

# China's Foundational Thought and Ancient Philosophers

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## **Abstract**

*China's Spring and Autumn (770 BC–403 BC) and Warring States (403 BC–221 BC) periods, though marked by disunity and constant warring, witnessed an unprecedented era of cultural prosperity and intellectual activities. This paper takes this political context and intellectual background into consideration when examining the main schools of thought in that era, and argues that the atmosphere of reform and new ideas was attributed to the struggle for survival among warring regional lords, who needed an ever-increasing number of well-educated officials.*

**Key words:** Chinese history; ancient Chinese philosophers; the Mandate of Heaven; *yin-yang* theory

## **1. Introduction**

In the Spring and Autumn (770 BC–403 BC) and Warring States (403 BC–221 BC) periods, warring regional lords competed in building strong and loyal armies and in increasing economic production to ensure a broader base for tax collection. To achieve these economic, military, and cultural developments, the regional lords needed an ever-increasing number of skilled literate officials and advisers. Recruitment for these positions was based on merit. Roaming philosophers offered their counsel to any ruler who would listen to them, and besides teaching their disciples, were employed as advisers to various state rulers on the methods of government, war and diplomacy. These wandering scholars proposed widely ranging remedies to social, political, economic and military problems. Their solutions covered extensive spectrums from total authoritarianism to anarchistic individualism, from blatant militarism to radical pacifism, and from support of a relaxed economy to the advocacy of state monopoly. Thus, many different competing ideas developed during the late Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods. Consequently, the era is often known as that of Hundred Schools of Thought. However, this name is not to be taken literally. The Chinese, who used the decimal system from earliest times, often use the number 'hundred' as a convenient shorthand for a large number. It was around 100 BC that historians like Sima Qian grouped different doctrines of that era into schools, using labels like Daoism (Taoism) and Confucianism that have survived until today (Ebrey, Walthall, & Palais, 2006, p.32). It should be noted that these labels often give a wrong impression that the people of the time thought in those terms. Nonetheless, from the Hundred Schools of Thought era came many of the great classical writings, especially those of Confucianism, Daoism, Moism and Legalism, the four major schools of thought in the late Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods. These writings became the source of the foundational thought for Chinese political and intellectual practices for the next two and a half millennia.

## 2. Political context

In the middle of eleventh century BC, a frontier tribe called Zhou began to expand eastward. A chieftain of this frontier overthrew the last Shang ruler, who was a despot according to standard Chinese accounts. With the conquest of the Shang dynasty by the Zhou as the supreme power in the Yellow River valley in 1045 BC, the Chinese sovereign state finally emerged, lasting for nearly 800 years. In the course of the longevity of this dynasty, thirty-nine kings followed one another, mostly in the order of a father-to-son succession. The early Zhou society was highly aristocratic. Inherited ranks placed people in a hierarchy ranging from the king, to the feudal rulers of states with titles like duke and marquis, and the lower ranks of the aristocracy called *shi*, men who could serve in either civil or military capacities. Ordinary subjects were at the bottom of the system. Patrilineal family ties were very important, and sacrifices to ancestors were one of the key rituals used to forge social ties. The Zhou dynasty first had its capital at Hao, near the present-day city of Xi'an. However, the early Zhou rulers, through conquest and colonisation, gradually extended its culture to the north of the Yangtze River. In 771 BC the Zhou court was sacked, and its king was killed by invading 'barbarians' who were allies with rebelling lords. The capital was moved eastward to Luoyang in present-day Henan Province. Because of this shift, historians divide the Zhou era into Western Zhou (1027 BC–771 BC) and Eastern Zhou (770 BC–221 BC). With the royal line broken, the power of the Zhou court gradually diminished, and the fragmentation of the kingdom accelerated. Thus, the Eastern Zhou period is usually divided into two sub-periods. The first, from 770 BC to 403 BC, is called the Spring and Autumn period; the second is named, more appropriately, as the Warring States period (403 BC–221 BC). The former is named after the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, which is attributed to Confucius, and is a history of his own state, Lu, from 770 BC to 403 BC. The title 'Spring and Autumn' is generally understood as a term for chronological annals, the reason being that their commendations are life-giving like spring and their censures life-withering like autumn. Despite this long haul of the political uncertainty, this era presided over an explosion in intellectual and artistic creativity that saw the emergence of the most influential texts which were to transform and dominate both Chinese society and government till the end of the dynastic period in the early twentieth century.

