

A DAOIST THEORY OF CHINESE THOUGHT

A Philosophical Interpretation

CHAD HANSEN



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A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought

To Joyce Wong

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have drawn on a rich fund of accumulated wisdom about Chinese thought as I studied and reflected on it over three decades. I worry that the explicit acknowledgments in the text and footnotes will barely begin to express my debt to earlier scholars. I welcome this format to mention a few of the most prominent influences and sources of insight and ideas. Some, I am sure, I will still miss. For those listed, I must add this caveat: they are entitled to claim credit for the fertilizing my thought, but bear no responsibility for any deviant uses I may have made of their contributions.

At the top of the list I place Donald Munro. He gave me my first comprehensive picture of the classical period. I realized then how much clarity he contributed to the subject because I had already despaired of making sense of the standard accounts in Chinese and English. But my appreciation of the clarity and depth of his insights has grown as I have worked out more and more of my theory. I continually discover the seeds of it in his first work. In particular, I cite his insight that Chinese thinkers focus more on the behavioral implications of a theory than on its *correspondence truth*. In a sense, this entire account merely defends and develops this central insight of his *The Concept of Man in Ancient China*. My book footnotes what I learned from my teacher and friend.

My professional attention has been focused on different, less orthodox areas and aspects of the classical period—the philosophy of language. And for my understanding of these areas I owe an immeasurable debt to Professor A. C. Graham. This debt is not mine alone. The entire field of Chinese thought could not have advanced to the point of being philosophically interesting without his magnificent lifelong contribution. Without any hesitation, I rank his publication of *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* as a far more important event in understanding Chinese thought than the unearthing of the Mawang-dui tombs. His unraveling of the analytic Mohist theory defines the state of the art in textual reconstruction and grammatical analysis. He reconstructed the details of a long-lost theory of language and showed its direct and immediate impact on the thought of Zhuangzi and Xunzi. This study is motivated primarily by the goal of working Graham's discovery into a unified theory of the philosophy of the entire classical period.

David Nivison has been an invaluable source of support and promotion during lean and threatening years. His positive evaluation of my various fragmentary insights and early results were especially important. My respect for him is such that I treated his opinion as essential confirmation that gave me the confidence to continue. If this study shows an inadequate fondness for the doctrines of Mencius, it cannot be his fault. Professor Nivison gave me a splendid opportunity to understand the idealist position. He gave me the main clue to Mencius' theory of language and the line that

would link the mainline Confucians with the analytic Mohists. His careful and thoughtful analysis of the Mencius-Gaozi debate has served as a model to me as it has to all of his students.

These three giants of Anglo-American sinology are links in the chain of creative transmission. Each link depends on the former ones. And the presence of the passion and commitment to preserving *dao* is a debt we all owe to Confucianism—and its first great innovative transmitter, Confucius. Without that transmission, there would be no possibility of this odyssey of the mind. It gives the resources for traversing the greatest conceptual, linguistic, and space-time distance possible in the actual world.

Two figures stand out as important in bridging the cultural gulf (at least from our side). They are Fung Yu-lan and Hu Shih. My first exposure to Chinese thought came from the first Chinese book I ever read all the way through. It was a middle-school adaptation of Fung Yu-lan's theory of Chinese thought. His magnificent two-volume *History of Chinese Thought* (with thanks to his translator, Derk Bodde) is the basis from which many of us begin. Fung dared advance a holistic theory of the period while most scholars prefer the safety of specialization in one thinker. His life required courage in many ways.

Hu Shih championed the notion that Chinese thought could be understood rationally. I read his *Development of Logical Method in Ancient China* for my first term paper on Chinese philosophy and read his *Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy* as the first step in my dissertation research. Much of this theory derives from that early attempt at the philosophical project of making respectable philosophical sense of classical Chinese thought.

