

CHINESE  
CULTURE

# PHILOSOPHY

WU CHUN



Lao Tzu:  
Tao Te Ching

道德經

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# Preface

Chinese philosophy is an extensive and profound subject that has had a deep and lasting impact on China's history and culture. In particular, the advocacy of benevolence, which is a central part of Confucianism and which reflects a broad-minded, virtue-based attitude toward the world, has become a central and highly valued part of the spirit of the nation. At the same time, Taoist wisdom, which is "as infinite as heaven and earth and as inexhaustible as rivers", provides a deep and undying source of motivation for the survival and development of the Chinese nation. Throughout her history, China has returned again and again to those ancient sages and generations of Chinese have reread their classic texts, listened to their teachings, and asked themselves the deep questions that this study has inspired. In fact, Chinese philosophy, based on Confucianism and Taoism, is among the most important and most precious cultural legacies that humankind possesses. The virtue and wisdom it contains can be compared favorably to any other school of philosophy from anywhere else around the world.

As part of the Chinese Culture Series, this book is an introduction to Chinese philosophy structured by subject rather than history. Although this approach makes it impossible to present a complete narrative, this is not a problem. It must be realised that, when looking at over 3,000 years of thinking, many marginal details can be left out without compromising a general, overall understanding of the subject. This is true not only for the history of philosophy, but also for the history of literature, science and art. Hopefully, after having read this book, readers will be left with an exciting impression of the subject, and will be inspired to do further research and reading to get a deeper understanding.

This book is divided into five subjects, which look at five key questions – 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 the five most basic questions (or subjects) in Chinese philosophy (though they can be broken down into a series of 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 questions around which many significant thoughts in Chinese philosophy revolve. They are also the four subjects that form 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*. Although these four subjects are key, the fifth ‘What is the Structure of Knowledge?’ is also very important. It is interesting to note that Taoism places great importance on the first, second and fifth subjects. This is a consequence of its profound intellectual background, as well as its focus on more essential and abstract issues, such as the laws governing the world and the origin of the universe. Although these philosophical issues 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. This focus is reflected in its theory of self-cultivation, statecraft, and its idea of the combination of “inner sage” and “outer ruler.” According to Confucianism, a person’s life should begin with “investigating things to achieve knowledge” (*gewu zhizhi*). The aim of this should be to attain an ideal character (becoming the “inner sage”) through the moral cultivation of one’s self. The eventual goal should be to apply oneself to social practice and to 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 relationships with the other major schools of thought may help with the reading of this book and, in turn, help with the development of a deeper understanding of the essentials of Chinese philosophy.

In order to present a relatively complete overview of Chinese philosophy and its issues, this book uses a combination of ideas, concepts and categories to cover a range of thoughts, theories and doctrines. This multi-faceted approach is taken to make the book as comprehensive as possible and to aid understanding of the concepts it covers. The approach taken is important as if, for example, the book only focused on concepts or categories, it would not provide a clear view of

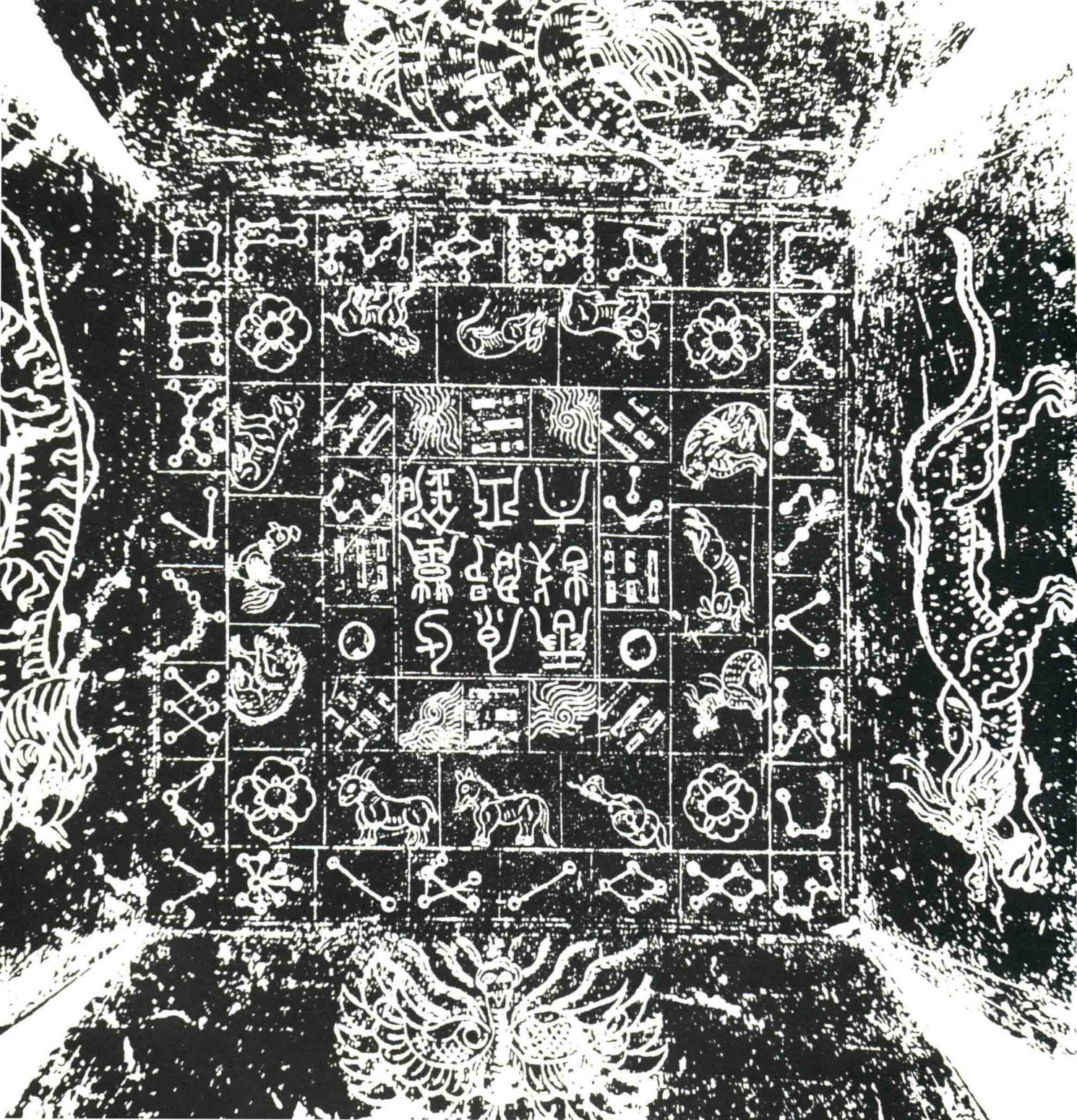
some important theories, and might miss out some of the brilliant discussions that have taken place around a certain issue. On the other hand, a narrative only based on theories and doctrines would miss out many crucial concepts and the important ideas they contain.

Given the limitations of the book's length it was decided that the only viable approach would be to highlight key points, including the thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism, especially those of their founders Confucius and Lao Tzu. It was also decided to focus on the pre-Qin period, during which many of the thoughts and theories of Chinese philosophy were developed (e.g. the Confucian theory of human nature and ideas on character, and Taoist dialectics). The book does give attention to later developments, where appropriate, however, omissions are inevitable, and it is hoped that readers will be inspired to find out more.

There are some other features about the way in which this book has been written that are worth mentioning here. First, I have tried to present Chinese philosophy as it really is. This is important as recently, under the influence of Western philosophy and trends of thought, the way in which issues covered by Chinese philosophy are described, including the terminology that is employed, has become increasingly Westernized, so much so that its identity has been blurred. This book therefore tries to get to the essence of what Chinese philosophy was originally like. It looks at the impact that science has had on its development and looks at the concepts of yin and yang, the Five Elements and Dao and Li. It investigates the close relationship between philosophy and teaching, and how it has been put into practice on a social level. It highlights the special role and significance of musical aesthetics in philosophical thinking, and the relationship of philosophy to the development of belief and knowledge. Furthermore, because of the "international" nature of this book, it also includes some cross-cultural comparisons, which should encourage readers to investigate further for themselves. These comparisons look at areas of disagreement, such as the different attitudes toward Divinity and divination that exist. They also look at areas of commonality, such as the similarity between Chinese family and clan rules and the Jewish Torah regarding ethical issues. Overall, they show that Chinese thinking and philosophy share common ground with other ways of thinking.

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 this book have been directly quoted from the textbook. I would also like to thank Jiang Kaitian, the PhD candidate under my tutelage, who has helped me to collate materials and who has 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.





# WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE WORLD?

What is the nature of the world? This question, which concerns phenomena (observable facts or events) and essence (the set of attributes that makes something what it is), is asked in every kind of philosophy. For ancient Western philosophers essence was more important than phenomena (due to factors such as Plato's skepticism about the reliability of phenomena). However, this was not the case for ancient Chinese philosophers, for whom phenomena played as important a role as essence. This chapter starts by considering the issue of *shen* (which can be translated as God, divinity, spirit, or "spiritual power"), which, as we shall see, involves both polytheism and atheism. Then it looks at the concept of yin and yang, and the idea of the Five Elements (*wuxing*). It investigates how the early Chinese people perceived nature, how the two concepts came into being and developed, and how they became central concepts in Chinese philosophy. The third part of this chapter deals with how the ancient Chinese perceived difference and variability, which also gives an insight into how ancient Chinese philosophy addressed the issue of phenomena. Finally, it looks at how Chinese philosophy has considered the issue of essence (which involves the concepts of origin and noumenon and *qi*, *dao*, and *li*, as well as various laws and rules). It highlights an overall movement toward the general and the abstract in the thinking process of the ancient Chinese philosophers.