

## Chapter 2: Pre-Islamic Chinese Thought

*Pre-Islamic Chinese Thought* by Howard F. Didsbury, Jr., M.A., Ph.D., Associate Professor of History, Newark State College, Union, New Jersey and Adjunct Professor at the American University, Washington D.C (U.S.A)

In the present chapter we shall attempt to survey some of the salient features of Chinese philosophy avoiding any specialized or detailed discussion of the individual schools or of the philosophical technicalities involved. Our purpose is to present, in brief compass, an account of Chinese philosophical thought indicating a number of its peculiar characteristics and its apparent major limitations. This, then, will be a summary of the outstanding peculiarities of Chinese philosophy prior to the arrival of any significant foreign influence.

First, a few words with respect to the period of Chinese philosophy we are covering, that of the Chou Dynasty (1122 –256 B.C.). The last centuries of the Chou were marked by political and social turmoil associated with the disintegration of feudalism. The Chinese world was torn by internecine warfare, old political powers were overturned and old values challenged or discarded.

During this “time of troubles,” to use Toynbee's term China produced a great variety of original schools of philosophical thought, such as Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism as well as a Chinese version of Epicureanism, the so-called Logicians, and the Yin Yang school.

Because of the creative freshness and richness of the later Chou, it may be regarded as the classical period of Chinese philosophy. Our discussion is, perforce limited to these classical philosophies and their spirit; Chinese medieval and modern philosophies are not delineated, nor are Buddhism in China, nor Chinese Buddhism.

The primary reason for this concentration on the Chou philosophies is that they represent the indigenous Chinese schools of philosophy before they were affected by the advent of other philosophical or religious idea, for example, Buddhism and its attendant Indian metaphysics.

Moreover, though some of these schools did not exercise a lasting influence on subsequent Chinese intellectual life, as was the case with Legalism which passed into oblivion with the collapse of the shortlived Ch'in Dynasty (221–207 B.C.), and with Mohism which died out a few centuries after the death of Mo Tzu, its founder, other schools, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and elements of the Yin Yang school, persisted throughout the history of Chinese philosophy.

Confucianism, though eclipsed at times, slowly gained a predominant position and became a powerful force in the moulding and direction of Chinese civilization.

While these latter schools survived, the others passed into insignificance. For instance, the school of the Logicians never exercised any great influence on the development of later Chinese philosophy.

Also, Yang Chu's thought, somewhat similar to the philosophy of Epicurus, was never a threat to the other schools since it consisted more of an attitude toward life than a philosophy of existence. It was too individualistic, too self-centred for wide acceptance by the Chinese.

To appreciate adequately the peculiar features of Chinese philosophical thought, it is important that one be cognizant of certain facts of Chinese geography, economics, and sociology with regard to its emergence and development. The distinguished contemporary Chinese philosopher and historian of Chinese philosophy, Fung Yu-lan, discusses all three topics at considerable length. [1](#)

From the earliest times the Chinese considered the world and their land, t'ien hsia (all under heaven), to be one and the same. Because of its unique geographical position—a vast continental land mass bounded by a great mountain range, desert, and the ocean—the early culture of China appears to have developed in comparative isolation from that of other great centres of civilization.

At any rate, it seems fairly certain that the Chinese thinkers of the later Chou were not in a position comparable to that of their Greek philosophical contemporaries vis a vis the intellectual, philosophical, religious, and scientific thought of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations. In developing their philosophies, the Greeks were undoubtedly stimulated by other highly civilized peoples.

An ancient Greek historian once noted that the Greeks were children compared to the Egyptians. In contrast, in the development of ancient Chinese philosophical thought, there does not seem to have been any significant cross-fertilization from other centres of civilization outside the Chou world.

The Greeks and the Chinese differed considerably in their respective economic conditions. The Greeks were a commercial people to a great extent and were, therefore, brought into contact with a wide variety of ideas, customs, lands and peoples. Their conception of the world recognized the existence of other great civilizations. The Chinese, however, were mainly an agricultural people. None of the Chinese philosophers ventured beyond Chou China.

There was, in consequence, a definite insularity attached to Chinese philosophical thought. In addition to

this insularity of thought, there was close affinity between the Chinese thinker and the Chinese peasant; both were attached to the land. The Chinese scholar-philosopher was usually a landowner, while the peasant cultivated the land. "Hence, throughout Chinese history, social and economic thinking and policy have centred around the utilization and distribution of land."<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, ancient Chinese philosophy may be said to have had an intimate association with, if not absolutely conditioned by, the peasant mentality. The Chinese thinkers' "reactions to the universe and their outlook on life were essentially those of the farmer."<sup>3</sup> With the aid of their learning and genius, the Chinese sages were able "to express what an actual farmer felt but was incapable of expressing himself."<sup>4</sup> Realization of this fact may go long way towards explaining the predominantly practical tone of Chinese philosophical thought. The peculiar problems connected with Chinese economic life tended to limit the spectrum of values in philosophy.

Though Confucianism and Taoism are "poles apart from one another, yet they are also the two poles of one and the same axis. They both express, in one way or another, the aspirations and inspirations of the farmer."<sup>5</sup> Confucianism stressed family obligations, while Taoism emphasized the power, beauty, and mystery of nature.

Just as geographical conditions and agricultural life have exerted an influence on the formation and character of Chinese philosophy, so also has done the Chinese social system, particularly the family. A striking feature of Chinese philosophical thought is its preoccupation with problems relating to the ethics of the family and the Chinese social system.

The most outstanding example of this preoccupation is to be found in Confucianism. "A great deal of Confucianism," Fung Yu-lan asserts, "is the rational justification or theoretical expression of this social system."<sup>6</sup>

The mental outlook of the Chinese farmer as well as his values tended to limit the range of philosophical speculation. "The way of life of the farmers is to follow nature. They admire nature and condemn the artificial, and in their primitivity and innocence, they are easily made content. They desire no change, nor can they conceive of any change."<sup>7</sup>

Here one may discern the source of strength of much of Chinese classical philosophy as well as its weakness. It reflected the attitudes, interests, prejudices, and values of the Chinese peasant.

A study of classical Chinese philosophy discloses that it possesses at least four highly distinctive features which may be a reflection of the dominance of this peasant mentality: lack of metaphysics, dearth of logical sophistication, preoccupation with ethics, and a regressive theory of history.

We shall comment on the last feature first. The traditional Chinese theory of history is regressive. According to the Chinese, the Golden Age of mankind was in the dim remoteness of the past and all subsequent history has been a tragic degeneration from the ancient ideal age.

The Chinese sages sought to find the proper path which would enable mankind to recapture the peace, justice, and harmony of that Golden Age. Associated with this regressive conception of history was the tendency of many of the classical schools to antedate the founder of a rival school of thought.

Apparently, in order to make a school or a point of view more attractive and authoritative, it was felt necessary to increase its antiquity. The Confucianists, for example, referred to the mythological rulers, Yao and Shun; the Mohists, in support of their philosophical position, went back beyond Yao and Shun to the legendary Yu; and the Taoists, for their part, went beyond Yu to the mythical Yellow Emperor. The more ancient the beginning of a school, the more was it to be trusted.

The classical Chinese philosophers, for the most part, manifested an aversion to metaphysical speculation. The Confucianists, Confucius (551–479 B.C.), Mencius (371–289 B.C.), and Hsun Tzu (298–c. 238 B.C.), showed little interest in or even awareness of metaphysical questions. Confucius was not concerned with understanding the character of Ultimate Reality nor with epistemological problems; his concern was with social and political philosophy. Mencius lacks an interest in metaphysics as such, as does Hsun Tzu.

At the risk of over-simplification, one could say that Confucianism was primarily an educational philosophy. Though Confucius was silent on whether or not human nature was good or evil, and, though Mencius and Hsun Tzu differ greatly on this point—the former maintaining that human nature is good, and the latter, that it is evil—all three agree on the need and efficacy of education for inculcating or developing ethical conduct. Subtle metaphysical disquisitions are lacking in all three.

Taoism, as set forth in the Tao Te Ching and the works of Chuang Tzu (399–c. 295 B.C.), frequently approaches a metaphysical analysis of reality, but, more characteristically, ends in a hazy mysticism or appears to be fascinated with the enunciation of paradoxes. The Taoist saying that he who knows cannot say and that he who says does not know the Tao (the Way, or Ultimate Reality) is not particularly conducive to metaphysical discourse.

Mo Tzu (c. 479–c. 438 B.C.), founder of Mohism, does not show any interest in metaphysical matters as such. His philosophy stressed an “all-embracing love” based upon utility. He condemned aggressive war and urged altruism based upon mutual self-interest because the results were more pleasant and useful to society. His reasons were practical and devoid of any metaphysical justification.

As for the Logicians, for example, Hui Shih (c. 380–305 B. C.) and Kung-sun Lung (380–250 B.C.?), their interest comes nearer to being metaphysical than any other school with the possible exception of the Yin Yang.

The Logicians, frequently referred to as the School of Names (Ming Chia), were chiefly concerned with problems relating to the relativity and changeableness of all phenomena, as was Hui Shih, or with the concept of universals—the “names” of things—which, according to Kung-sun Lung, were absolute and unchangeable. Hui Shih contended that concrete things were undergoing constant change and were,

therefore, different from one instant to the next. Kung–sun Lung insisted that the “names” of things, similar to Platonic ideas, were absolute and unchangeable. In order to substantiate his position, he employed epistemological arguments. One of his most famous arguments is contained in his discussion concerning “a white horse is not a horse.”

Many of the Logicians arguments posed paradoxes and logical conundrums and, for this reason, were disparaged by the Confucianists. For example, the great Chinese historian of the Han, Ssu–ma T’an, himself a Confucianist described the work of the Logicians as “minute examinations of trifling points in complicated and elaborate statements, which made it impossible for others to refute their ideas.”<sup>8</sup>

Because of the lack of interest in metaphysical questions peculiar to Chinese classical philosophers in general, the influence of the Logicians was not especially significant in the development of later Chinese thought.

The Legalists, whose most important representative is Han Fei Tzu (died 233 B. C.), were not concerned with problems of metaphysics, logic, or epistemology. Their fundamental concern was political: What happens when a ruler is weak, wicked, or incompetent? How is a State to be unified and governed?

For the Legalists, the answer was impersonal law in the place of personal ethics or moral principles. The Legalists, though at odds with the Confucianists, show a similarly overriding interest in the practical aspects of political and social philosophy. Metaphysical speculation is a pastime which neither of these classical schools pursued.

Tsou Yen (305–240 B.C.) of the Yin Yang school probably represents the extent to which the Chinese were willing to pursue metaphysical speculation without the pressure of foreign ideas. Certainly the Taoist and Yin Yang represent indigenous Chinese metaphysical thinking prior to the advent of Buddhism.

The Yin Yang school, however, lacks genuine metaphysical profundity and, in essence, appears to be based on a dualistic theory of the interaction of the female and male principles of the universe, the Yin and the Yang respectively.

Neither the Yin Yang school nor Taoism possesses a meta–physical presentation approaching the works of Plato or Aristotle. One has the feeling that the thinkers of these two schools educed one or two ideas and then used them uncritically and mechanically to explain various phenomena.

In general, Chinese philosophers either ignored metaphysics or showed only a spasmodic interest in understanding, logically and systematically, the nature and character of the Ultimate Reality. Only after the introduction of Buddhism did the Chinese philosophers concern themselves seriously with metaphysics.

“Even the basic metaphysical problems, such as God, universals, space and time, matter and spirit,

were either not discussed, except in Buddhism, or discussed only occasionally, and then always for the sake of ethics.”<sup>9</sup> Chinese thinkers confined themselves to social and political thought; they had always in mind the capability of their respective philosophies for practical implementation. As metaphysics was, in the main, slighted or ignored, so were epistemological problems.

An examination of the history of Chinese philosophy illustrates plentifully that Chinese philosophers occupied themselves with questions of human adjustment to nature or the individual's adjustment to society. The Taoists stressed the former, the Confucianists the latter. The Taoists regarded society as unnatural and unnecessary for Good Life. In this respect it resembles Romanticism.

Confucianism maintains that society is natural and necessary for the life of a human being. Society permits a man to satisfy his ethical obligations and also affords him an opportunity to enrich his life with learning, art, music, and moral example. Society is not only a structure of ethical and social relationships but also a product of man's cultural heritage.

Man as a member of society is able to appreciate tradition, literature, ceremonies—all those things which are not absolutely necessary for physical survival but which are nevertheless the very essence of civilized, cultured existence. As Taoism lauds the state of nature, it is akin to Romanticism; Confucianism is allied to Classicism.

In addition to a lack of metaphysical interest or regard for epistemological problems, Chinese philosophical thought, both classical and medieval, is distinguished by its patent deficiency of logical refinement. Chinese philosophical discourses are usually unsystematic and infrequently based upon rigid logical argumentation.

The classical philosopher's approach was simple; his use of an elaborate philosophical method was almost non-existent. The Chinese philosopher was primarily engrossed in questions of ethics and with practical matters relating to the ordering of society according to proper moral principles or, as in the case of Taoism, with the way of nature and naturalness.