## 3. Intellectual background

Early agriculture in China, which first appeared around 8000 BC–8500 BC, was characterised by the domestication of plants and animals. The advent of agriculture fundamentally changed the trajectory of cultural development and laid the foundation for ancient Chinese cosmology. The cornerstone of this ancient cosmology was the *yin-yang* theory, which viewed the world as the product of two interacting preliminary elements, *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* was the attribute of all things female, dark, weak and passive, whereas *yang* was the attribute of all things male, bright, strong and active. While *yin* and *yang* were both necessary and complementary, one was by nature passive toward the other. Therefore, *yin* and *yang* are complementary opposites that interact within a greater whole, as part of a dynamic system. Everything has both *yin* and *yang* aspects, but either of these aspects may manifest more strongly in particular objects, and may ebb or flow over time. This theory also provided the intellectual framework for much of Chinese scientific and philosophical thinking in fields like biology and medicine. The organs of the body were seen to be interrelated in the same sorts of ways as other natural phenomena, and best understood by looking for correlations and correspondences. Illness was seen as a disturbance in the balance of *yin* and *yang* caused by emotions, heat or cold, or other influences. Therapy thus depended on the accurate diagnosis of the source of the imbalance. Almost all the philosophers of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods seem to have accepted the basic concepts of the *yin-yang* theory.

Agricultural activities greatly promoted the understanding of the importance of climatic conditions for farming and husbandry, ushering a strong interest in astronomy. The ancient Chinese records of eclipses and comets have proved amazingly precise (Dryer, 2010, p.26). Interestingly, astrological knowledge was gradually applied beyond agriculture, into the fields of politics and governance. In 1059 BC, a rare astronomical event occurred: a momentous conjunction of the five visible planets. Similar occurrences in 1953 BC and 1576 BC had coincided with the supposed rise of the two previous dynasties, the Xia and the Shang. For this reason, the chieftain of Zhou was convinced that Heaven signalled to him to remove the Shang ruler (Makeham, 2008, p.82), and so he rebelled, finally wiping out the Shang army and entered Shang capital in 1046 BC. Thus, it was during the Zhou dynasty's long reign of over 800 years that Chinese philosophers first enunciated the doctrine of the 'Mandate of Heaven' (*tianming*), the notion that the ruler, or known in Chinese as *tianzi* (Son of Heaven), governed by divine right. The doctrine explained and justified the demise of the two earlier dynasties and at the same time supported the legitimacy of present and future rulers. Heaven's disapproval of the ruler behaviour could be revealed by unusual natural events, such as earth quakes, floods, drought, and eclipses. The doctrine of the 'Mandate of Heaven' became the basis of the Zhou ideology.

#### 4. Confucius

'Confucius' is a seventeenth-century Jesuit Latinization of Kong Fuzi [Master Kong], as he was known by his followers. His personal name was Qiu and his courtesy name (given at his attainment of adulthood) was Zhongni. He is said to have been born in 551 BC in the State of Lu, in the modern Shandong Province of China. During this time, he devoted himself to study. His father was a district magistrate and died when he was only three, leaving his care and education to his mother. During his youth he was remarkable for his grave demeanour and knowledge of ancient learning, which gained him respect among his countrymen. At the age of twenty, he was entrusted with the duties of being a subordinate officer at the revenue department, and was later appointed a supervisor of the fields and herds. When he was twenty-four, his mother passed away. In conformity with the ancient practice, which was no longer observed, he immediately resigned from all his employment to mourn for his mother for a period of three years (Zhang, 1989 and Williams, 1965).

