

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CHINA

Since the beginnings of human civilizations, people of all sorts have devoted energy to certain basic questions about how to make the best of life: How can we know all that can be known? How can we get the most pleasure possible? How can we become the best that people can be? How do or can our lives have meaning? All of us ask versions of these questions sometimes, but even in simple and specific forms questions like these turn out to be complicated and confusing when we actually start to think about them.

Historically, the earliest answers to such questions were religious ones, and religion has never failed to serve as a source for such answers for most people in the world. But since about 500 BCE religious approaches have been complemented by thinking that depends far less on beliefs concerning actions taken or standards set by a deity. Traditions that attempt to answer questions about the structure of the world and the nature of human beings without string reliance on religious concepts are generally discussed as philosophical traditions. Philosophical traditions are devoted to the free exercise of the intellect in the search for fully reliable answers to basic but elusive questions about the world and about life. In the ancient world, three cultures emerged as distinctly active in the discourse of philosophy: the cultures of Greece, China, and India. Perhaps by coincidence, philosophical activity began to achieve momentum in all three cultures about the same time, roughly 500 BCE. Although in this course we will focus solely on the development of philosophical thinking in early China, we will begin with a brief overview of issues key to the development of philosophy in Greece, and we will note throughout the course points at which the founders of Chinese thought may have build their enterprise upon different foundations from their Greek counterparts and inheritors of the Western traditions.

Before we begin to look at the way in which those who sought after wisdom in ancient China pursued their goals, we need to talk over some basic facts about China -- and about “ancientness.” In the sections that follow, we’ll survey some points of China’s geography, culture, history, and language that you’ll need to have full control of to feel comfortable with the material of this course.

## Geography

There are several key points to make about the geography of ancient China. First, we need to understand China's remoteness from other centers of civilization. People in China did not know about Europe or its people. Although it is very possible that through a slow process of step-by-step communication, inventions, techniques, and ideas may have seeped back and forth between Europe and East Asia for thousands of years, no one in the ancient world was *aware* of this if it did occur. As far as mutual recognition was concerned, China and the Mediterranean civilizations could just as well have been on different planets. Although India, the third great center of ancient philosophy, was near China geographically (contemporary India and China share a common border), the wall of the Himalaya Mountains was for each civilization an edge of the world over which nothing could pass. On the whole, then, ancient China's geographical location on the globe placed it in effective cultural isolation, without any awareness that more than one complex civilization, China itself, existed.

But the Chinese did not exist in total cultural isolation. The heartland of China was surrounded by a variety of different peoples. Nomadic cultures based on sheep and cattle herding flourished on the grassy steppes to the North and to the West; hunter-gatherer and fishing cultures existed in the forests of the South and on the coasts of the East. But none of these societies was literate, and none had created stable and complex centers of settlement. The Chinese people had for thousands of years practiced agriculture, and their gradually expanding domain was well marked by extensive engineering projects: networks of walls, roads, and irrigation canals that connected permanent village settlements and populous urban centers. These physical networks reflected enduring political and cultural connections as well.

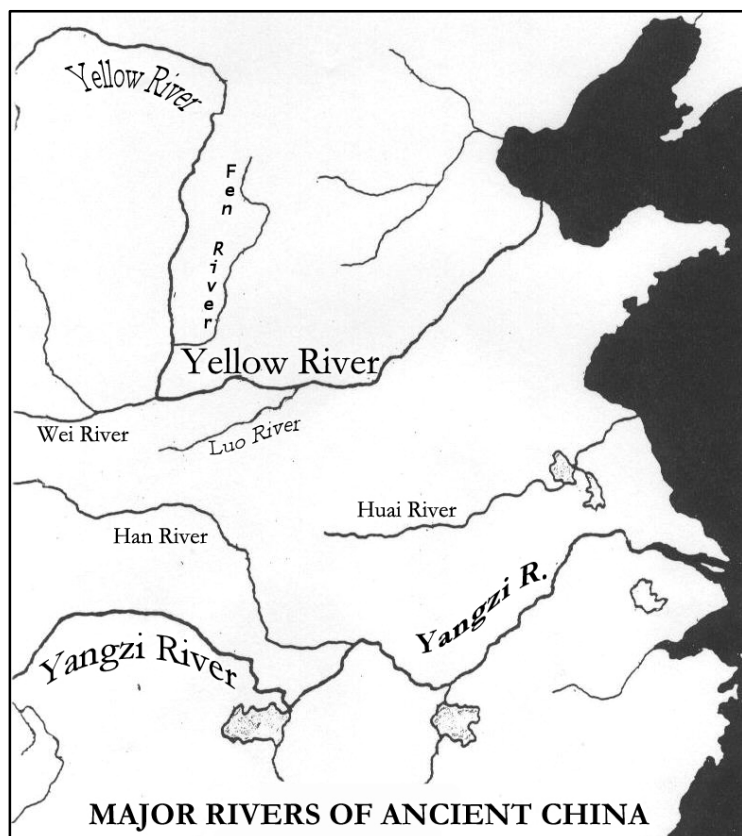
When Confucius, China's most influential thinker, was born in 551 BCE, China was the most vast and complex political entity on earth, in touch only with the simple and unsophisticated cultures surrounding it. Cut off from Europe by the deserts of Central Asia, from India by the Himalayas, from the rest of the world by ocean, and surrounded by small, mobile, non-literate cultural groups, China had no way of conceiving a world in which there might be many alternative paths of human improvement, organization, and fulfillment.

