

*The Columbia History of  
Chinese Literature*

*Victor H. Mair*

EDITOR



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
NEW YORK

Columbia University Press  
*Publishers Since 1893*  
New York, Chichester, West Sussex

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Columbia University Press wishes to express its  
appreciation for assistance given by the  
Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange,  
the Pushkin Fund, and the  
Center for East Asian Studies of the University of Pennsylvania  
toward the cost of publishing this book.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Columbia history of Chinese literature / Victor H. Mair, editor.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-10984-9 (alk. paper)

1. Chinese literature—History and criticism. I. Mair, Victor H., 1943–

PL2265 .C65 2001

895.1'09—dc21

2001028236

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Cover art: Juan Chi (210–263) and Sung/Chin-period actor whistling  
Woodcuts by Daniel Heitkamp

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books  
are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## *Chapter 3*

### PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE IN EARLY CHINA

From the fifth through the second centuries B.C.E., a set of widespread philosophical debates flourished in China. Many of the positions taken during this time concerning such issues as authorship, the nature of the cosmos, and the purpose of literature were to have a major impact on the development of Chinese literary thought. This chapter surveys the history of philosophical debates concerning these issues and explicates the ways in which the positions taken during these debates influenced the later tradition.

#### THE EMERGENCE AND MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY DURING THE EASTERN CHOU PERIOD

During the second half of the first millennium B.C.E., several societies in Eurasia witnessed the emergence of intellectual debates. The most notable of these included Greece, India, and China. Indeed, the florescence of philosophical thought in these cultures led Karl Jaspers in the middle of the twentieth century to pronounce this period of Eurasian history the “Axial Age.”

In all these cultures, the emergence of philosophical debate was produced by a comparable set of social and political circumstances. At the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first millennium B.C.E., the settled agricultural civilizations of Eurasia were dominated by aristocratic societies that utilized bronze metallurgy and were characterized by forms of chariot

warfare. From roughly the eighth century B.C.E. onward, however, aristocratic dominance gradually declined, and social mobility increased. Part of this process can be seen in the fact that the use of iron spread throughout Eurasia during this period, gradually replacing bronze in most societies within a few centuries. Since iron was much easier to produce than bronze, it allowed for mass production that undercut the aristocratic domination of metallurgy seen during the earlier Bronze Age. In warfare, mass infantry armies gradually replaced the aristocratic form of chariot warfare. Since infantry armies inevitably involved large numbers of people born below the aristocracy, such forms of organization broke the aristocratic control of warfare and opened an avenue of social mobility for the lower-born. Moreover, market economies began to emerge in many of these societies, and this provided yet another avenue of social mobility.

This emergence of social mobility and the concurrent breakdown of aristocratic control in the major agricultural civilizations of Eurasia led to significant cultural crises as well. In India, Greece, and China, many of the lower-born figures who came to prominence during this period began reflecting on and questioning the ideas of the earlier Bronze Age. In all three of these societies, this led to the emergence of philosophical debates.

In China, these broad trends took specific forms that would have a lasting influence. The Bronze Age societies in the North China plain consisted of the Shang dynasty, which had, according to later texts, overthrown an earlier Hsia dynasty, and which was in turn replaced by the feudalistic state of the Western Chou. The Western Chou ruled from the eleventh century to 771 B.C.E., when the Western Chou capital was overrun.

The ensuing period, known as the Eastern Chou (770–256 B.C.E.), was one of enormous political, social, and technological changes. Politically, the period can be characterized in terms of the interplay of competing states, many of which had originated during the Western Chou through enfeoffment by the Chou kings. These states became increasingly independent from the Chou rulers, to the point that, by the fourth century B.C.E., many of the leaders of the various states usurped the Chou title and began calling themselves “kings.” Although the state of Chou would not actually be extinguished until the third century B.C.E., such a usurpation of the royal title was clearly meant to symbolize the complete autonomy of the states from the Chou rulers. Indeed, many of these rulers had ambitions of once again unifying China and beginning a new dynasty to replace the Chou.

Administratively, the states began engaging in a general policy of centralization, a process involving the creation of bureaucracies based on merit rather than birth, the promulgation of written legal statutes, and the large-scale mobilization of peasants for mass infantry armies. All these policies led to a gradual breakdown of the power and privileges associated with the old aristocracy of the Bronze Age. In their place there rose to prominence the *shih* class: men

born below the aristocracy who had been retainers and knights during the Bronze Age but became the primary officeholders of the developing bureaucracies in the Eastern Chou.