During Confucius' life (551 BC–479 BC) the imperial rule of the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC–256 BC) was weak, and the feudal princes vied for supremacy with each having their own form of government. Confucius dreamed of restoring the social order according to the rules of propriety in the early Zhou dynasty, which he called *li* [propriety]. He never denied that he was 'believing in and loving the ancients', and was 'fond of antiquity and earnest in seeking it' (*Analects*, 7:1 and 7:19, trans. Legge, 1971). His teachings are rich with nostalgia for the golden era of antiquity.

The *Analects* of Confucius is conceivably the most important text of the entire Confucian canon. Divided into twenty chapters, the book is not arranged chronologically. It is a collection of the sage's words and actions as recorded by his disciples, and discloses Confucius' shrewd insight into his countrymen's characteristics, and knowledge of the manner in which they could best be approached and influenced. The central concerns outlined in the book are his life-long dream of reviving the doctrines of the ancients, his tenets of benevolence, filial piety and truthfulness, and his firm belief in education. Among the most remarkable passages in Confucius' *Analects* are the following:

Zi Gong asked, saying, 'Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life?'  
The Master said, 'Is not RECIPROCITY such a word? What you don't want done to yourself, do not do to others.' (15:23)

The Master said, 'Governing with morality resembles the North Star, which is fixed, and all other stars surround it.' (2:1)

The Master said, 'Learning without reflection will profit nothing; reflection without learning is dangerous.' (2:15)

The Master said, 'Knowledge produces pleasure clear as water; complete virtue brings happiness solid as mountain; knowledge prevails all things; virtue is tranquil and happy; knowledge is delight; virtue is long life.' (6:23)

The Master said, 'The superior man does not promote a man simply on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words because of the man.' (15:23)

The Master said, 'Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man. Without an acquaintance with the rules of Propriety, it is impossible for the character to be established. Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men.' (20:3) (trans. Legge, 1971)

A marked feature of the *Analects* is its prescriptive rather than descriptive emphasis on the ideal man, which he called *junzi* – a true gentleman or a superior man. Moral superiority could be acquired by any man who was willing to learn. The character of *junzi* was the possession of *ren* [benevolence], a virtue in which the individual and society were harmonised. The *Analects* of Confucius contains numerous references to the qualities of *junzi*, who 'considers righteousness to be essential in everything. He performs it according to the rules of propriety. He brings it forth in humanity. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man' (15:18, trans. Legge, 1971). 'In his conduct to himself, he was humble; in serving his superiors, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just' (5:16, trans. Legge, 1971). 'The faults of the *junzi* are like the eclipses of the sun and moon. He has his faults, and all men see them; he changes again, and all look up to him' (19:21, trans. Legge, 1971).

Confucianism was first espoused by the rulers of China's early Han dynasty (206 BC–9 AD). This political philosophy of Confucianism was the interpretation and crystallisation of the principles and ideas attributed to Confucius by scholars and officials such as Mencius (372 BC–289 BC), Xunzi (298 BC–238 BC) and Dong Zhongshu (179 BC–104 BC). It emphasised the ruler's duty to set a moral example and govern in the interest of the populace, and has developed characteristics beyond anything conceived by Confucius himself (Fang & Bi, 2013).

## 5. Mencius

Mencius emerged as a sage a century after Confucius died. He had the advantage of the examples, fame and teachings of his master, Confucius. Nevertheless, in many respects, he displayed an originality of thought, firmness of purpose and extensive views, and therefore must be regarded as one of the greatest men China has ever produced. Mencius was born in 371 BC in a place not far from Confucius' native district. His father died early, leaving the guardianship of the boy to his widow, Zhang Shi. As a mother, her caring and thoughtful ways has been cited as a model for all virtuous parents in China for centuries. Mencius sought to defend the doctrine of Confucius against other influential thinkers of the time, such as Mozi (479 BC–381 BC) and Yang Zhu (440 BC–360 BC). He is probably best known for the view that 'human nature is good', a view based on the defence of Confucian ideals which developed a self-cultivation process. His view was subsequently challenged by Xunzi (298 BC–238 BC), another major Confucian thinker, who advocated the alternative view that 'human nature is evil' (Shun, 1997).