This situation led the ancient Chinese to view themselves as uniquely advanced and valuable. Chinese viewed their civilization as self-evidently the product of some special cosmic grace, and they assumed that there was something special about the culture heroes who, according to history and legend, had created Chinese civilization. Chinese civilization seemed

the acme of human development, and the future of China meant nothing less than the future of human kind. This viewpoint is sometimes referred to as China's *sino-centric* point of view (*sino-* is a prefix meaning "China"), and it contrasts very strongly with the Mediterranean awareness of multiplicity and variety in social practices and cultural values.

All this might lead us to expect that China, during the time of Confucius, would have been a static and monolithic society. But another set of geographical facts had created a very different situation. While the people of China felt they were, in fact, a highly unified group, there existed *within* Chinese civilization itself great diversity, the product of centuries of cultural absorption.

China was divided north-to-south by two enormous rivers, the Yellow River in the North and the Yangzi River in the South. The earliest centers of Chinese culture had developed during the period c. 5000 - 1000 BCE in the basin of the Yellow River in the North, an area of dry but fertile soil and moderate rainfall, ideal for raising dry grain crops that were



close relatives of wheat and barley. Over time, and particularly after about 1000 BCE, the political and military strength of Chinese culture led to a gradual expansion of its influence into the Yangzi River basin in the South and towards the Southeast coast, an area of high rainfall, rivers and lakes, ideally suited for the cultivation of wet-grain varieties of rice. In these southern regions, the advancing culture of the North China Plain encountered a variety of local cultures with very different features, which, through military, political, or

economic processes, were gradually absorbed into Chinese culture as a whole.

Consequently, by Confucius's time, China was actually a composite ethnic and cultural entity in the process of long-term dynamic change. One important reason why Chinese

civilization was able to outstrip its neighboring cultures by so great a distance was precisely the richness of its multi-ethnic structure, which included cultural contributions from a variety of sources. Although individuals during the period of Classical China tended to conceive and speak of China as a single civilization with a single history and a single destiny, we will discover important variety within that civilization, reflecting the fault lines of China's cultural geography.

## **Chronology**

The period of Chinese intellectual history that we will be studying in this course, the period that we will refer to as "Classical China," extends from the beginning of Confucius's career, about 520 BCE, until 221 BCE, the year of a great political upheaval that effectively ended China's most fruitful period of philosophical inquiry. A detailed chronology of the pre-philosophical period will be given in the section on the historical background of Classical thought, below, and the philosophical chronology of the Classical era itself, which may be seen at a glance on the online [Timeline](#), will be covered step by step as the course goes on.

At this point, the key issue concerning ancient China's chronology is that it is *ancient*. The world was in many ways a radically different place than it is today, and it will be important to become used to conceiving this different world when you read what ancient thinkers have to say. Confucius & Co. lived at a time when few people normally traveled more than ten miles from home (going further in your ox-cart meant finding a lodging place). Fewer books existed altogether than you probably have in your home now, and there were no newspapers or other sources of public information (but the luster of the night sky seemed to proclaim an urgent message from the cosmos). Fatal disease struck early in nearly every family and malnutrition and illness made disfigurement common and physical beauty rare. Most people were locked in a life-and-death struggle with the land for food, and mass starvation and the brutality of desperation were common. In studying ancient China it is crucial to avoid thinking that people had any firm concept of what the world was, that information of any kind was widely available (or that most people even had a clear idea what "information" was), that ordinary living entailed any sense of personal security, that experience suggested that there was any nobility or even value in the mere fact of being human.

In such a world, what may seem to us now as among the simplest and most self-evident ideas were often conceived only after exhaustive efforts of study, imagination, and debate. These ideas were gleaming jewels to their discoverers, and looking at the world by their light

made things seem excitingly different. Our long familiarity with some of these ideas may make them seem routine and dull to us. But that familiarity, which we owe to some of the people we study in this course, also sometimes leads us to lose track of what we know, which can be little different from being ignorant of it. There are times when, if we look at old ideas with fresh eyes, we can see not only how these ideas changed the world, but how they still have power to change how we see our world and ourselves.