Another aspect of this process of centralization was territorial expansion: in order to increase their resources, the larger states engaged in a policy of annexing surrounding smaller states. Indeed, the ferocity of the wars of annexation led later historians to refer to the latter part of the Eastern Chou as the period of the Warring States (403–221 B.C.E.).

It was out of this sociopolitical context that intellectual debates emerged in early China. The majority of the figures involved belonged to the *shih* class, and many of the debates in which they engaged concerned the nature of these new states—states that were clearly recognized at the time as moving further and further away from the institutions of the Western Chou. The debates accordingly came to focus on questions such as the legitimacy of these new states, the degree to which it was acceptable to break from the aristocratic culture of the Western Chou, and the degree to which kings should follow the examples of statecraft from the past or base their rule on other criteria. The fact that merit, rather than birth, was becoming the dominant means of political access also meant that much of the intellectual debate came to focus on issues of self-cultivation: how one should cultivate oneself and how one should live one's life.

This practical orientation in early Chinese thought also had important ramifications for the development of rhetoric and logic. The Platonic distinction between philosophical discourses that aim at a correct representation of the Ideas and literary and rhetorical discourses that do not is entirely absent in early Chinese thought. Indeed, the terms “philosophy” and “literature” have no equivalents in early Chinese texts, nor was there a concern at the time with the issue of representing Truth. Instead, the concern was with convincing one's intellectual opponent, or ultimately in convincing the rulers of the day, to accept one's own view, rather than with defining a correct form of representation. Storytelling and poetry thus became a major aspect of philosophical writing during the Warring States period; there was never an attempt to prevent a “philosophical” discourse from utilizing “literary” techniques of persuasion. Consequently, it is common to find in texts that would now be classified as philosophical a frequent utilization of poetry, narratives, and other so-called literary techniques.

However, because so much intellectual discussion was concerned with the relevance of past exemplars of statecraft, many of the arguments came to focus on analyses of the actions of the significant kings and ministers from the Bronze Age. Indeed, a great deal of the intellectual debate involved telling various stories and poems about the exemplary figures of the past, with the philosophical disagreements being phrased in terms of offering different versions and interpretations of what these figures in the past had said and done. And, insofar

as the historical events of the past came to be so strongly emphasized, conscious fictionality was rarely regarded in the early texts as a laudable activity. The concern tended to focus much more on debating what had in fact happened in the past and what should happen in the future. Accordingly, although stories and poems were frequently utilized, both were presented as revealing factual accounts of what had occurred in the past.

With these general statements in mind, a survey of the intellectual discussions follows, beginning with the teachings of the Confucian school.

## EARLY CONFUCIANISM

One of the earliest and most influential figures in early Chinese intellectual life was Confucius (550–479 B.C.E.). The primary text devoted to Confucius's teachings is the *Lun-yü* (*Analects*), a set of sayings attributed to Confucius by his later disciples. The sayings themselves were written down over the course of the Warring States period. According to the *Analects*, Confucius viewed the early Western Chou as a fully moral culture, guided by kings and ministers who correctly followed the ethical dictates of righteousness and benevolence. However, he argued, the morals and ritual traditions of the Chou had slowly decayed, resulting ultimately in a loss of sovereign authority for the Chou kings and a full breakdown in morality throughout society at large. Confucius saw his own world of the Eastern Chou as in a state of decline, and he called upon his contemporaries to put in place once again the moral and ritual traditions of the Chou. This would involve everything from, at the highest level, a recognition of the Chou king as the one proper ruler for all of China to, at a lower level, an attempt by the elites of society to cultivate themselves through practicing the rituals of the Chou. In short, the ideal society for Confucius was not located in an afterlife or in a distant mythical past; he believed that an ideal moral society had been realized by humans only a few generations earlier and that it could be realized once again simply through acts of proper moral cultivation. The ideal society, in other words, was realizable here and now.

Confucius's vision of history reinforced this notion. Following earlier Chou political ideology, Confucius argued that history was cyclical, consisting of the rise and fall of dynasties. When a moral ruler arose, Heaven, a moral deity, would confer upon him the Mandate of Heaven, thus starting a new dynasty. The kingship would then be passed down from generation to generation. When an immoral ruler inherited the kingship, however, Heaven would take away the mandate and confer it upon a worthy person, thus beginning a fresh dynasty.

The Chou was thought to be so moral because it had built upon the culture handed down from earlier antiquity. According to several passages in the *Analects*, the sages of earlier antiquity patterned themselves after Heaven and then brought these cultural patterns, *wen*, to the world of humanity. The patterns were thereafter passed down throughout history, finally being brought to their

most refined state by the Chou. Confucius presented himself as simply transmitting these patterns to the people of his own day. From such a perspective, a true sage was one who was able to recognize the proper patterns in the universe and bring them to humanity.

The educational curriculum favored by Confucius involved a study of these patterns from the past, patterns that included both the ritual traditions themselves and the early texts written by or about the early sages, namely, the *Shih-ching* (Classic of Poetry) and the *Shu-ching* (Classic of Documents). The view was that these texts, if understood properly, would explicate the views of the early sages. In other words, one had to learn to read the words correctly so as to reveal the inner meaning that the sages had given them.

Later Confucians claimed that Confucius himself, despite his disclaimers, was a sage, not a transmitter. Thus they attributed to Confucius the authorship of *Ch'un-ch'iu* (Springs and Autumns), a text that chronicles events in the state of Lu from 722 to 481 B.C.E. Since a sage wrote the text, however, the argument was that the work was not a simple chronicle at all: instead, it was interpreted as a subtle critique of the rulers' actions during that period and thus a guide to any future ruler. In short, it was a work that distilled patterns of morality from the events that occurred in the state of Lu, and any proper reading of the text must involve an attempt to recover these patterns distilled by Confucius.

There were several consequences of these views of sagehood. First, early Confucians strongly advocated a didactic function for writing. The goal of writing was to guide moral activity, and this was to be accomplished by distilling proper patterns of morality. Accordingly, moral patterning, rather than representation, became the cornerstone of Confucian hermeneutics. The criterion for evaluating writing was thus the issue whether a given work was moral or immoral. For example, Confucius condemned particular poems in the *Classic of Poetry* that he deemed licentious, that is, promoting immoral behavior. This was not a claim of poor representation. On the contrary: the argument was precisely that the poems did manifest the views of the authors and that such views were to be condemned.

Second, Confucians were strongly committed to the notion that only a true sage ought to compose a work, for only a sage would be able to write in morally edifying ways. For example, Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.), the leading Confucian of the fourth century B.C.E., explicitly criticized his intellectual opponents for inventing new ideas that would only turn people away from the correct moral path. Only a true sage, Mencius argued, would be able to compose in the proper way. Thus, he claimed, Confucius's composition of the *Springs and Autumns* was an example of a correct form of authoring. For anyone other than a sage to invent, however, was not only an act of hubris but in fact a socially dangerous act.

Finally, there was a strong emphasis on reading proper texts in order to discover the ideas and actions of the sages of antiquity. Thus, for example, by

the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), a lengthy commentarial tradition had emerged in which the acceptable poems of the *Classic of Poetry* were interpreted as referring to historical figures in the past. Even love poems were read as allegories of virtuous conduct between particular ministers and rulers. Literature, therefore, was appreciated only insofar as it provided a morally efficacious pattern for the reader, and this emphasis led in turn to a strong tendency to read even poems as referring to the historical actions of the past.

## MOHISTS

The school of Mohism grew out of the teachings of Mo Tzu (480?–400? B.C.E.), a strong critic of the early Confucian schools. Although the Mohists would have little direct impact on later literary thought, many of their ideas were to spark a strong reaction among other, highly influential, Warring States thinkers. Accordingly, a few of their ideas are worth mentioning here.

One of the central doctrines of the Mohists concerned the importance of the spiritual world. The Mohists were strongly committed to the idea that natural phenomena were governed by individual deities who rewarded the worthy and punished the unworthy. At the top of the celestial hierarchy was Heaven. Like the early Confucians, the Mohists regarded Heaven as a moral deity who granted and withdrew a mandate to rule. But the Mohists viewed Heaven as actively intervening in everyday affairs to a far greater extent than the early Confucians allowed. Moreover, the Mohists presented spirits and ghosts as equally involved in actively rewarding and punishing the behavior of humans.

Just as the spiritual world of the Mohists was theistic, so did the Mohist vision of sages reflect a comparably activist vision. For the Mohists, the sages were innovators, creators of the artifice of material culture that brought humanity away from the world of nature. Whereas the early Confucian texts emphasize how sages brought ritual and textual patterns (*wen*) to humanity, the Mohist texts claim that the crucial act of the sages consisted in giving humans material inventions, such as housing, clothing, agriculture, boats, and chariots. The sages, in short, were creators of artifice.

