

CHINA KNOWLEDGE SERIES

A SHORT HISTORY
OF
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

HOU WAI-LU



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS
PEKING

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IN COLLABORATION WITH
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Foreword

Chinese philosophy has long been omitted from the histories of philosophy written by Western bourgeois scholars. At the same time there are "national characteristics" groups¹ of both traditional and modern type in China who vaunt the superiority of Chinese philosophy, making no distinction between its merits and defects and enshrouding it in an air of mystery. Those who omit it entirely and those who claim the superiority of Chinese philosophy appear to belong to two opposing camps, but they actually complement each other — they are in short all idealists. This is at once apparent when we see that in dealing with the problem of accepting our cultural heritage the imperialists and the feudal reactionaries form a close alliance and support each other in their views. The real polarity is between these idealist distorters of the history of Chinese philosophy and those who have tried to make a really scientific analysis of its development.

In the course of its continuous development over a period of some four thousand years, there have been, in Chinese philosophy as in the philosophies of other nations, two different national cultures and two opposing

¹The name given to several groups who advocated a revival of feudal culture. In their blind worship of ancient things, they in fact extolled the past at the expense of the present. Being against the course of historical development their views were not progressive. Such dregs of the historical heritage could only lead people to look backwards and divorce themselves from practical realities.

schools of thought constantly warring with each other: the feudal, bourgeois, reactionary culture and the democratic, socialist, revolutionary culture; the idealist, metaphysical theory and the dialectical, materialist theory. Revolutionary culture with its materialism grew and matured in its struggle against the reactionary one with its idealism.

In the realm of philosophy the Chinese people have a heritage, varied and rich in content and no less praiseworthy than that of any other people. Engels told us that to improve our theoretical and speculative ability we must study the history of philosophy. He also pointed out that to enable ourselves to wage a more effective struggle today we must draw on the experience gained and lessons learned in the struggle between materialism and idealism in the past.

The great materialist thinkers of China have shown marvellous courage in their stormy struggles against the hostile idealists as may be seen from the historical records. They dared to destroy superstition, raise new problems, seek the truth, and through their creative thought they achieved remarkable progress. They skillfully used the methods of their forerunners and gave new content to old forms making them accord with the spirit of their times. In this respect they may be said to have both inherited from the past and bequeathed to the future. Using philosophy as an instrument they expressed the ideals of the progressive class and held high the torch of a glorious tradition. With an open mind, they absorbed the good elements of foreign cultures and combined them with the realities of Chinese history. Such effort becomes especially noteworthy as we come to more recent times.

With the spread of Marxism in China Mao Tse-tung, inheriting the excellent tradition of Chinese philosophy, developed Marxism in the practice of the Chinese revolution. The philosophy of Mao Tse-tung is the culmination of the wisdom of the Chinese people. It is the one and only correct theory by which the Chinese proletariat and the entire body of the Chinese working people effected their liberation.

This book is an attempt to write a brief history of Chinese philosophy in line with the above.

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1. The Origin and Development of Philosophy in *the Yin and Chou Dynasties; and the "Hundred Schools"* of the Warring States Period

We are as yet unable to say for certain when class society began in China. Archaeological researches have shown, however, that as early as the 16th century B.C., i.e. at the end of the Hsia and in the early years of the Shang dynasty, the people of the Shang tribe in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River left traces of their advance towards a civilized society. Practically no written records of the Hsia and the earlier period of the Shang dynasty are yet available. The earliest written materials we possess now belong to the latter part of the Shang dynasty, commonly known in history books as the Yin dynasty (13th-12th century B.C.). This is the reason why this review of the development of Chinese thought has to start with the Yin period.

In the Yin dynasty, the early period of slave society, religion and witchcraft occupied a dominant place in man's world outlook. The Yin people believed in the existence of two worlds: An "upper" world of the gods and a "lower" world of man. Using the ruling body of their own society as a model, they conceived of an image of a "ruler,"* who was the supreme power in the "upper"

*In this book an asterisk indicates that Chinese names with transliteration are given in the index.

world, with a host of deities, who were his subordinates. The King of Yin called himself a descendant of the "ruler" and his agent on earth. By means of religion he initiated the idea of a super-social power, i.e. the power of a ruler. The people of Yin were also worshippers of nature. The sun, the wind, the Yellow River, and the big mountains were all objects of their devotion.

The Yin people did have a certain amount of scientific knowledge but it was inextricably mixed up with religion. During the Yin dynasty astronomy, mathematics and the art of calendar-making were fairly well developed and the classification of natural phenomena was also fairly detailed and accurate. The arts of metallurgy and bronze-casting reached a high level of excellence. But so far as materials are available we have as yet found no definite indication of a moral code, nothing relating to rights and duties.

Towards the end of the 12th century B.C. there emerged in the valley of the Wei River a group of tribes known as Chou the members of which had hitherto been culturally backward. These tribes were originally subordinate to the tribe of Yin. Both under King Wu and King Cheng, the Chou tribes launched expeditions to the east against the Yin conquering and making the latter and their allies their tribal slaves. The Kingdom of Chou was founded and an early form of slavery was adopted. The Chou rulers inherited but reformed the various institutions of Yin. This resulted in major political changes which in turn resulted in some changes of ideology.

The reason why the Chou inherited the culture of the Yin was because their own cultural level was lower in many respects. But in some ways they retained their own characteristics and made changes in the Yin culture

adapting it to their own needs. This was shown by the historical tradition that the Duke of Chou, younger brother of King Wu, and Regent during minority of King Cheng after King Wu's death, formulated rites* and music.* The Chou rulers continued to make use of the concept of the "ruler" in the hope of maintaining their own power. They created new concepts of "virtue"* and "mandate of heaven,"* stating that the Yin rulers were overthrown by order of heaven because they had forsaken virtue, and that the Chou rulers were given mandate of heaven because they were virtuous. So the fall of Yin and the rise of Chou was a decision made by the "ruler's" will. Virtue means "to worship heaven" and "care of the people." The rulers were required to discipline themselves by strict class "rites," so as to consolidate their rule. These "rites" were the earliest moral concepts of the ruling clan and were exclusively aristocratic codes reflecting the political system of a slave-owning autocracy.

By the 9th and 8th centuries B.C. when the Western Chou¹ was nearing its end the clan-slavery system had become an impediment to the productive forces causing a crisis in labour power. Owing to a process of social differentiation a stratum of people known as freemen* appeared. Gradually through struggle these people acquired the right to own property and participate in political affairs. A form of slave system was then in the process of developing. From the viewpoint of the de-

¹Historians usually divide the Chou dynasty into two major periods: the Western Chou (c. 11th century to 771 B.C.) when the national capital was at Haoching (now Sian) and the Eastern Chou (770-221 B.C.) when it was at Loyi (now Loyang).

clining clan aristocrats society was going to the dogs. Through their poems and songs they expressed sharp complaints and doubts about heaven, gods, and their ancestors, who were unable to protect them any longer from losing their rights and privileges. Hence, scepticism and humanism prevailed in their thinking.

With the old religious world outlook tottering, rudimentary materialism based on the already accumulated knowledge of natural science found expression. Thus during the reign of King Hsuan towards the end of the Western Chou dynasty Po, the official historian, taught that metal, wood, water, fire and earth were the fundamental elements of which the world was made. It was from this that the later Theory of the Five Elements* originated. Kuo Wen Kung,* a minister of King Hsuan, and Pai Yang Fu,* official historian to King Yu, believed that there were two natural forces, the positive* and negative,* opposite and at the same time complementary to each other. All natural calamities, according to them, were due not to supernatural powers, but to the loss of balance between these two forces. This idea later gave rise to the Theory of the Positive and Negative Forces.* Both this theory and the Theory of the Five Elements were much elaborated during the period of Spring and Autumn (770-475 B.C.). The initiators of these two forms of rudimentary materialism were mainly the official historians, who were in charge of divination and witchcraft and the official physicians. They had a certain amount of knowledge of the natural science but they could not separate their scientific knowledge from religion and mythology.

With the gradual development of such rudimentary materialism, the simplest form of atheism came into

being. It denied the existence of a heavenly mandate, of gods and spirits. In the early stages of its development the terms "heaven" and "gods" were still used though no longer in their former sense. "The way of heaven is far and the way of man is near," said Kung-sun Chiao,* a statesman of the Cheng State. "The people are the masters of the gods," said Chi Liang* of the Sui State. These atheistic views, expressed in a round-about way, attached importance to the role of man and treated lightly that of the gods. There was something revolutionary about them as compared with the all-pervading religious world outlook of the Western Chou dynasty.

From the last years of the Western Chou dynasty to the Spring and Autumn Period the landownership and political power monopolized by the Chou rulers gradually slipped into the hands of their subordinates. In their efforts to break the barrier of the clannish patriarchal social system the freemen stepped on to the stage of history. In 770 B.C. nomadic tribes from the west invaded the Kingdom of Chou. King Ping was forced to move his capital to the east and to seek help from the vassals of his own clan. Most of the cultural objects of the Western Chou dynasty were lost in the turmoil. This signified the decline of the Chou rule. Education and knowledge, which had hitherto been a monopoly of the clan aristocracy, gradually spread and was shared by the lower classes. Towards the end of the Spring and Autumn Period private education was given to the hereditary official scholars of the Lu State which retained a part of Western Chou culture. The pioneers of private education were the Confucians* and a little later the Mohists*

whose teachings were known as the Confucian and Mohist "illustrious learning."

The founder of the former school of thought was Confucius* (c. 551-479 B.C.), who tried to preserve the interests of the declining clan aristocracy. Owing to the rising power of the freemen, however, he was forced to make certain concessions to them. There were, therefore, also some progressive ideas in his teachings. This resulted in a series of contradictions in his thought which manifestly expressed themselves in his Doctrine of the Mean, which was full of compromises. Confucius' world outlook was rehashed mainly from the world outlook prevalent in the Western Chou dynasty. He too was a believer in heaven, a ruler with will-power, though endowed with certain natural attributes and he was a defender of the traditional patriarchal system of the Western Chou dynasty. He added, however, a moral and spiritual content to the prevailing "rites" and "music," which by then had become quite formalistic. The highest moral concept Confucius dwelled upon was "love" or "benevolence,"* a moral standard attainable by all men, which he even extended to the freemen. But he also associated "love" with "rites" which were formerly a monopoly of the aristocracy. In his theory of knowledge Confucius believed in innate knowledge though he also stressed experience and practice. Confucius was, however, an innovator in the theory of education. It was here that he showed a certain degree of progressive thinking. He believed that, except for the most and the least wise who could not change, men closely resembled each other in their original natures but in their acquired practices they grew widely apart.

After Confucius, came a rival school, the Mohists. The Mohist school of thought was founded by Mo Ti (c. 480-397 B.C.), who represented the interests of the rising class of freemen. He was against the despotic rule of the clan aristocracy and stood for the democratic system of ancient times. He opposed the idea of a heavenly mandate by which the ruling class deceived the people. Although he also used the terms heaven and spirits he stripped them of their religious connotation. In his theory of knowledge, he put forward a materialist principle that the world of reality should be taken as the point of departure. He seemed to respect the sage-kings¹ but these were actually his own creations which he used as a means of argument. Mo Ti was a stern critic of Confucianism because it represented the interests of the clan aristocracy, especially with regard to the theory of knowledge. He pitted his materialist theory against the idealism of the Confucians. He laid stress on perceptions and impressions which he considered to be the foundation of knowledge. In declaring his philosophical theory he frequently drew illustrations from actual human experiences such as hunger, cold, warmth, satiety, poverty, wealth, nobility, lowliness, communication, etc. Mo Ti and his followers formed a political body with rigid organization and discipline.

The efforts of the early Confucians and Mohists represented the primary stage of private schools. They reasoned about moral institutions governing human rela-

¹ During the Western Chou dynasty, the clan aristocrats worshipped their ancestors, principally King Wen and King Wu. This tradition was followed by Confucius. It was a reflection of the rule of the clan aristocrats.

tions by their knowledge of nature. But they lacked the ability to carry on full philosophical deliberations.

During the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.), especially during the third century B.C., the use of iron implements became more general. With the rapid progress made by the productive forces, agricultural and handicraft production methods were reformed. This led to private ownership of land and drastic changes in class relations. These political and economic changes, however, were reflected ideologically in the emergence of the "Hundred Schools" contending with one another.

Let us take up the more important of these schools one by one. First, the Taoists. The book called *Lao-tzu* or *The Way and Its Power*,* probably written in the Warring States Period, is the earliest piece of Taoist literature. Lao Tzu,* believed to be the author, is usually considered as belonging to the Spring and Autumn Period though the book bearing his name was a much later product. Taken as a whole, the philosophy of Lao Tzu was an idealist one. He considered "the Way" or "truth"* as a transcendental absolute. However, he discussed natural laws governing the growth and development of all things in combination with "power"* and thus showed that he accepted some elements of materialism. Lao Tzu rejected the worship of the sage-kings and opposed the crude form of belief in the existence of gods. As such, his was a development of the criticism of the Confucian and Mohist theories. But in many other ways he was still a mystic. "The Way," he said, "produces oneness, oneness produces duality, duality produces triplicity, and triplicity produces everything." In his theory of knowledge Lao Tzu was an intuitionist. In his book *The Way and Its*

Power he disclosed and analysed the antagonistic contradictions between various things. This shows that his philosophy contained rudiments of dialectics but he attempted to resolve contradictions by subjective methods. He also taught men to take humiliation with a good grace and be pliant in their outlook on life. This is clearly seen in his political theory. He stood for the restoration of a primitive form of social life to relieve the existing social strife and conflicts. This reflected the feelings of the peasants of the recently collapsed tribal communes and their naive attitude of non-resistance.

Chuang Chou (c. 360-280 B.C.), better known as Chuang Tzu,* was the second greatest Taoist after Lao Tzu. His philosophy was a form of subjective idealism. He believed that matter was merely an illusion or unreal and that the final cause of matter was the indescribable "Way." He was an agnostic and denied the knowability of the material world, saying that the reflections of the material world in man's mind are nothing but hypotheses freely affirmed. Therefore, a knowledge of the real nature of things may be acquired only if the mind is in a state of absolute tranquillity, as still as water and as clear as a mirror. Starting from the principle of relativity, Chuang Tzu inferred that there was equality of all things and he opposed the transformation of nature. His philosophy of life — satisfaction with the things as they were — inevitably leads to pessimism and philistinism.

Another group of Taoists was represented by Sung Chien* and Yin Wen.* They held that "the Way" is really innate in man. The human mind is identical with "the Way" and so long as the mind is pure it is able to know "the Way" in its entirety. The difference between Sung Chien and Yin Wen on the one hand and Lao Tzu

and Chuang Tzu on the other was that the former supported benevolence, justice,* rites and law* and believed that the metaphysical, natural qualities are superseded by moral qualities. Thus, they endowed themselves with the colours of objective idealism.

The doctrines of Yang Chu* have a close connection with the Taoist School, especially with that of Chuang Tzu. We know little about the life of Yang Chu but from the scanty material now available we know that he was an egoist. He and his followers stressed the importance of life and self-interest. This, however, with regard to the relation between thought and existence, is a materialist principle, by which they actually meant that man is an organ of senses and simply remains such. Accordingly, they said that all man cared for were material benefits for his senses upon which they based their moral code. Yang Chu's ethical theory was directly opposite to the "heaven-inspired" ethical theory of the idealists. It was in a certain sense progressive in that it reflected the desire of the freemen of that time to seek personal interest.

During the Warring States Period both the Confucian and Mohist Schools of thought were split into a number of minor ones. Among the Confucians the Schools of Mencius* (c. 390-305 B.C.) and Hsun Ching* were most famous. Mencius inherited the teachings of Tseng Sen,* one of the best-known disciples of Confucius and Kung Chi,* the grandson of Confucius. He was much influenced by the teachings of Sung Chien and Yin Wen and believed in the mystical theory that human nature was essentially good, without offering any convincing proof. He thought that every man has the innate power to distinguish right from wrong. It followed, therefore, that in acquiring