The *Mencius* consists entirely of Mencius' teachings. Most scholars nowadays think that *Mencius* was almost certainly compiled by his disciples or disciples of his disciples. The book makes reference to a number of key philosophical terms in early Chinese thought as well as to ideas associated with the teachings of Confucius as recorded in the *Analects*. The three most important terms and concepts in the book are *tian* [Heaven], *ming* [mandate, decree, destiny], and *de* [virtue, power]. Mencius made it clear that the king retained the authority to rule only if he respected *tianming*, the mandate from Heaven to rule. Rulers' preservation of the Mandate of Heaven should depend on his *de*, which refers to qualities such as generosity, self-sacrifice, humility, receptiveness to instruction, as well as to powers associated with these qualities. These powers include the recipient's compulsion to respond to generous acts and a non-coercive power of attraction and transformation.

Similar to his idol Confucius, Mencius travelled broadly, offering his advice to rulers of various states. He repeatedly tried to convert them to the belief that any ruler able to win over the people through benevolent government could succeed in unifying *tianxia* [all under Heaven]. He advocated detailed and specific proposals concerning political and financial measures in order to ease tax burdens and reduce military escalation. He argued that the pursuit of military dominance would backfire because it would turn the world against the ruler of such domination, whereas those who were benevolent would have no enemies.

Mencius expanded Confucius' social and economic ideas and stressed people's well-being as one of the government's most important objectives. He argued that '[t]he people are the most precious and venerable thing. The spirits of the grain come second. The princes are of the least importance' (*Mencius*, 14:14, trans. Legge, 1971). The most important contribution that Mencius made to the development of Chinese history, particularly in terms of power transition, was his innovative elucidation of the 'Mandate of Heaven' notion (Fang & Bi, 2013). He developed this notion into the principle that bad rulers would lose their right to rule. In the eyes of the Chinese peasant population, the Emperor's suitability could easily be judged based on decisions and performance. Natural catastrophes, civil war, disorder, famine and suffering all became indications of the ruler's lack of virtue and Heaven's discontent. Celestial signs such as comets and earthquakes were also taken as heavenly warnings. When things went wrong and the heavenly mandate had expired, rebellion was justified in order to replace the old dynasty with a new one (Nivison, 1996). The ramifications of this were far-reaching: in more recent Chinese history, foreign forces such as Mongol and Manchu conquerors were accepted as possessing the Mandate of Heaven to rule. Nonetheless, this interpretation of the Emperor's responsibility afforded the Confucian school broad popular appeal.

## 6. Mozi

Mozi (470 BC–391 BC) was born to a humble family in north China about the time Confucius died. One hundred years later, his philosophy had become so widely accepted that it challenged Confucianism as the leading system of thought in the fourth century BC. The main themes of his thought were universal love and non-militarism. Mozi believed that 'all men are equal under Heaven' and that mankind should follow Heaven by practicing universal love. Advocating that all action must be utilitarian, Mozi condemned the Confucian emphasis on the importance of filial piety on the ground that to place priority on one's family was clannish and selfish, and ultimately family welfare was often advanced by Confucian believers at the expense of the welfare of the whole society. It was the welfare of the whole society, according to Mozi, that should be a real gentleman's primary concern. Economics and utility were his two key principles, and as such he advocated peace on economic rather than ethical grounds (Li, 1971). Despite many differences, Mozi and Confucius had much in common. Both were motivated by a sincere interest in human welfare, and both accepted the existing political structure of monarchy as the best kind of government. In general, the teachings of Mozi left an indelible impression on the Chinese mind.

