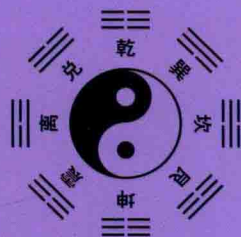




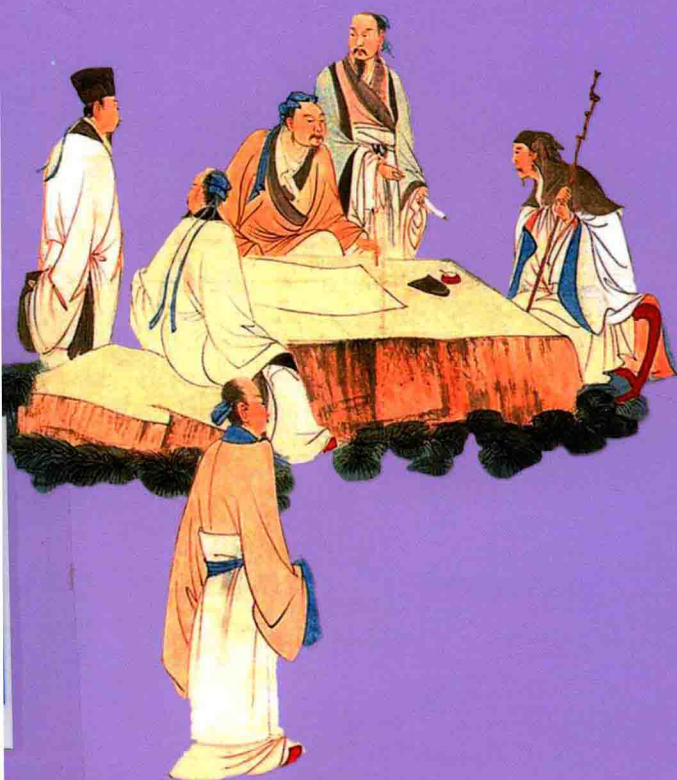
Sharing the Beauty of China

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Wu Chun



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Foreword

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.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE WORLD



What is the nature of the world? This question, which concerns phenomenon and essence, is asked in every kind of philosophy. In the West, however, attention to and thought about phenomenon have been largely excluded from philosophy due to Parmenides' discussions of being, Plato's skepticism about the reliability of phenomenon, Aristotle's exploration of essential properties, and the demonstration of the existence of God in Christian philosophy. However, this was not the case in ancient China, in which phenomenon plays as important a role as essence in philosophy. This chapter starts from the issue of *shen* (which can be translated as God, divinity, spirit, or "spiritual power" – translator's note), which, as we shall see, involves both polytheism and atheism. These are followed by the concept of yin and yang, and that of the Five Elements (*wuxing*), through which we could know early Chinese people's perception of nature, how the two concepts came into being and developed, and how they became central concepts in Chinese philosophy. The third part deals with ancient Chinese people's perception of difference and variability, which is also an insight in Chinese philosophy formed by long-term attention to and thinking about phenomenon. Finally, Chinese philosophy has also given some thought to the issue of essence, which comprises origin and noumenon as well as laws and rules. The important concepts involved are *qi*, *dao*, and *li*. Here is indeed a movement toward the general and the abstract in the thinking process.

The Birth of Beliefs

Like any other ancient nation and civilization, China developed the idea of *shen* as its first concept and belief. Such belief or worship, which can be traced back to remote antiquity before the "Three Dynasties" (Xia, Shang and Zhou), namely 2070 BC, lasted throughout the ancient times of China. However, since the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC), Chinese intellectuals have shown a tendency to deny or downplay the



Oracle bone recording the worship to ghost and God, unearthed in Yin Ruins, Anyang, Henan Province

existence of God. Such rationalism, which has been followed by both Taoism and Confucianism since that period, has made an inestimable impact on China's intellectual community.