The arguments employed by the philosophers were eminently practical in the sense that they made no appeal to complicated logical analysis, theory, or hypothesis, but appealed to man's common sense. It would be helpful to illustrate the type of “logical” argumentation frequently encountered in the works of Chinese classical philosophers.

The ancients, who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts.

Wishing to rectify their hearts they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the

investigation of things.

“Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy.”<sup>10</sup>

That an over-emphasis upon logical analysis may inhibit novel ideas and conceptions of reality, few will deny. Too great a reliance upon logical clarity precision and consistency may lead to sterile thought. The later medieval period in Europe, which was dominated by Scholastic logic, illustrates sufficiently the perils involved in an over-estimation of the power and validity of logical analysis. The Scholastics appear to have regrettably misunderstood the value of logic.

The medieval Schoolmen erred in the direction of too much emphasis upon logical acuteness whereas, in contradistinction, the Chinese appear to have been blind to the importance of logical refinement. Whether through disinterest or because of the intrinsic difficulties involved in their own written language (pictographs and ideographs), Chinese philosophers do not seem to have understood the proper role of logic in the acquisition of new knowledge.

In one of his works, Alfred North Whitehead states succinctly the crucial part logic may play in the advancement of the frontiers of human knowledge. “Logic, properly used,” he writes, “does not shackle thought. It gives freedom, and above all, boldness. Illogical thought hesitates to draw conclusions, because it never knows either what it means, or what it assumes, or how far it trusts its own assumptions or what will be the effect of any modification of assumptions.”

Continuing, he remarks, “Also the mind untrained in that part of constructive logic which is relevant to the subject in hand will be ignorant of the sort of conclusions which follow from various sorts of assumptions, and will be correspondingly dull in divining the inductive laws”.<sup>11</sup> One can hardly fail to agree with Whitehead's observation when studying Chinese classical philosophy as well as much of the philosophy of the later schools in China.

By confining their attention to the world of everyday affairs and common sense, the Chinese savants felt no need to engage in metaphysical speculation in a systematic manner, nor did they feel any desire to indulge in the luxury of logical subtlety.

“Therefore,” a well-known Japanese philosopher comments, “when their philosophy did not vanish in the mist of vague mysticism, as in the case of Taoism, it tenaciously clung to the agnosticism of everyday experience . . . .”<sup>12</sup> As we study the Taoist classic, Tao Te Ching, we can readily understand what is meant by a philosophy losing itself “in the mist of vague mysticism,” for example:

The Tao that can be told of is not the Absolute Tao. The Names that can be given are not Absolute

Names. The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth; the Named is the Mother of All Things. Therefore oftentimes, one strips oneself of passion in order to see the Secret of Life; oftentimes, one regards life with passion, in order to see its manifest results.

These two (the Secret and its manifestations) are (in their nature) the same; they are given different names when they become manifest. They may both be called the Cosmic Mystery:

Reaching from the Mystery into the Deeper Mystery Is the Gate to the Secret of All Life. [13](#)

This may be an example of “pure speculation” on the part of a Chinese philosopher. If so, one is inclined again to agree with Whitehead who also observed: “Pure speculation, undisciplined by the scholarship of detailed fact or the scholarship of exact logic, is on the whole more useless than pure scholarship, unrelieved by speculation.” [14](#)

The Taoists seem to have engaged in “pure speculation” fairly consistently. For their part, the Confucianists emphasized learning and traditional scholarship and the “business” of social existence and its obligations.

Unfortunately, the excessive engrossment in the realm of the commonplace was as detrimental as the marked tendency to mysticism. Both of these extremes tended to stultify the adventure of thought toward new possibilities of achievement. When Chinese thought did not float away in the clouds, it remained earth-bound.

Granted that the confluence of the regressive theory of history, the lack of metaphysical speculation, and a pronounced deficiency of logical refinement are distinctive features of classical Chinese philosophy, in general, probably the most significant characteristic the one which may help explain why metaphysics and logic languished—is the dominant concern with ethics, for, indeed, there is little doubt that ethics was the main concern of Chinese philosophers.

There were but few exceptions during the classical period and even thereafter. Ethics played a major role in Chinese philosophy. “The moral life,” Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki writes, “can be said to have been the only philosophical subject which . . . has seriously interested the Chinese, and which has been considered worthy of their earnest speculation.” [15](#)

By focusing their attention on ethical problems—man and his life in society or in harmony with nature—the Chinese seriously restricted the content of philosophy in their culture. The special facts of geography, economics, and sociology exercised a strong influence on the Chinese climate of philosophical opinion and may account, as we have noted, for their almost exclusive concentration on ethic.