Many nonphilosophers have contributed to the cultural transmission. These include the incomparable James Legge, the father of all sinologists. The great triumvirate of Wing-tsit Chan, Burton Watson, and Theodore De Bary produced translations and publications which were the texts for my generation. I still use them for my students. Joseph Needham's lifelong dedication and his works are well known. The second volume of his *Science and Civilisation in China* represents an English model of someone willing to produce a holistic theory of the period. Bernard Karlgren launched the serious theoretical study of the classical Chinese language.

My first philosophy teachers in China were Fang Dong-mei and Chen Guying at the National Taiwan University. At the Stanford Center on that same campus, I studied and argued about philosophy with many of my teachers. All provided light-bulb-like insights that eventually fit into the larger theory. I especially thank Gregory Chang, with whom I first read Hu Shih. He was not only patient with my Cantonese accent, but willing to bend the then-strict rules to allow free philosophical discussion. I was honored later to attend classes taught by the Mo Zongsan and Tang Junyi at New Asia College in Hong Kong. The richness of my opportunities to learn far outstripped the meager conscious capacity of my brain to comprehend and store what was available. I find many of what I thought were my original insights in Tang's wide-ranging *Yuan-Dao*.

My best ideas often come after animated conversations with professional friends. Frequently those long leisurely talks plant the seed of an idea (or embarrassingly often, they fully communicate it to one's subconscious where it is later "rediscovered"). But the greater value of those friends lies in the stimulation of thought, defence, elaboration. They also offer the immense luxury of enjoying what one does

for a living. Some of my most enjoyable moments came while I was at Stanford University and regularly attending seminars at Berkeley. These were organized by Tu Wei-ming, who has always impressed me as the most articulate spokesman for Neo-Confucian ideas in American academe. My companions for the delightful discussions, besides David Nivison, included my colleague Lee Yearley, and students P. J. Ivanhoe and Sally Gressens. My conversations with each have continued with equal pleasure, but regrettably less frequency, over the years.

I owe a similar debt to a more scattered group: Michael Martin at the University of Hong Kong, Roger Ames at the University of Hawaii, Henry Rosemont at St. Mary's College, Robert Eno at Indiana University, who gave helpful and stimulating comments on the text, Kwong-loi Shun at the University of California at Berkeley, and Bao Zhiming at Fudan University and MIT. They have all listened patiently to various aspects of my theory and reacted alternately with enthusiasm or reasoned criticism. Both reactions have helped enormously as I struggled to clarify and support the overall theory.

I have been exposed to the ideas of several scholars after my own ideas had mostly taken shape. Still I benefited from reflecting on their general outlook and have drawn heavily on their works for detailed insights in fleshing out my own view. These include Benjamin Schwartz, Frederick Mote, Raymond Smullyan, and Herbert Fingarette. Schwartz's early paper on "The Absence of Reductionism in Chinese Thought" excited me a great deal and I have constantly enjoyed his gentle but stimulating insights and questions at conferences and gatherings. His imposing *World of Chinese Thought* was published between the first and second drafts of this attempt at a related but rival project. This stimulus to clearer and better elaboration of my view was invaluable. It will be obvious how much I have drawn from and reacted to that rich work. Mote's admirably clear picture of Chinese thought made me wish I had discovered it far earlier. I still incorporated many elements of his theory easily into my overall picture. Smullyan delighted me in showing that another analytically inclined philosopher who happened not to be a sinologist should anticipate what I take to be the real nature of Daoist mysticism. Similarly for Fingarette's picture of Confucius, to which my review was too unkind. I have always appreciated his groundbreaking vision of the depth of Confucius' reliance on convention.

I owe debts of many kinds to my colleagues at the University of Vermont, especially Bill Mann, the chairman. The university and department have been generous with sabbatical and release time. My colleagues there include most notably Hilary Kornblith, George Sher, the departed Philip and Patricia Kitcher, David Christensen, and Derk Perebloom. They all demonstrate the openness that belies the prejudice held among sinologists that philosophers—especially analytic philosophers—are narrow minded about Chinese thought. They stimulate me to clear thought and hold me to high standards. Each has contributed important philosophical insights that sharpen the presentation. Peter Seybolt, who heads the Asian Studies Group at the University of Vermont engages me regularly in those debates that foment whole new section headings. Vermont is the ideal environment for an American Daoist.