Shen, the Religious Source of Chinese Philosophical Ideas

As far as the written language is concerned, the Chinese character for *shen* (神) has been found to appear frequently on oracle bone. However, the idea of *shen* must have come into existence even earlier, which is attested to by the account about the “isolation of Earth from Heaven” given by Guan Shefu, a senior official of the state of Chu, to King Zhao of Chu, as recorded in *The Discourses of the States* (*Guo Yu*):

In ancient times, people and gods were not mingled. Upon those among the people who had no unfaithfulness in their minds



Rubbings of oracle bone script, roughly meaning "Should the female slaves be used as sacrifice and offered to God of River?"

and could be solemn, prudent and upright, whose wisdom was exemplary for people of higher and lower status alike, whose sagacity was known far and wide, and whose sight and hearing were extraordinary, the spirits of gods would descend. The male among them were called xi, and the female, wu. ... Thus there were officials in charge of matters related to heaven, earth, gods, people, and all kinds of things, called the Five Officials, each of whom maintained order in his jurisdiction without any confusion. Owing to this, the people were loyal and faithful, and the gods were virtuous. The people and the gods went about their separate business, respecting each other with no profanity. So the gods blessed the people with a good life, and the people offered sacrifices to the gods, protected as they were from misfortune and shortage. However, when Shao Hao's rule declined, Jiuli began to disrupt the moral order, so that people were mingled with gods, making it impossible to tell them apart. Female magicians were allowed to offer sacrifices to gods, and each family had its own magicians, but no sense of faith

and loyalty. People neglected their sacrifices and did not know their blessings. They indulged in excesses and placed them on a par with gods. They profaned the sacred oath between man and gods, depriving the latter of their awe-inspiring solemnity. The gods, on their part, also connived at the people's wrongdoings rather than stop them. As a result, no auspicious crops appeared anymore to be offered to the gods. Moreover, misfortunes befell the people one after another, and there seemed to be no end to them. When Zhuan Xu came to power, he ordered Zhong, the Official of South, to be in charge of heaven and affairs related to the gods, and ordered Li, the Official of Fire, to be in charge of earth and affairs related to the people, so that the original order was restored to prevent man and gods from mutual encroachment and profanity. This was called "the severing of communication between heaven and earth."

This passage generally conveys the following meanings:

1. Male and female priests for communication between divinity and man (from "In ancient times, people and gods were not mingled" to "The male among them were called *xi*, and the female, *wu*");
2. The creation of official positions in charge of such communication (from "Thus there were officials in charge of matters related to heaven, earth, gods, people, and all kinds of things" to "protected as they were from misfortune and shortage");
3. Criticism on the fall into disorder in such communication starting from the decline of Shaohao (from "However, when Shao Hao's rule declined" to "misfortunes befell the people one after another, and there seemed to be no end to them");
4. The restoration of order in such communication in the reign of Zhuanxu (from "When Zhuan Xu came to power" to "the severing of communication between heaven and earth").

Afterwards, the idea of *shen* was retained despite the appearance of the concepts of and words for "the supreme being" (*di*) and "heaven" (*tian*). In fact, there are records about this concept in writings dating

from the Shang and Zhou Dynasties: He then offered a special sacrifice to the Supreme Ruler, sacrificed purely to the six honored ones, looked with devotion to the hills and rivers, and worshipped with distinctive rites the hosts of spirits. (*Canon of Yao, Book of Documents*) From these mountains was sent down a Spirit/Who gave birth to [the princes of] Fu and Shen (*Lofty Mountains, Major Court Hymns, Classic of Poetry*) Having developed during the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, the idea of divinity was finally established among the Chinese and was reflected in the offering of sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, to all deities, and to ancestors, through which the concept was formalized and ritualized. Still afterwards, it was mainly reflected in the polytheistic beliefs of Taoism and Buddhism as well as utilitarian needs closely related to it. These actually show the continuity of China's tradition of beliefs¹.

