the mysterious female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is called the root of heaven and earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there, Yet use will never drain it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a thing confusedly formed,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born before heaven and earth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent and void</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It stands alone and does not change,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes round and does not weary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is capable of being the mother of the world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know not its name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So I style it “the way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When the way prevails in the empire, fleet footed horses are relegated to ploughing the fields; when the way does not prevail</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in the empire, war-horses breed on the border. One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know. Therefore the sage puts his person last and it comes first, Treats it as extraneous to himself and it is preserved. Is it not because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zhuangzi Compares Governmental Office to a Dead Rat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When Hui Tzu was prime minister of Liang, Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi) set off to visit him. Someone said to Hui Tzu, “Chuang Tzu is coming because he wants to replace you as prime minister!” With this Hui Tzu was filled with alarm and searched all over the state for three days and three nights trying to find Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu then came to see him and said, “In the south there is a bird called the Yuan-ch’u—I wonder if you’ve ever heard of it? The Yuan-ch’u rises up from the South Sea and flies to the North Sea, and it will rest on nothing but the Wu-t’ung tree, eat nothing but the fruit of the Lien, and drink only from springs of sweet water. Once there was an owl who had gotten hold of a half-rotten old rat, and as the Yuan-ch’u passed by, it raised its head, looked up at the Yuan-ch’u, and said, ‘Shoo!’ Now that you have this Liang state of yours, are you trying to shoos me?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

who clings to the forms of morality or makes morality a goal could never be. So in the *Laozi* it is written, “Exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude, and the people will again be filial; exterminate ingenuity, discard profit, and there will be no more thieves and bandits.”

In these words, we also see the basis for the political philosophy of Daoism, which is summed up by the expression “not doing” (*wu wei*). What this means is something between “doing nothing” and “being, but not acting.” This concept has some overlap with Confucianism. The Confucian sage-king, we recall, exerts a moral force by dint of his internal accord with nature. A perfect Confucian sage could rule without doing. Confucius said, “If there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action, it was, perhaps, Shun [an early Zhou sage emperor]. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south.” In Daoism, all true sages had this Shun-like power to rule without action: “The way never acts yet nothing is left undone. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, the myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.” Or, says the *Laozi*, “I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the uncarved block.” The sage acts without acting, and “when his task is accomplished and his work is done, the people will say, ‘It happened to us naturally.’”

Along with the basic Daoist prescription of becoming one with the *Dao* are two other assumptions or principles. One is that any action pushed to an extreme will initiate a countervailing reaction in the direction of the opposite extreme. The other is that too much government, even good government, can become oppressive by its very weight. As the *Laozi* put it, “The people are hungry; it is because those in authority eat up too much in taxes that the people are hungry. The people are difficult to govern; it is because those in authority are too fond of action that the people are difficult to govern.” Elsewhere, the same idea was expressed in even homelier terms: “Govern a large state as you would cook small fish,” that is, without too much stirring.

**Legalism**

The third great current in classical Chinese thought, and by far the most influential in its own age, was Legalism. Like the philosophers of other schools, the Legalists were concerned to end the wars that plagued China. True peace, they felt, required a united country and thus a strong state. They favored conscription and considered war a means of extending state power.

The Legalists did not seek a model in the distant past. In ancient times, said one, there were fewer people and more food, so it was easier to rule; the different conditions of the present day require new principles of government. Nor did the Legalists model their state on a heavenly order of values. Human nature is selfish, argued both of the leading Legalists, Han Feizi (d. 233 B.C.) and Li Si (d. 208 B.C.). It is human to like rewards or pleasure and to dislike punishments or pain. If laws are severe and
LEGALISM

According to Legalism, the state can only regulate behavior, it cannot affect the inner dimensions of human life. Rewards and punishments, furthermore, are far more efficient in controlling behavior than moral appeals.

Do the tenets of Legalism have any modern parallels? What do you think of Legalism as a philosophy of government? As an approach to the problem of crime? How does Legalism compare with other approaches to law, leadership, and government?

Han Feizi Argues for the Efficacy of Punishments

Now take a young fellow who is a bad character. His parents may get angry at him, but he never makes any change. The villagers may reprove him, but he never reforms. The love of his parents, the efforts of the villagers, and the wisdom of his teachers and elders—all the three excellent disciplines are applied to him, and yet not even a hair on his shins is altered. It is only after the district magistrate sends out his soldiers and in the name of the law searches for wicked individuals that the young man becomes afraid and changes his ways and alters his deeds. So while the love of parents is not sufficient to discipline the children, the severe penalties of the district magistrate are. This is because men became naturally spoiled by love, but are submissive to authority.

That being so, rewards should be rich and certain so that the people will be attracted by them; punishments should be severe and definite so that the people will fear them; and laws should be uniform and steadfast so that the people will be familiar with them. Consequently, the sovereign should show no wavering in bestowing rewards and grant no pardon in administering punishments, and he should add honor to rewards and disgrace to punishments—when this is done, then both the worthy and the unworthy will want to exert themselves.

Han Feizi Attacks Confucianism

There was once a man of Sung who tilled his field. In the midst of his field stood the stump of a tree, and one day a hare, running at full speed, bumped into the stump, broke its neck, and died. Thereupon the man left his plow and kept watch at the stump, hoping that he would get another hare. But he never caught another hare, and was only ridiculed by the people of Sung. Now those who try to rule the people of the present age with the conduct of government of the early kings are all doing exactly the same thing as that fellow who kept watch by the stump.

Those who are ignorant about government insistently say: “Win the hearts of the people.” If order could be procured by winning the hearts of the people, then even the wise ministers Yi Yin and Kuan Chung would be of no use. For all that the ruler would need to do would be just to listen to the people. Actually, the intelligence of the people is not to be relied upon any more than the mind of a baby. If the baby does not have his head shaved, his sores will recur; if he does not have his boil cut open, his illness will go from bad to worse. However, in order to shave his head or open the boil someone has to hold the affectionate mother while performing the work, and yet he keeps crying and yelling incessantly. The baby does not understand that suffering a small pain is the way to obtain a great benefit.

Now, the sovereign urges the tillage of land and the cultivation of pastures for the purpose of increasing production for the people, but they think the sovereign is cruel. The sovereign regulates penalties and increases punishments for the purpose of repressing the wicked, but the people think the sovereign is severe. Again he levies taxes in cash and in grain to fill up the granaries and treasuries in order to relieve famine and provide for the army, but they think
The era of religious and philosophical revolutions in the ancient world is sometimes called the “axial age.” Subsequent developments, this term suggests, revolved about the axes of these doctrines. If the philosophical revolution of the Zhou is compared with others, it is unlike Judaic monotheism or its second-stage offshoots, Christianity and Islam, unlike Hinduism or Buddhism, and most like the development in ancient Greece with its contending schools of philosophy. When Mao Zedong in 1956 said, “Let the one hundred flowers bloom”—encouraging a momentary easing of intellectual oppression—he was referring back to the creative era of the Zhou when many philosophies abounded.

Of the two, Greek thinkers were more speculative, more concerned with numbers and the world of nature. Chinese thinkers were usually more practical, more strongly oriented toward the social and political. Even the Daoist sages, who were intrinsically apolitical, found it necessary to offer a political philosophy.

Chinese philosophy also had far greater staying power than the Greek. Only a few centuries after the glory of Athens, Greek philosophy was submerged by Christianity.
It became the handmaiden of theology and did not reemerge as an independent force until the Renaissance. In contrast, Chinese philosophy, though challenged for centuries by Buddhism, reasserted itself and kept its dominance down to the early twentieth century. How were these early Chinese philosophies, especially the Confucian, able to maintain such a grip on China when the cultures of every other part of the world fell under the sway of religions?

Part of the answer is that Confucianism, which in later dynasties usually had state support, was always counterbalanced by a plethora of popular religions with gods and demons, heavens and hells. Most Chinese participated in such religions. Their temples became established in every village and town throughout China. Only among the literati of later dynasties, who studied in the rarified atmosphere of Confucian academies, was a “pure” philosophical Confucianism to be found.

Another part is that Confucianism had a religious dimension, but one with assumptions very different from religions with Judaic roots. In the Christian or Islamic worldview, there is a God, who, however concerned with humankind, is not of this world. This conception leads to dualism, the distinction between an other world, which is supernatural, and this world, which is natural. In the Chinese worldview, the two spheres are not so separate: The cosmos is single, continuous, and non-dualistic. It includes Heaven, earth, and man. Heaven is above. Earth is below. Man stands in between, ideally governed by a wise ruler who regulates or harmonizes the cosmological forces of Heaven and earth by the power of his virtue and by performing the sacrifices.

The form that this cosmology took under the last Manchu dynasty can be seen today in the city of Beijing. The Temple of Heaven is in the south; the Temple of Earth is in the northeast; and the Imperial Palace is, symbolically at least, in between. To say that the emperor’s sacrifices at the Temple of Heaven were secular (and, therefore, not religious) or religious (and not secular) misses the point. It projects our own dualistic assumptions onto China. Similarly, when we speak of the Daoist sage becoming one with nature, it is not the nature of a present-day natural scientist; rather, it is a nature that contains metaphysical and cosmological forces of a kind that our worldview might label as religious.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. “The ‘New Stone Age’ is a shorthand designation for many complex changes in China’s society and economy.” How did these give rise to civilization?
2. What are the distinguishing characteristics of the Shang, Eastern Zhou, and Western Zhou eras?
3. What conditions gave rise to the one hundred schools of philosophy?
4. What was China’s predicament in the fourth century B.C., and what solutions were offered by Confucianism, by Daoism, and by Legalism?
SUGGESTED READINGS


LI, X. Q. *Eastern Zhou and Qin Civilizations* (1986). This work includes interpretations based on archaeological finds.


WELCH, H. *Taoism, the Parting of the Way* (1967). A most readable and insightful account.