I have benefitted from sabbatical release funds from a Fulbright sabbatical grant and summer research support from the University of Vermont. The University of Hong Kong offered some housing support, a forum for my verbal exposition, a position at the Center for Asian Studies, and regular opportunities for enrichment at-

tending their seminars and conferences. They have also graciously invited me to deliver bits and pieces of my theory in their Traditional China Seminar. The philosophy department provided other opportunities for discussing my ideas about Chinese thought and lots of encouragement. Special thanks to Professor Tim Moore, Lawrence Goldstein, and Chris New.

I cannot begin to trace and credit the sources of the Western philosophical ideas I use here in explaining Chinese philosophy. Obviously, not much is original. In addition to the ancient masters, my ability to distance myself from the traditional Western psychology and philosophy of language owes much to Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars. I have drawn especially from the more recent writings of Stephen Stich, David Lewis, Daniel Dennett, Richard Montague, Michael Sandel, Saul Kripke, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, John Rawls, Richard Grandy, Tyler Burge, Thomas Nagel, and Derek Parfit.

I must thank my students through the years at the universities of Pittsburgh, Michigan, Stanford, Vermont, Hong Kong, Hawaii, and U.C.L.A. Their questions, their interest, and their enthusiasm all helped. But mostly it helps to reflect on how they have restated what they learned from my attempt to make Chinese philosophy accessible. I collect those restatements and use them to improve the presentation and this account.

My thanks to my wife, Joyce, who unlike most wives noted in acknowledgments, didn't type a word of the manuscript. But she tolerated my temper as I ran the gauntlet of computer word processing. She encouraged and made space for my bizarre work habits and curious interest in wildly different ways of thinking. Then she guided me with what, as soon as I heard them, I instantly recognized as incredibly sensible techniques for working on the text.

Lest I forget what we must all learn from Confucians, let me also thank my parents. They provide the basis on which we all build. In my case they gave me both a habit of early rising and hard work and a love of learning. They also gave me a dose of the life of a dairy farmer that helped me acquire a passion to be an academic instead. And my entire family gave me the confidence that comes from life-long acceptance that good Freudians and good Confucians both agree is essential for our development. The inner freedom to be an eccentric is frequently a consequence of such orthodox systems of support and a wonderful gift from my family.

If this is to become thanks to the causal antecedents, a Daoist acknowledgment must now follow. If personal history and transmission of culture is a cause, then so is evolution. My thanks to the primates, large mammals, the plant kingdom, and the unfathomable natural forces on which they rest. The electromagnetic field coursing through my computer no doubt flows from the Big Bang. (Mysticism is an easy matter these days of black holes and singularity.)

No serious skeptic can cite natural causes and ignore supernatural ones. A special footnote of thanks to Dan Hoffman for originating the theory that I am a reincarnation of Zhuangzi. Apparently Zhuangzi decided that the distortion and misunderstanding of his doctrine had gone on long enough and needed a missionary. What better than to use the barbarian system? He chose rebirth in the Rocky plateaus of the High Uintah mountains of Utah where one can grow to outward maturity acquiring a minimal cultural endowment. (My ninth-grade English teacher read *Horton the Elephant* to us aloud for cultural enrichment!) It also provided an institution that

would send the scion to Hong Kong in this relatively unformed state. So from a place where our nearest neighbors were three miles away I found myself whisked to a place where I saw more people in fifteen minutes than I had seen my whole life. There I quickly learned there was more gospel to learn than to teach.