Atheism

On the other hand, we should be aware that Chinese philosophy gradually developed atheistic ideas since the Spring and Autumn Period.

1. Here it is safe to extend the judgment on the Chinese people's religious outlook to some degree. Max Weber said that the Chinese people's beliefs are traditional. This remark was undoubtedly made in comparison with Abraham's monotheistic system. According to Zhang Guangzhi, Chinese society is characterized by continuity, which is obviously reflected, among other things, in people's attitude toward God. It has to be noted, however, that there is actually no essential difference between the Chinese beliefs and those of ancient Greece and early Rome. However, whereas the religious traditions of Greece and Rome were terminated by the introduction of Christianity (which was based on the breaking or revolution of Judaism), those of China have continued to exist. Such a religious tradition would be reflected in thinking and outlook. For more discussion of such continuity, you may read my book: *The Religious Tradition of Chinese Society: Opposition and Coexistence between Magic and Ethics*, Shanghai SDX Joint Publishing Company, 2009.

Instead of absolutely repudiating the existence of God, this kind of atheism marginalizes or weakens the role of God and denies that God has any dominant position or significance. Meanwhile, it explains the universe in terms of nature or laws, or enhances the role of man and the responsibility he bears for himself. This, according to Karl Theodor Jaspers, is a reflection of rationalism². Examples can be found in ancient records, such as the following: Shi Yin said, “When a state is about to rise, the people are listened to; when it is about to fall, divinity is followed.” (*Zuo Zhuan, The 32nd Year of the Reign of Duke Zhuang*) Shu Xing regarded both the fall of a meteorite and the “backward flight of six water fowls” as natural phenomena “related to yin and yang” rather than bad omens. (*The 16th Year of the Reign of Duke Xi*) A comet appeared when Yan Zi was in the state of Qi. When asked by the Marquis of Qi, who saw it as a bad omen, to pray to gods, Yan Zi said, “If you do not doubt the Way of Heaven and follow its mandate in good faith, why should it be necessary to pray?” (*The 26th Year of the Reign of Duke of Zhao*) Sun Tzu was even more atheistic. He said, “Foreknowledge cannot be obtained from ghosts or spirits, nor from gods, nor by analogy with past events, nor from astrological calculations. It can only come from men who know the enemy’s situation.” (*The Use of Spies, The Art of War*) This is, of course, necessary for military operations, and a vivid reflection of a scientific view of military affairs.

Since the late Spring and Autumn Period, this fine tradition of rationalism was carried on by Taoist, Confucian and Legalist scholars. For instance, Confucius’ rational opinions on “gods and spirits” are recorded in *The Analects*:

2. Jaspers said that, with the advent of the “axial age,” the age of mythology, along with its serenity and clarity, was gone forever; reason and rationally expounded experience waged a war against mythology. (Karl Jaspers: *The Origin and Goal of History*, Huaxia Press, 1989, p. 9)



Ximen Bao Demystifying the Superstition that Offered Girls to God of River as Wife (Comic)
 Ximen Bao (475-221 BC) was born in Kingdom Wei in the Warring States Period. He was an atheist. He was once a magistrate at Yexian County (today in the west of Linzhang County, Hebei Province and north of Anyang, Henan Province), which had been suffering flood. The local witch colluded with the officials and extorted citizen's wealth. The citizens could not tolerate them. Knowing this, Ximen Bao disclosed the scam and educated the citizens. He also issued laws to prohibit witchcraft.

To keep one's distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence can be called wisdom. (*Yong Ye*)

The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were: extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings. (*Shu Er*)

You don't know yet how to serve men; how can you serve spirits?
 (*Xian Jin*)

Here it is obvious that Confucius distanced himself from – or even kept silent about – the issue of gods and spirits. Confucius believed what was important was not what gods and spirits meant to man, but the meaning of man's own behavior. So did Lao Tzu, as apparent from these remarks in *Tao Te Ching*: