

CHINESE
CULTURE

PHILOSOPHY

WU CHUN



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Preface

Chinese philosophy is extensive and profound. The advocacy of benevolence by Confucianism, which reflects a broad-minded, virtue-based attitude toward the world, is the most valuable quality of the Chinese nation – a sublime spirit that is now in the blood of the whole nation. The Taoist wisdom, which is as infinite as heaven and earth and as inexhaustible as rivers, provides a deep and undying source and eternal motivation for the survival and development of the Chinese nation. Throughout her history, this nation has returned time and again to those ancient sages to reread the classics, listen to their teachings, and conduct self-examination. The same we should do today. In fact, Chinese philosophy based on Confucianism and Taoism is among the most important and most precious cultural legacy of the whole humankind. The virtue and wisdom contained therein can be compared to those in any other great tradition of humanity.

As part of the Chinese Culture Series, this book is expected to be an introduction to Chinese philosophy based on subjects rather than history. That makes it impossible to present a complete narrative, which is in fact unnecessary. In a glimpse cast upon 3,000 years of thinking, many details playing a marginal role in the whole picture are bound to be left out. This is true not only of philosophy, but also of literature, science and art. It is also true that people are similar in their cognitive habits. As a familiar example, when we first came into contact with Western art, religion and philosophy, we actually remembered little except some persons, works, books, and a few schools of thought. Nevertheless, once attracted by the impression left by that first glimpse (via watching or reading), you would make an attempt at a deeper understanding.

This book is divided into five subjects – What is the Nature of the World, What are the Relationships between Things, What are the Social Norms, What is the Proper Orientation of Life,

and What is the Structure of Knowledge. In my view, these are just about the most basic questions in Chinese philosophy, though it is also true that they comprise more specific questions. It is worth noting that, of the five subjects mentioned above, the first and the second actually have a profound religious and intellectual background, while the third and the fourth involve social and moral issues. These are the four aspects around which many significant thoughts in Chinese philosophy revolved – an insight that I have gained in my study of Chinese philosophy. These are also the four subjects forming the framework of my recent book *The Origin of Chinese Philosophy: the Development and Formation of Ideas, Concepts and Thoughts before the Era of Eastern Zhou Philosophers*, though the fifth subject is also very important. It is interesting to note that Taoism is generally partial to the first, second and fifth subjects. This, to be sure, has to do with its profound intellectual background as well as its interest in more essential and abstract issues, such as the laws governing the world and the origin of the universe. However, since these philosophical issues and the knowledge behind them are difficult to grasp and describe, Taoism presents a unique outlook on knowledge and language. In comparison, Confucianism is more interested in the third, fourth and fifth subjects. These are actually reflected in its theory of self-cultivation, statecraft, and the combination of “inner sage” and “outer ruler”: a person’s life should begin with “investigating things to achieve knowledge” (*gewu zhizhi*), attain an ideal character (becoming the “inner sage”) through the moral cultivation of oneself, and eventually apply oneself to social practice and achieve the goal of “regulating the family, ruling the state, and maintaining peace for all under Heaven” (becoming the “outer ruler”). An understanding of these ideas, their structures and their relationship with the major schools of thought might be helpful in your reading of this book and, by means of that, grasping the essentials of Chinese philosophy.

In order to present a relatively complete overview of Chinese philosophy and its issues, this book has adopted for its narrative a combination of ideas, concepts and categories with thoughts, theories and doctrines, because any means alone could lead to defective narration and understanding. For instance, if it centers around concepts or categories only, we would be denied a clear view of some important theories, including some thinkers’ brilliant discussions of a certain issue. On the other hand, a narrative only based on theories and doctrines would eclipse many crucial concepts and the important ideas they contain. However, given the limitation to only 80,000

Chinese characters, how am I supposed to select and arrange thoughts and materials? The only viable methods would be to “fan out from several points to the whole area” and to “epitomize the entire history in one segment.” The former is to highlight the key points, i.e. the thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism, especially those of their founders Confucius and Lao Tzu. In fact, they had already brought into existence many of the basic issues, thoughts and concepts in the Taoist and Confucian philosophies. Additionally, this method requires the coverage of as many essential points as possible (e.g. Wang Chong’s view on destiny and the opinions on the issue of “form” and “spirit” between the pre-Qin period and the Southern and Northern Dynasties) for the sake of completeness. The second method is to focus on the pre-Qin period, during which many thoughts and theories in Chinese philosophy were largely or fully developed (e.g. the Confucian theory of human nature and ideas on character, and the Taoist dialectics). Because of this, it is safe to base my narration upon this period, though I should also pay due attention to later developments, for some issues, such as the view on knowledge and action, were gradually brought to maturity in later ages. However, omissions are inevitable, and could only be compensated for by the reader’s endeavor at a deeper understanding.

There are other features in the way in which this book has been written that are worth mentioning here. First, in its narrative I have tried to present Chinese philosophy as it really is. Since the modern times, especially at present, under the influence of Western philosophy and trends of thought, the way in which issues in Chinese philosophy are described, including the terminology employed, has become considerably westernized, so much so as to blur its identity. This book tries to restore what Chinese philosophy was originally like, including the great impact of knowledge or science on it (how the concepts of yin and yang, the Five Elements, Dao and Li were formed and the influence on the issues of origin or law); the close relationship between philosophy and edification, and how this was put into practice on the social level (which was discussed by Feng Youlan); the special role and significance of musical aesthetics in philosophical thinking, and the continuity that characterized it in relation to the development of belief and knowledge. Furthermore, because of the “international” nature of this book, I have also included some cross-cultural comparisons in my narrative, which might help to spark interest in wider reading and deeper thinking. These encompass attitudes toward Divinity and divination, differences in views on

the issue of origin due to disparate background knowledge, the similarity between Chinese family and clan rules and Jewish Torah regarding ethical issues, and of course much more. Besides, as part of human wisdom, Chinese thinking and philosophy share common ground and can engage in dialogue with other parts, which should be reflected in those issues, thoughts and even concepts.

I am indebted to Professor Cui Yiming, the co-editor of the textbook – *Chinese Philosophical Ideas* (East China Normal University Press, 1998) – upon which this book is based, for his contribution. In fact, some passages in the latter have been directly quoted from the former. Jiang Kaitian, the PhD candidate under my tutelage, has helped me collating materials and given me some good advice. My thanks also go to China Intercontinental Press (CIP) for giving me this opportunity to introduce Chinese philosophy to the rest of the world and also for supplying the pictures in this book and translating it into English.

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