Although such a view could have been taken over by later literary theorists to argue for a notion of literature as a created artifice, this in fact rarely occurred. Instead, the Mohist vision both of the spirit world and of sagely creation became increasingly suspect in Warring States intellectual culture, as these notions came to be rejected in favor of naturalistic interpretations. This shift would have profound implications for later literary theory in China.

## SELF-CULTIVATION TECHNIQUES

Some of the earliest shifts toward a naturalistic interpretation of human action can be seen in the early literature on self-cultivation. One of the clearest



examples is in the “*Nei yeh*” (Inner Workings) chapter of the *Kuan Tzu*, a chapter probably written in the fourth century B.C.E.

A key notion in the chapter is that the universe is composed of *ch'i*, a term that can mean matter, breath, air, or energy. “Inner Workings” uses this notion to criticize some of the theistic views found in popular religion and supported by the Mohists. A widespread religious belief of the time held that natural phenomena were under the direct control of spirits. Thus particular spirits controlled the rain, the wind, and more general aspects of change in the world. The claim of “Inner Workings,” however, is that change is not controlled by single spirits but is, rather, simply a product of the alterations and transformation of *ch'i*. Therefore the universe changes according to spontaneous, natural processes, instead of being controlled by anthropomorphic spirits.

Moreover, the text argues, spirits are simply highly refined *ch'i*. Because they are made of refined aspects of the same substance that pervades the rest of the cosmos, spirits are able to understand fully the movements and changes of the universe. However, humans also have such aspects of *ch'i* within themselves. So, humans, if they cultivate themselves properly, can refine the *ch'i* within themselves and ultimately gain the powers of the spirits.

Crucial in this argument are the claims that any human, through proper cultivation, can attain sagehood and that the path to sagehood cannot be found in the patterns passed down from antiquity. In such a philosophy, studying early texts and following the example of past sages become increasingly irrelevant. Moreover, the result of such an attainment is the achievement of an intuitive understanding of the universe comparable to what the spirits themselves possess. Such claims, which rejected several of the dominant strands of both early Confucian and Mohist thought, would become crucial in the later development of literary thought in China.

## CHUANG TZU AND LAO TZU

Many of these ideas concerning self-cultivation and the cosmos were taken to even greater extremes in the texts attributed to Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. Although these two texts are quite different, they were, several centuries later, classified together as “Taoist.” Despite their many differences, both texts argue for a nontheistic interpretation of the universe—that the universe changes spontaneously, without a conscious will driving it—and both texts argue that the goal of the sage should be to act in accordance with these spontaneous changes. Moreover, both explicitly state opposition to the moral vision of the Confucian and Mohist schools.

Chuang Tzu, a figure who lived in the fourth century B.C.E. and probably wrote the first seven chapters of the work attributed to him, argued that the moral patterns advocated by both the Confucians and the Mohists were artificial

constructs of humans and thus should not be followed. Since the universe operates according to spontaneous processes, the goal of humans should be to act spontaneously as well, thus according with the natural way. However, Chuang Tzu argued, humans, because of their cognitive faculties, have a tendency to make artificial distinctions, thus removing themselves from the spontaneous processes of the natural world. Confucian morality, Chuang Tzu argues, was one such artificial construct.

Chuang Tzu writes in a highly playful style, attempting to break his readers out of the habitual, and artificial, distinctions to which they had become accustomed. In direct contrast to the early Confucian view of writing, Chuang Tzu tells clearly fictive stories with patently fictive characters, many of whom are invented out of puns and word plays. And when he does refer to the earlier sages mentioned in other texts of the time, he utilizes them in ways that overtly contradict the normal associations of the figures. Early sage kings are thus described as renouncing their positions, Confucius is presented as opposing rituals, and so on. It is important to note, however, that such fictional play was not an attempt to celebrate the ability of humans to create artifice but, rather, the exact opposite. It was, in short, written to oppose any notion of creation and artifice and instead to support an emphasis on natural spontaneity.

This commitment to spontaneity was further developed in the *Tao te ching* (Classic of the Way and Integrity), the text attributed to Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu is probably a fictitious name (it means "Old Master"), and the exact date of the composition of the *Tao te ching* is unclear. The *Tao te ching* shows some vestiges of oral composition and is probably a collection of wise sayings of *rishi*-like sages. The text did, however, begin to achieve a great deal of influence by around 270 B.C.E. Like the *Chuang Tzu*, the *Tao te ching* argues that any attempt to break from natural processes, any attempt to impose one's own conscious will upon the world, will only result in failure.

However, Lao Tzu subscribed to a very different definition of nature from the one found in the *Chuang Tzu*. Lao Tzu's argument was that the universe operated through a constant process of generation and decay: things are naturally born, and then they naturally die. Everything emerges from oneness and, ultimately, returns to it. The act of differentiation, although perfectly natural, is thus a movement away from oneness, from stillness, from emptiness. The goal of the true sage, therefore, is to become still and empty and thus achieve a state of returning to this oneness. Such a state was referred to as attaining the way, or *tao*. Insofar as the text places a higher value on the undifferentiated than on the differentiated world, it is not surprising that the additional creation of anything artificial by humans is strongly opposed. A true sage instead acts without conscious deliberation and without the introduction of artifice. Moreover, he is amoral, for the *tao* itself is amoral: like Chuang Tzu, Lao Tzu held that morality is an artificial human construct and should thus be opposed.

The text also casts a great deal of suspicion upon the use of language. Insofar as language concerns differentiation, and hence cannot refer to the *tao*, it was presented as an inaccurate medium for conveying ideas. Accordingly, the text itself is written as a series of highly elusive aphorisms and poems, with constantly changing terminology. Even the term “oneness” is described differently in different passages—at times as a root, at other times as a gate, and at other times as the mother. Because of this suspicion of stable categories, the text also avoids the emphasis found in other Warring States texts on referring to exemplary figures from the past. Indeed, the *Tao te ching* utilizes no stories of past sages and does not mention personal names at all. Still, along with the Hindu philosophical dialog known as the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Song of the Blessed One), the deeply mystical *Tao te ching* is one of the most popular non-Western works of antiquity, with new translations of widely varying quality appearing in an unending stream.

## REACTIONS AGAINST “TAOISTIC” THOUGHT

Such claims that nature was a spontaneous process on which humans should model their behavior provoked a strong reaction among other thinkers in the third century B.C.E. One of these responses was from Hsün Tzu (c. 300–c. 219 B.C.E.), a Confucian who accepted the definition of nature as an amoral, spontaneous, self-generating process but argued that humans should not attempt to accord with it. On the contrary, Hsün Tzu argued, human culture was indeed an artificial construct of the early sages, morality was merely a creation of the sages, and following morality actually involved an overcoming of man’s spontaneous nature. Nonetheless, Hsün Tzu claimed, such artifice should be embraced.

One of Hsün Tzu’s students, Han Fei Tzu, took this valorization of artifice to even greater lengths. Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 B.C.E.), who would later be classified as a “Legalist” thinker, accepted the Mohist notion that human culture consisted of the artificial constructs invented by sages to raise humanity away from nature. Moreover, he argued, times change, so that even the artifice invented by the earlier sages need not be followed. Sages must be willing to create new institutions of governance whenever they are necessary. Han Fei Tzu conceded to the Confucians the claim that the Chou dynasty ruled with righteousness and benevolence, but he argued that times had once again changed, and that the proper form of governance for the Warring States period was one based on strong bureaucratic structures, a full use of uniform laws, and a lack of concern for morality. Unlike most intellectuals of the time, in other words, Han Fei Tzu fully supported the bureaucratic and legalistic institutions that were appearing in the Warring States period, and he believed that the only problem was that such policies needed to be pursued more consistently.

## COSMOLOGICAL MODELS

Despite these reactions, by the mid-third century B.C.E. most intellectuals were moving in a very different direction. Claims concerning the spontaneity of the universe became increasingly common in the latter part of the Warring States period, from roughly 250 B.C.E. on. By this time, the growth of centralized states had progressed to such a point that a simple return to the Western Chou seemed increasingly idealistic and impracticable. As a result, calls for rulers to follow past exemplars seemed less persuasive. However, many intellectuals were uncomfortable with the kind of support that Legalist figures like Han Fei Tzu were willing to grant to the institutions of the day. Accordingly, they began searching for ways to legitimate the centralizing states of the time while providing a means to limit and direct their development. Some of these intellectuals started using versions of the definitions of nature first developed in the self-cultivation literature. They argued that political states should attempt to accord with the spontaneous processes of nature, and they then defined these spontaneous processes so as to limit the states in specific ways.

In particular, many intellectuals defined nature in such a way as to encompass the political teachings of several earlier schools of thought. Their argument was that a successful political ideology would include earlier intellectual positions but would limit each of them. Thus, for example, aspects of the political teachings of Legalism would be granted a place in the natural model, but it would be only one of several ideologies included.