In the final analysis, the classical Chinese philosopher's ideal was the attainment of the Good Life here and now on earth. Most classical thinkers assented to Confucius observation:

“While you do not know life, how can you know about death?” The world of the present requires man's

full attention, courage, and ingenuity. To the great majority of Chinese philosophers, righteousness, family, economic security, and a stable social order were the main objects of study. During the later periods of Chinese philosophy, though there were occasional lapses from these objectives, they remained permanent features in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

Tang Chung-shu (c. 179–104 B. C.) was the thinker who contributed most to the ultimate triumph of Confucianism over all the other schools of the Chou in the Han Dynasty (206 B. C.–200 A. D.).

Later, it is true that Confucianism was overshadowed by Buddhism during the period of Division (221–589 A.D.) following the break-up of the Han Empire, but, to survive in China as an effective, popular force, Buddhism had to accommodate itself to the peculiarities of the Chinese philosophical temper which we have endeavoured to sketch in the preceding pages.

Those schools of Buddhism which tried to preserve their original philosophical purity failed to achieve currency in China and, hence, remained ineffectual in Chinese intellectual life. Chinese Buddhism enjoyed immense support because it was Buddhism *a la chinoise*.

In short, the cardinal limitation of Chinese philosophy stems from its inordinate attention to what Whitehead calls “practical reason.”<sup>16</sup>

Chinese thought was too closely associated with practical matters, with social adjustment. It was blinded, so to speak, by the affairs of the present. In concentrating on the “practical reason,” it neglected “speculative reason” which is allied with logic and systematic discourse.

Here we must stress that flights of fancy or sheer contemplation are not to be construed as speculative reason or speculative philosophy. Speculative philosophy seeks a comprehensive understanding of the nature of reality, of God, of man, and of the universe; it strives for a synoptic vision; while, in contrast, practical reason of practical philosophy is concerned with the empirical approach to concrete problems of living and action.

The speculative philosopher, as here described, often regards his opposite as a victim of spurious knowledge, lost in the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. Though the speculative philosopher may frequently be at odds with the practical philosopher, each needs the other. Unfortunately, the practical thinker may be oblivious of what his counterpart is about and may regard his pursuits as quite extraneous to the business of living.

The speculative thinker does not deny the importance of practical reason; he presupposes it and moves along on a plane above the details of the everyday world. It should be noted that the practical activities of the mind produce data which the speculative thinker may utilize in the formulation of new theoretical possibilities, and these in turn may stimulate the activities of the practical philosopher in his desire to implement them in new social programmes and in new technologies.

This interplay between these two types of reason or philosophical endeavour constitutes a kind of creative cultural symbiosis. If a civilization neglects either the practical or the speculative type of reason, it will be affected adversely.

China, until the impact of the modern world was felt, was an example of the harmful effects of a pragmatic, utilitarian philosophical orientation. Though authorities differ on the precise amount of weight to be given to its philosophical orientation as a cause of the somnolence of Chinese society, there appears to be agreement that the stress on practicality and social ethics, especially of Confucianism, played a most important role.

Science and technology were retarded; there was no speculative thought to challenge the mind towards new heights of achievement; the scholar class, reared on mundane philosophy, was dominant.

This is not to say that Confucian civilization was not a creative and remarkable civilization in many areas; it is merely an endeavour to point out why a certain type of mind did not flourish. Philosophies which concentrate too completely on social adjustment and utility paralyze, if they do not actually destroy, individual creativity and spontaneity in other avenues of human development.

Just as civilizations have cramped the individual by a preponderant religious or materialistic orientation, so the same cramping may occur when social utility is made the absolute measure of value.

The case of pre-modern Chinese civilization may furnish an example of the great danger attached to continually stressing the "social" or "practical" value of thought. The continued vigour of a culture depends upon how well it is replenished with new insights and challenged by new visions of possibility.

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[2.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[3.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[4.](#) *Ibid.*

[5.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[6.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[7.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[8.](#) Quoted in Fung Yu-lan's *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 81.

[9.](#) Wing-tsit Chan, "Synthesis in Chinese Metaphysics," *Essays in East-West Philosophy*, ed. with an Introduction by Charles A. Moore, University of Hawaii Press; Honolulu, 1951, p. 163.

[10.](#) James Legge, Tr., *Great Learning (Ta Hsueh)*, Verses 4 and 5.

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[13.](#) Lao-tse, the Book of Tao, tr. Lin Yutang in Wisdom of China and India, ed. idem, The Modern Library, New York, 1956, p. 583.

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