Of course in order for Zhuangzi's plan to work, one had to have such a religious institution. Zhuangzi had a plan. A Vermont farmer possessed of his New England Yankee independence could create a religion. But he needed the impetus. History used the Chinese ginseng root. A mysterious stranger proposed to Joseph Smith, Sr., that he plant his farm to ginseng and sell it to China. I don't know if it was ever delivered, but no money came back and Smith lost his Vermont farm. He fell back on his mystical Vermont tradition of water dowsing but added the special claim that he could douse for gold. His son learned the trade as they wandered to Upstate New York. There Joseph Smith, Jr., continued his fascination with finding buried gold and an interest in ancient, exotic cultures and people. He found gold plates with a theory of the American Indians. Based on this book, he founded his iconoclastic, freethinking, quintessentially American religion. The chain of events leading to founding of the Mormon empire in Utah and my own eventual return to Vermont is all fairly ordinary history. Those who sense a continuity with Mormonism in my thought patterns, despite my professed atheism, don't have it all wrong.

I do not intend to put much weight on this story. I shall rest my case on the explanatory power of the interpretive theory. I offer it here for those more impressed with pedigree and credentials than argument.

Shelburne, Vermont
May 1992

C. H.

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1

An Introduction with Work to Do

A missing text is always an exciting discovery. The later Mohist dialectic chapters are a unique case. They form a missing text that was not physically lost. Chinese archivists had copied and transmitted it down through two millennia after a textual accident had turned it into an incoherent jigsaw puzzle. The interpretive tradition lost the ability to understand the text. A Qing scholar first discovered the key to the puzzle near the end of the nineteenth century. Angus Graham completed the systematic reconstruction of the text in his *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science* in 1978.

The Mohist text gives us access to a detailed classical Chinese theory of language. It thus poses a rare challenge and an opportunity. The Mohists exemplify the opposite of the ruling stereotype of Chinese thought. That stereotype treats *analytic thought* and *Chinese thought* as virtual opposites. Now Graham has shown that many Chinese philosophers of the period knew the basic principles of Chinese linguistic analysis. They both understood and applied its technical terminology. Any coherent account of the period must now shoulder a new task. We must explain how that intense interest in language analysis arose out of the philosophical context. This missing text challenges us to revise our entire view of the classical period of Chinese philosophy.

Coincidentally, general studies of the entire classical period are beginning to come back in style. Benjamin Schwartz published his monumental *The World of Thought in Ancient China* in 1985 and Angus Graham followed in 1989 with his *Disputers of Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. Both studies, however, mainly develop the ruling stereotype. Schwartz surveys several new approaches to the classical thinkers but he consistently finds the reasons for departing from traditional interpretations deficient. Graham is intentionally more revisionist. (His theories are among those that Schwartz rejects.) Still, he structures his account around the familiar reason-intuition dichotomy that devotees of Eastern wisdom have used to explain Chinese thought since Northrup first proposed it.¹ I regard both as differing versions of a deeper standard interpretation. Bifurcating the tradition into separate analytic and intuitive components is the trademark of the traditional standard view. Schwartz treats Chinese linguistic analysis as a minor and irrelevant aberration and largely ignores it. Graham, of course, gives it more extensive treatment. Still, he treats analytic reason and intuitive mysticism (spontaneity) as two distinct and incompatible philosophical styles. Analytic reason, he argues, lost out in ancient China.

Both scorn the challenge to revise and unify the interpretive theory that was

dominant before we understood the analytic Chinese philosophers. Neither challenges our familiar romantic assumptions that antirational mysticism is distinctive of Chinese thought. Both, in different ways, relegate the language theorists to an out-of-tune limbo in Chinese thought. A *unified interpretation* should try to *explain* how these different philosophical directions in Chinese thought emerged from a shared philosophical perspective and problems.

Unifying our interpretive theory of the period requires that we thoroughly rethink the background beliefs we attribute to the preanalytic philosophers. A unified theory must show both how earlier philosophical issues led to the interest in linguistic analysis *and* to the particular line of analysis they followed. The view that Chinese linguistic analysis is an inexplicable aberration in Chinese thought should raise our skeptical eyebrows.

The New Perspective and Philosophical Progress

My motivation in writing differs from that of the two giants of sinology who preceded me. Confucius posed the classic polarity, "To study without thinking is worthless, to think without study is dangerous." The trick, of course, is to find where the balance lies. My instincts are philosophical, not historical. I depend heavily on what other scholars have learned about Chinese thought. But for me, the challenge has always been to make some sense of it. My response to the challenge is also philosophical. Philosophers construct *thought experiments* when exploring theoretical frameworks. We test philosophical positions by detailing how they would *spin out*. We test our intuitions or considered judgments by imagining alternative theories.

In one sense, the philosopher's urge is to start from scratch—the view from nowhere.² We can't, of course. But classical Chinese philosophy gave me a chance to do the next best thing. What would it be like to do philosophy with a *radically different* set of assumptions? The assumptions I trace are constrained, but not by the limits on my imagination or current theoretical purposes. Chinese philosophy allowed me to perform a thought experiment removed from the immediate task of solving some outstanding philosophical problem. At the same time, it allowed me to *start over* in a sense—but not from nowhere. The new starting point is a real place that is just very different. I imagine myself retracing the rise of philosophy in *the one place in the actual world* most removed from our own in spatial, temporal, linguistic, cultural, and conceptual terms.

The texts and the language set real and rich limits on this exercise of philosophical imagination. The philosophical and conceptual theories I attribute to Chinese thinkers should meet two explanatory goals. Those theories should both *explain* and *be explainable*. That is, it must explain the text as expressing a theory, and it must explain why thinkers using that language and addressing those philosophical issues would adopt the theory.

My quarrel with the current state of interpretative theory thus goes far beyond its failure to explain Chinese analytic theory of language. It fails adequately to explain a host of things. It has notoriously (and admittedly) failed to make sense of Daoism, it denigrates Mohism as shallow, boring or *excessively Western*, and makes

Legalism an implausible ideology of official cruelty. So it not only marginalizes the analytic school; it marginalizes *all* the classical thinkers except Confucians. The Confucian theory even fails to make much sense of Confucianism itself. It tends to be filled with defensive claims that objecting to its obvious inadequacies reveals a modern or Western or (horrors!) analytic bias.

I don't quite see the point of denying my guilt. There are many modern, Western, analytic views of many different things. I believe some and disbelieve others. One of the things I believe is that no one I know personally has successfully adopted the view from nowhere. I doubt that my pretending to have done so would increase my credibility except among the gullible, who, I suppose, will already have stopped reading. So I will neither adopt a "Just the facts, Ma'am" tone nor represent what follows as the shared conclusions of all serious and competent scholars. I am aware, and the reader will be soon, that I disagree with the wise men of the realm.

Given our inherent limitations, objectivity must take the form of explaining why our perspective would vary. I came to the study of Chinese philosophy just as Graham was working out his account of the Analytic school, with its rich theory of language. I thought about that *first*. Having made some sense of that, I looked at Daoism. It looked philosophically interesting! Then early Mohism, out of which this study grew, looked much richer and more pivotal. Even Legalism seemed more sensible. The conventional theory of Confucianism seemed to fit into a coherent picture that unified the whole period.

The key to my view of Chinese thought is this. I attribute a theory of language and mind to Chinese thinkers that differs fundamentally from the popular Western view. This theory of language makes sense of the philosophical disputes between the ancient philosophers. It is a very different theory. We can explain those differences either as *prima facie* plausible or as a tenable theory of language for this philosophical tradition—given the Chinese language and their other philosophical presuppositions. It both explains and can be explained.

Attributing a radically different theory of language and mind to the classical tradition reveals good, albeit also radically different, philosophy. But more important, it reveals a unified philosophical point of view that develops and matures in an interesting way until banned, buried, and burned by political authority. The only cost of this new perspective is that Confucianism does not come out on top philosophically. In fact it ends up near the bottom. The same political authority that stifled further philosophical development also awarded Confucianism its high position in history. One of my Daoist biases is against argument from authority—especially political authority.

I will attribute the following perspective on language to all Chinese philosophers of the period: Language is a social practice. Its basic function is guiding action. The smallest units of guiding discourse are *ming*^{names}.^{*} We string *ming*^{names} together in progressively larger units. The salient compositional linguistic structure is a *dao*^{guiding}

^{*}I will use this superscript notation to refer to Chinese characters in my interpretive metalanguage. When I use such a notation, I am using (or mentioning) the Chinese concept. The translation in superscript is to help readers who know Chinese identify the concept and to help others follow the theory. Use of this notation does not mean that the supplied translation is identical to the intended concept. This whole book, not the superscripts, is my interpretive theory. A change in superscripts does not mean a change in character. I include a glossary of characters with the different superscripts at the end of the book.

discourse. * The Chinese counterpart of interpretation is not an account of the truth conditions. Rather, to *interpret a dao* is to *perform* it. The interpretation of a *dao*^{guiding} discourse starts from the interpretation of the *ming*^{names} that compose it. In learning a conventional name, you learn a socially shared way of making discriminations in guiding your action according to a *dao*^{way}.

The issues that provoke skepticism and drive philosophical reflection in this perspective differ from their counterparts in the Western tradition in intelligibly related ways. These issues include: (1) what standards should guide the social conventions for discriminating and applying a term† (2) whether there are extralinguistic sources or standards of guidance and (3) whether we can find any constant (objective) way of fixing which language to use in guiding behavior or the ways of interpreting it. These questions, I will argue, both motivated the early philosophers and led to the newly discovered Neo-Mohists' theory of language. The Later Mohists proposed a referential semantics for names and embedded it in the larger pragmatic project. All the ancient thinkers viewed languages as a way to coordinate and regulate behavior. No one in this tradition developed a theory that the central function of language was representing or picturing facts or reality.

My theory identifies four progressive stages in Classical doctrines about language and mind. The first stage is the positive *dao*^{way} period, what the Daoists call the *Ru-Mo*^{Confucian - Mohist} period. The philosophical dispute in this stage concerned what language we should use in guiding a society. Should tradition set the standards of discourse or should we reform those standards? If we are to reform them, we need a standard or criterion such as utility. How could we justify using such a standard? Tradition would reject it and utilitarian justification presupposes it.

The perceived futility of the *Ru-Mo* debate led to the second stage—the antilanguage *dao* period. Both Confucian and Daoist thinkers from this period rejected the earlier ideal of guiding behavior by social conventional discourse. They appealed to a natural, intuitive, or innate guide to behavior. This development led to the doctrines of Mencius and the Laozi form of Daoism.

The third period—the analytic period—exposed the incoherence of the antilanguage position. It led to the realist analysis of the Later Mohist school. But the school of names also included a strain of relativist-skepticism about language. This motivated the skepticism of Zhuangzi.

*The obvious contrast here with Western thought lies in the absence of compositional units corresponding to sentences. Chinese thinkers did not distinguish sentential units as an intermediate structure. Thus they did not focus on truth conditions. Similarly, their philosophy of mind did not include the theory of beliefs (sentences in mentalese). And their moral theory did not focus on rules (universal prescriptive sentences). The Later Mohists did begin to analyze compositionality but mainly analyzed how names are compounded and included in noun and verb phrases.

†The issue of realism versus conventionalism (of word use) still drives ancient Chinese versions of skepticism. Classical Chinese skepticism questioned the constancy of naming, not the descriptive accuracy of beliefs or perception. That skeptical premise lead to the conclusion that no scheme of linguistic guidance was constant or reliable in guiding action. The postanalytic philosophers faced this specter of skepticism with two results. Daoists, like Zhuang zi, playfully romped in skeptical freedom from convention. Confucians and their offspring, the Legalists, viewed linguistic skepticism as criminally dangerous and disorderly. Since language played a role in coordinating and regulating cooperative behavior, skepticism threatened society with a deep kind of anarchy. They advocated using authoritarian methods to impose and stabilize social control of how people use names.