A clear example of such a cosmological and syncretistic approach was the theory of *yin* and *yang*. Although these terms had appeared earlier in Chinese philosophy, it was only during the third century B.C.E. that they achieved a great deal of influence. *Yin* and *yang* were thought of as distinctive, but complementary, forces in the universe. *Yin* was associated with inactivity, *yang* with activity. *Yin* was female, night, winter, the lower, earth; *yang* was male, day, summer, the higher, Heaven. Although *yang* was usually associated with the superior, *yin* was seen as crucial as well: unlike an opposition such as "good/evil," neither *yin* nor *yang* was expected to win out ultimately over the other. On the contrary, each was necessary and complementary to the other, and there were proper times when each would be in the ascendancy.

For example, one of the arguments provided in the eclectic work by Lü Pu-wei (d. 235 B.C.E.) entitled *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* (The Springs and Autumns of Master Lü; c. 239 B.C.E.) is that the actions of the ruler should accord with the natural movement of the seasons, which are themselves a product of the spontaneous mixing of *yin* and *yang*. The height of winter is pure *yin*; spring is the rebirth of *yang*; the height of summer is pure *yang*; and autumn is the gradual growth of *yin* again. Thus the ruler should promulgate self-cultivation techniques during the spring, Confucian policies for maturation in the summer

and Legalist policies during the autumn, and then reserve winter for warfare and executions. In short, the ruler is called upon to model himself upon the natural world, and the natural world is then defined such that many of the major intellectual positions taken during the earlier Warring States period are assigned a proper time for implementation. The argument, then, is that many of the earlier intellectual positions were correct but limited: the proper vision would be comprehensive, encompassing earlier views and wedding them all to a general cosmological model.

Another crucial cosmological idea that came to the forefront in the late Warring States period was the theory of *wu-hsing* (five phases), later attributed to Tsou Yen (305–240 B.C.E.) but articulated in late Warring States texts like *The Springs and Autumns of Master Lü*. The argument held that all processes of nature go through a cycle, in which certain phases of *ch'i* would, in succession, come into ascendancy. There were supposedly five such phases or elements: fire, water, earth, wood, and metal. Moreover, each phase was correlated with particular colors, numbers, and features.

For a ruler to start a new dynasty successfully, he would have to rule according to the characteristics of the proper phase in ascendancy at that time: of the three earliest dynasties, the Hsia was said to have ruled by the phase of wood, the Shang by the phase of metal, and the Chou by the phase of fire. At the time these ideas were being propounded (the second half of the third century B.C.E.), it was thought that, were a ruler to arise who could unify the states and begin a new dynasty, he would be ruling under the phase of water, since water is the phase that extinguishes fire. Moreover, fire was correlated in this system with moral rule, and water was associated with law, harsh punishments, and warfare. Thus the cosmological theory was articulated so as to support the policies of the centralizing states of the day, while arguing that, at the proper time, there existed cosmological justification for the policies advocated by other schools of thought.

In different ways, therefore, both theories emphasized the importance of according with the spontaneous movement of nature, and both defined the natural world so as to encompass several competing notions of statecraft.

## THE “TA CHUAN” (GREAT TREATISE) CHAPTER IN *YI-CHING* (CLASSIC OF CHANGE)

In terms of the later development of literary thought, perhaps the most influential work from the late Warring States period to develop such a comprehensive cosmological theory was the “Great Treatise” of the *Classic of Change*. The “Great Treatise” was an attempt to develop a cosmological interpretation of the universe by means of the *Classic of Change*, a divinational text written during the Western Chou period. Moreover, the text tried to link this cosmological

viewpoint with a generally Confucian vision. The particular way in which the text did this was to have a lasting influence not only on the Confucian movement but on much of later Chinese thought as well.

The general cosmology presented by the author is quite common in many late Warring States texts. The basic components of the universe are described in terms of pairs of opposites (Heaven and earth, hardness and softness, *yang* and *yin*). These opposites are seen as spontaneously interacting, thus generating the various changes and movements of the universe. The universe, in other words, is a spontaneously generated process that transforms of its own accord, without a guiding will.

Humans are then called upon in the text to model their behavior on these spontaneous changes in the universe, learning to act at the appropriate moment in accordance with the processual movement of nature. In order to help humans achieve this, the text argues, the sages of antiquity wrote the *Classic of Change* as a guide for all later generations. The first stage in this process began with Fu-hsi, the earliest sage recognized in the text. Fu-hsi, the “Great Treatise” argues, studied the images in Heaven, the models on earth, and the patterns of the birds and beasts. The sage then took these patterns and used them to make eight trigrams. Each trigram consisted of three lines, each of which could be either broken or unbroken. The trigrams were then combined into hexagrams, consisting of six lines apiece. The total number of possible combinations was sixty-four hexagrams. The claim of the “Great Treatise,” then, is that these combinations were originally patterns in the natural world and that Fu-hsi simply brought these into the realm of humanity.

The “Great Treatise” goes on to describe how the early sages were inspired by the hexagrams to invent cultural implements (including nets and snares for hunting, plowshares, plow handles, markets, boats, oars, domesticated oxen and horses, mortars and pestles, bows and arrows, palaces and houses, coffins, and writing). Thus human culture was itself a product of the patterns brought from the natural world by the ancient sages. In opposition to those figures, like the Mohists or Han Fei Tzu—who presented the inventions of material culture as artificial constructs of the sages—the “Great Treatise” reads them as having been inspired by the hexagrams, which were themselves inspired by patterns of the natural world.

Moreover, the “Great Treatise” argues, the hexagrams can be used to divine the future precisely because they replicate the changes in the universe itself: the shifting lines in the hexagrams form a microcosm of the shifting patterns in the universe at large. The changes in the hexagram lines of the *Classic of Change* thus mirror the changes that occur in the natural world. However, since only a sage can understand how to interpret the hexagrams, the sages of antiquity appended statements to each line so that any human can divine and thus understand what actions are proper for each situation.

The view in the “Great Treatise,” in short, is a cosmological version of the ideas found in early Confucian texts: the sages brought patterns from nature to the world of humanity and then invented human culture from these patterns. Unlike Hsün Tzu, the “Great Treatise” argues that culture is not an artifice at all; it is instead a product of the patterns of nature as distilled by the early sages.

The sages transmitted these patterns through textual traditions, so that later generations could understand the workings of the universe and how to act. Unlike the ideas in the *Tao te ching*, for example, those in the “Great Treatise” hold that writing can express the intentions of the author, that it can be an accurate guide to behavior, and that it can express the workings of the universe. This view of writing as an act of both manifesting the patterns of nature and manifesting the intentions of the author was to have a tremendous influence on later theories of literature in China.

## EARLY HAN IDEAS

The Warring States period ended in 221 B.C.E., when the state of Ch'in completed its conquests and thereafter created the first unified imperial state in Chinese history. Its policies were unapologetically Legalist. However, the empire of Ch'in lasted until only 207 B.C.E., whereupon a civil war erupted. When a new empire, the Han, was finally proclaimed in 206 B.C.E., one of the pressing concerns was to develop an ideology that could legitimate imperial rule more successfully than the Ch'in had been able to do.

The main theoretical formulations to which intellectuals turned to forge such an imperial ideology were the cosmological systems of the late Warring States period. As a consequence, the various claims that had been made during the Warring States period by figures as diverse as the Mohists and Han Fei Tzu concerning the sages as inventors of artifice were fully rejected and the naturalistic and cosmological philosophies from the late Warring States period emerged into full prominence.

## HUAI-NAN TZU AND CORRELATIVE COSMOLOGY

One of the more influential of these texts was *Huai-nan Tzu*, a text submitted to the Han court in 139 B.C.E. *Huai-nan Tzu* was compiled by Liu An (c. 179–122 B.C.E.), a local king who was calling for a more decentralized form of empire. Many of the chapters of the text involve an attempt to develop a full cosmological system out of ideas found in earlier texts like the *Tao te ching*.

“T'ien wen hsün” (Treatise on the Patterns of Heaven), chapter 3 of *Huai-nan Tzu*, provides a cosmogony of the universe. The text posits that initially there was formlessness, which then gave birth to *ch'i*. The more refined parts

of *ch'i* then drifted upward and formed Heaven, and the less refined parts drifted downward and formed the earth. The essences of Heaven and earth became *yang* and *yin*, which in turn gave rise to the four seasons, fire and water, and so on. The universe, in this argument, came into being solely through spontaneous processes. There was no external will, no demiurge, directing it at all. Indeed, in such a cosmology Heaven itself is simply a product and part of the ongoing spontaneity of the universe.

Moreover, the cosmology given here is fully monistic and fully correlated: everything in the universe, including human beings, consists of *ch'i*, and everything is inherently linked and in constant interaction with everything else. Thus, for example, an action in one part of the universe will, spontaneously, stimulate a response in another part. This relationship, called *kan-ying*—literally “stimulus and response” but often translated as “cosmic resonance”—was characteristic of most Han systems of thought: things that are correlated, whether that be through *yin* and *yang* categories or five phases categories, were seen as sympathetically linked and hence as resonating with one another.

