



Chinese Philosophy

There are six schools of classical Chinese philosophy and all of them arose during the *Warring States* period in ancient China. This was a period of several hundred years when China was divided by a number of states that were constantly at war, and which only came to an end with the victory of the state of *Qin* (pronounced *Chin*) in 221 BCE that led to the first unified Chinese empire. It was a time of constant warfare and thus great social distress. It should not be surprising that thinkers would emerge concerned with the disorder of the time to wonder how their society had lost its way and who might be concerned to understand how it might find a way out of such a time. Understandably, then, the six schools of classical Chinese philosophy developed in a dispute about the *Dao*, most often translated as "way" or "path."

道

Dao

As John Koller explains in chapter 14 of our textbook, advanced civilization in ancient China goes back at least as far as the beginning of recorded history in China during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE). As their artwork attests the Shang dynasty civilization was quite advanced and sophisticated. The more powerful Zhou people conquered a vast part of ancient China, eventually overthrowing the Shang and establishing the Zhou dynasty in 1122 BCE. Several centuries of relative peace and prosperity followed, but when the Zhou king was overthrown in 770 BCE, the civilization of ancient China gradually devolved into the constant warfare of the Warring States period.

An important feature of Chinese thought is that it is much more concerned with finding the *dao*, or way to live in this world, rather than the focus on finding the secret to liberation from this world that is the focus of much of the philosophies of India. The notion of reincarnation, the cycle of *samsara*, simply does not arise in Chinese thought until it was brought over from India with Buddhism.

Another important feature of Chinese thought is that the sharp separation between human beings and nature, which is such a distinctive feature of Western thought, just doesn't arise in Chinese philosophy. In ancient Chinese cosmology, there was an assumption that the 'three powers' of Heaven (*tian* 天), Earth (*di* 地), and human beings (*ren* 人) were always understood to be mutually related. The notion of Heaven (*tian* 天) should not be confused with the Christian sense of another world beyond this physical cosmos, but rather something like the sky above, or

the cosmos that opens at night when one can see the vastness of the cosmos. Though the term originally referred to a sky god who ruled over the cosmos, it evolved over time, from this notion of a sky god, to something more like 'fate' in the sense of an a power beyond human control, and then eventually to an impersonal standard for human conduct. By the time of Confucius, the notion had become an impersonal force of nature that reigned over the worlds of Earth and human beings. The phrase "the heavens and the earth" (tiandi 天地) is often used to refer to the 'whole world', or 'cosmos', and thus might be understood as 'nature' in the broadest sense of the natural world or universe. There is thus this broad sense that human beings are under 'heaven and earth' and thus part of the cosmos, and thus not separated from nature.

Classical Chinese philosophy begins with Confucius (551–479 BCE). A learned scholar and cultured gentleman, Confucius travelled around China teaching about the *dao*, trying to encourage the rulers of the warring states to be better rulers through understanding the *dao*. Eventually, the way of Confucius would be challenged by other thinkers, and thus during this period of the Warring States six schools of philosophy developed. In this course, we will focus on the two most famous, Confucianism and Daoism. These two schools, along with Buddhism, which arrived from India centuries later, would have a profound influence on all East Asian philosophy and culture.

Classical Chinese Philosophy

1. Confucianism
2. Daoism
3. Mohism
4. School of Names
5. Philosophy of Change
6. Legalism

The main difference between Confucianism and Daoism might be described as the difference between *humanism* and *naturalism*. Even though there is this broad sense of the interrelationship between the three powers of Heaven, Earth and human beings in Chinese thought, there was always more of an emphasis on the human and the social in the development of Confucianism. For Confucius, the *dao* develops through human beings, through what is best in human culture. For the Daoist philosophers, however, the Confucian perspective was too narrow. They thought it was necessary to get a wider perspective and see human beings within the context of the natural world, or even the whole vast cosmos. Thus, while Confucianism focuses on knowing humanity and developing virtues that could lead to social harmony, Daoism focuses on knowing the natural world and attuning human society to the patterns or rhythms of the cosmos.

The scholarly Confucius was influenced by the Five Classics of earlier times:

The Five Classics

Classic of Poetry (Shijing)

Classic of History (Shujing)

Classic of Changes (Yijing)

Classic of Rites (Lijing)

Spring and Autumn Annals (Chunqiu)

Of particular interest in the development of Chinese philosophy is the *Yijing*, the *Book of Changes*, which Koller discusses at length in chapter 15. This book, the oldest Chinese philosophical text, influenced all the philosophies that would develop in China. Originally this was a book of divination used during the Shang and Zhou dynasties and eventually it became a way of understanding the processes of change. One of the distinctive features of Chinese



Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate

from the *Compendium of Diagrams*,
1623 by Zhang Huang (1527-1608)

symbolized all the possible combinations of change from *yin* to *yang* and back to *yin*. The hexagrams and the commentary that followed would provide some guidance about the changes to come in the future.

philosophy is its acceptance that reality is made up of continually changing processes rather than unchanging things. As Koller explains, "by the end of the Zhou, understanding the changes (*yi*) had become a way of learning how the Way (*Dao*) of the universe functions through polarities of *yin* and *yang*" (Koller, 171). The image of the *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* shown above includes the well-known symbol of the *yinyang* polarities, with the *yin* the dark side and the *yang* the bright. Originally, the terms referred to the bright (*yang*) and shady (*yin*) sides of a hill, that would change throughout the day as the sun moved across the sky. Through the polarities of *yin* and *yang* the ancient Chinese sought to understand the process of change by which something comes into existence (*yang*) and then passes away (*yin*) changing into something else. According to the *Yijing*, the basic creative-energy stuff (*qi*) of the universe has two forms, the *yin* being "receptive, dark, hidden, passive, yielding, cool, soft, and feminine" and the *yang* being "creative, bright, active, aggressive, controlling, hot, hard, and masculine" (Koller, 183). The *Yijing* includes sixty-four hexagrams made up of alternating *yang* (unbroken) and *yin* (broken) lines. The hexagrams

氣
Qi