## 7. Laozi

Laozi (ca. 6<sup>th</sup> century BC), meaning ‘Old Master’, is a semi-legendary figure, who is credited as the originator of Daoism (Taoism). It is said that Laozi served as a keeper of archival records at the court of Zhou, and Confucius (551-479 BC) had consulted him on the rites and praised him lavishly. This establishes the traditional claim that Laozi was a senior contemporary of Confucius. At least one meeting between Confucius and Laozi, identified as ‘Lao Dan’, is reported also in the *Zhuangzi* and other early Chinese sources. Laozi is said to have written a short book, which was originally simply called the *Laozi*. When the *Laozi* was recognised as a ‘classic’ (*jing*), it acquired a more exalted and hermeneutically instructive title, *Daodejing* (also spelt as *Tao-te-ching*, see Baxter, 1998), commonly translated as the ‘Classic of the Way and Virtue’. Its influence on Chinese culture is pervasive, and it reaches beyond China. The current *Daodejing* is divided into two parts (*pian*) and 81 chapters or sections (*zhang*). Part one, comprising of chapters 1-37, has come to be known as the *Daojing* (*Classic of Dao*), while chapters 38-81 make up the *Dejing* (*Classic of Virtue*) (Ames & Hall, 2003). The *Daojing* is more metaphysical, whereas the *Dejing* focuses more on socio-political issues.

The concept of *wuwei* (nonaction) serves to explain naturalness in practice. ‘Nonaction’ is an awkward translation, and some translators prefer ‘non-assertive action’, ‘non-coercive action’, ‘inaction’ or ‘effortless action’, but *wuwei* is identified as a technical term. It does not mean total inaction. The notion of *wuwei* asserts that the Way (*Dao*) is characterised by spontaneous creativity and by regular natural alternation, such as day following night, which proceeds without effort. The Way is a natural course. Human intervention is fruitless and against nature. The power of such effortlessness is best illustrated by the conduct of water, which unresistingly flows to a lower level, and yet wears away the hardest substances. In the *Daodejing*, the concept seems to be used more broadly as a contrast against any form of action characterised by self-serving desire. Hence, morally, Laozi supported people to ‘transform themselves’, ‘rectify themselves’, and ‘enrich themselves’, and politically, the concept of *wuwei* advocated minimum government intervention.

## 8. Zhuangzi

Zhuangzi (also spelt as Chaung Tzu, 369 BC–286 BC), the author of the book of the same name, was a historical figure and a great follower of Laozi. In general, Zhuangzi’s philosophy is seen as sceptical, arguing that life is limited and knowledge to be gained is unlimited. Zhuangzi’s ideas can also be considered a precursor of relativism in systems of value. His relativism even led him to doubt the basis of pragmatic arguments, such as life is good and death is bad. He wrote that he had once expressed pity to a skull he saw lying at the side of the road. He lamented that the skull was then dead, but the skull retorted, ‘How do you know it’s bad to be dead?’ Another example about Zhuangzi’s scepticism points out that there is no universally objective standard for beauty. This is taken from ‘Discussion on Making All Things Equal’ (*qi wu lun*):

Men claim that Mao [Qiang] and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream; if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, who knows how to fix the standard of beauty in the world? (trans. Watson, 1968)

However, this observation about subjectivism is balanced by a kind of sensitive holism in the conclusion of the following section called ‘The Happiness of Fish’ (*yuzhile*). The names have been changed to *pinyin* romanisation for consistency:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao Waterfall when Zhuangzi said, ‘See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really enjoy!’

Huizi said, 'You're not a fish - how do you know what fish enjoy?'

Zhuangzi said, 'You're not me, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?'

Huizi said, 'I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish - so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!'

Zhuangzi said, 'Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me *how* I know what fish enjoy - so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao.' (trans. Watson, 1968)

Another well-known part of the book is usually called 'Zhuangzi dreamed he was a butterfly' (*Zhuangzhou mengdie*). Again, the names have been changed to *pinyin* romanisation for consistency:

Once Zhuangzi dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuangzi. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuangzi. But he didn't know if he was Zhuangzi who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. Between Zhuangzi and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things. (trans. Watson, 1968)

Zhuangzi believed that life forms have an innate ability or power to transform and adapt to their surroundings: 'the Transformation of Things'. While his ideas don't give any solid proof or mechanism of change such as Alfred Wallace and Charles Darwin, his idea about the transformation of life from simple to more complex forms can be seen as being along the similar lines of thought. Zhuangzi further mentions that humans are also subject to this process, as humans are a part of nature (Chan, 1963, p.204; also see Palmer & Breuilly, 1996). Generally, Zhuangzi attacked society and the state by claiming that rulers were robbers and serving them was immoral. He advocated reclusion and disengagement from the world. His thought remained 'the single most powerful voice of protest against the hegemonic monarchistic order' (Makeham, 2008, p.99).

## 9. Xunzi and Legalists

Xunzi (ca. 300 BC–237 BC), another Confucian follower, preached that man is innately selfish and evil, and that goodness is attainable only through education and conduct befitting one's status. He also argued that the best government is one based on authoritarian control, not ethical or moral persuasion. Xunzi's unsentimental and authoritarian inclinations were developed into the doctrine embodied in the School of Law or Legalism. The doctrine was formulated by Lord Shang Yang (390 BC–338 BC), Hanfeizi (around 230 BC), and Li Si (around 200 BC), who maintained that human nature was incorrigibly selfish; therefore, the only way to preserve the social order was to impose discipline from above and to enforce strict laws. The Legalists exalted the state and sought its prosperity and martial prowess above the welfare of the common people. Legalism became the philosophical basis for the imperial form of government. When the most practical and useful aspects of Confucianism and Legalism were synthesised in the Han period, a system of governance came into existence that was to survive largely intact until the late nineteenth century.

## 10. Conclusion

The late Spring and Autumn and early Warring States periods saw all sorts of ideas put forward, debated, written, and practiced: thus, it is easy to see why Chinese people refer this era as one when 'hundred schools of thought contend'. The frequent wars and political competitions accelerated rather than hindered intellectual creativity, as those in power turned to intellectuals and philosophers for solutions to the increasing number of problems surrounding them.

It can be said that the intellectual activities of the period were characterised by: firstly, their unanimous acceptance of the ancient cosmology based on the *yin-yang* theory; secondly, their primary

concern with the imperfect world and indeed the imperfect man rather than metaphysics; and thirdly, their aim to improve man and the world through developing a better system of politics and economics, and most importantly establishing an ideal system of ethics. It was an age of remarkable freedom of thought. The influential figures of the Hundred Schools of Thought wandered from state to state and would serve whoever hired them. During the Warring States period, their influence became so great that some rulers vied with one another to win the allegiance of these roaming scholars.

In this age of deep socio-political crises, Chinese thought was dominated by political and practical concerns. A doctrine not only had to be intellectually convincing, but most importantly useful. Beneath the apparent diversity of competing doctrines, however, there was the unanimity of supporting unification of 'all under Heaven' as the only solution to the political chaos. Most thinkers concurred that the monarchical system was the only acceptable form of political organisation. They bitterly criticised individual rulers, but no one proposed any systematic alternative. Basically, their ideology was man-centred and their emphasis was on human relationships, which even personalised the impersonal institutions such as government. In their view, the rulers were to rule by example, and they were 'fathers and mothers' of the people. The moral calibre of those who enforced the law was more important than the law itself. Their ideas became the backbone of Chinese political culture and their joint activities shaped Chinese intellectual tradition for the next two and a half millennia.

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