Therefore the true sage is one who acts spontaneously, in accordance with natural processes, and is thus able to resonate harmony throughout the cosmos. The chapter thus provides a cosmological version of the types of arguments given in the Warring States texts that would later be classified as “Taoist”: the sage acts spontaneously and so need not follow past exemplars or textual precedents. Such a philosophical position granted individuals an enormous amount of autonomy from reading ancient texts and following the teachings of ancient sages.

## HAN CONFUCIANISM

Partly in reaction to ideas found in texts like *Huai-nan Tzu*, several Confucian scholars began to develop fully syncretistic and cosmological models that would define man's role in the universe while still advocating the importance of following the moral teachings of the past sages. The most influential figure in this movement was Tung Chung-shu (c. 179–104 B.C.E.). While using the correlative system of cosmic resonance found in *Huai-nan Tzu*, Tung and his followers argued that the correspondences in the universe are fully moral. So, if the emperor does anything immoral, negative portents will spontaneously develop in Heaven. Similarly, if the emperor acts morally, there will spontaneously develop positive signs in Heaven as well as harmony throughout his realm.

A further argument of these scholars was that the proper guide to moral development was in the texts that recorded the actions and statements of the ancient sages. Thus the Western Han Confucians advocated the creation of a standard canon of early texts that should be studied. There were five of these “classics”: the *Classic of Poetry*, the *Classic of Documents*, the *Classic of Change*, the *Springs and Autumns*, and the *Li-chi* (Record of Ritual), a text devoted to



the nature of ritual. Confucius was credited not only with having written the *Springs and Autumns* but with having had a crucial role in transmitting or editing the other four. Indeed, Confucius was credited with having written the “Great Treatise” in the *Classic of Change* itself.

The consequence of this position was that the earlier Confucian emphasis on reading texts as a method of gaining an understanding of the ancient sages came to be combined with the cosmological systems that had become dominant by the early Han. This synthesis of early Confucian teachings with correlative cosmology proved highly influential. The Han ultimately made this synthesis into its imperial ideology, and this form of cosmological Confucianism was to predominate throughout the Western Han (206 B.C.E.–8 C.E.).

## IMPLICATIONS

The above survey of some of the most important philosophical positions in early China allows us now to discuss how some of these ideas played out in the development of Chinese literary thought. The various claims made in the early philosophical texts provided many of the themes, images, and views around which literary theory would later revolve and to which it would respond.

Several early texts, as seen above, presented natural phenomena as being under the direct control of specific gods and spirits, and this view prevailed in the world of popular religion. However, for the historical reasons outlined earlier, much of the intellectual culture of the late Warring States and early Han periods came instead to embrace a vision of the natural world as a spontaneous, correlative system. In such a cosmos, there could be no directing will and certainly no demiurge or creator-deity of any kind. Similarly, although several early texts had emphasized the notion of the sage as a creator of artifice, much of the intellectual culture of early China ultimately came to oppose such a view and instead to embrace a definition of the sage as one who acted in accordance with the spontaneous movement of the universe.

These intellectual choices had tremendous implications for the development of Chinese literary thought. Although it would have been possible for later writers to draw on certain early Chinese philosophical statements to develop literary theories based on notions of artifice, much of Chinese literary thought developed out of the cosmological notions that had become predominant by the late Warring States and early Han periods. Therefore, rather than building on Mohist ideas of deities as imposing their will on natural phenomena and of sages as creators of artificial constructs, later literary thought much more frequently spoke of literature in terms of the issues seen in the other strands of thought from early China—issues such as manifesting natural patterns, manifesting the natural inclinations and feelings of the author, or distilling the moral and didactic patterns of the world. Debates continued to rage over such basic questions as whether writing should serve a didactic function, or whether past

exemplars should be followed. But only rarely would literary writings be discussed in terms of a conscious creation of artifice. Thus, for example, the image that became so prevalent in early modern Europe, of the author as a demiurge creating a fictional world of his own, has no clear analog in Chinese literary thought: notions of constructed artifice tended to be strongly downplayed.

The nature of intellectual discourse in early China, as well as the specific ideological choices made therein, had a tremendous impact on the later tradition of Chinese literary thought. It is perhaps not going too far to suggest that some of the distinctiveness of that tradition derives in part from the particular directions that the intellectual debates took in early China.

*Michael Puett*