A key to studying ancient Chinese ideas is to see how, despite their apparent simplicity, they may guide us to new perspectives we had not before imagined.

## **Culture**

While the world of Classical China is far removed from us in time but contemporary with ancient Greece, the shape of Classical Chinese culture was in many respects entirely unique. Some features of society were functions of the particular historical circumstances of the Classical period, and we will discuss these later. But there are aspects of Classical culture that we could term pan-Chinese, common to all or most stages of China's cultural history. We will survey some of these briefly here.

### **1. The primacy of family**

It is true of virtually every era of Chinese history that the family has played a greater social role in Chinese culture than in most world cultures. This does not only mean that family was more essential for individuals in ancient China than it is for most people today, but that it was in many respects more essential than it was for most societies in the ancient world.

There was in ancient China a very strong view of the integrity of the family and a very weak view of the independence of the individual. There existed no clear notion that each individual possessed a unique inner core, particular to himself or herself, that constituted an independent or unchanging identity. Such an idea, associated with the concept of an immortal soul in the West, can serve to sustain a belief in the value and autonomy of individual people. In China, the absence of such a concept guided people towards thinking of individuals as representatives of the human network that brought them into existence: their family.

Individuals were not pictured as coming into the world in possession of unique talents and dispositions that animated their personalities and made them who they were. An individual's qualities were pictured as emerging from the nurturance provided by the family

and community in which that person was brought up. One's character was, in a very fundamental sense, a product of the micro-society of the family, and in this way, personal identity was pictured as organically linked to this family source, and never fully independent of it. A person separated from his or her family was not quite fully human. For this reason, traditional culture placed very strong ethical emphasis on the importance of fulfilling one's family role and, in particular, learning dedication to family through the exercise of filial conduct towards one's parents. Filiality -- treating one's parents with obedience and dutiful graciousness -- was a cardinal and much honored social value in China long before and long after the Classical era.

The importance of the family was reinforced by highly elaborated family and clan structures. Households normally included several generations living under a single roof, and even if there was some physical distance between the homes of brothers or cousins, extended families generally continued to live in close proximity, to share property and privileges, and to join together in ritual activities that brought large numbers of clan members together on a regular basis.

The centrality of the family and the social view of people as first and foremost family members contributed to the worldview of the first philosophical school in China, the Confucian School. But this cultural tendency did not mean that it was impossible for Chinese people to think in other ways and to view the person as less integrally linked to family. Indeed, the most important reaction against Confucianism, the school of Daoism, which we will discuss in detail, placed little or no emphasis on family, and pictured the individual as organically linked not to the family, but to the world of Nature.

## **2. Family and religion**

Early China's family-centered orientation was expressed in religious practice. Although ancient Chinese society included a wide variety of religious cults and practices, the most basic of all religious activities was the family cult known as ancestor worship. People in ancient China believed in a type of life after death. In their view, certain components of the person -- including aspects of consciousness, physical needs, and worldly powers -- did not cease to exist with death, but persisted for generations in a semi-physical state. Ghosts of the dead continued to inhabit the local space of their former homes, continued to need physical sustenance in the form of food and drink, and possessed the ability to influence events in the

world. It was the duty of the lineal descendants of these ghosts -- their sons and grandsons -- to provide regular nourishment in the form of sacrificial foods and drink, and to behave in ways that accorded with the good examples set by former generations. If lazy children allowed dead ancestors to go hungry or brought disgrace to their names, ancestors had the power to wreak vengeance. On the other hand, dutiful fulfillment of ritual sacrifices, respectful salutations of the dead, and upright social behavior by descendants would attract the blessings of ancestors, who had the power to provide protection and bestow rewards.

The most regular form of religious activity for every person in ancient China was the offering of scheduled sacrifices to one's ancestors. These rituals occurred in homes at every level of society. Among the privileged classes, elaborate ancestral halls served as religious centers for extensive clans. The most aristocratic of clans were entitled to construct large walled temple complexes devoted exclusively to the ancestors of their clan.

### **3. Gender inequities**

It is probably correct to say that with only a few known exceptions, traditional cultures worldwide accorded much higher status and privilege to men than to women. China was not only no exception in this regard, its social values were probably more skewed towards male privilege than most societies. For example, in traditional China women were substantially separated from their birth families after marriage, girls were not provided with education, males possessed almost sole effective rights of property (widows were an exception), and men were permitted to take as many "secondary wives" (sometimes called "concubines") as their wealth and status made socially acceptable.

Despite these cultural features of the traditional Chinese environment, it is interesting to note that philosophical texts almost never make a claim that women are in any way inferior to men. The most they will say (and many do say this) is that women and men are different in their natural capacities and should perform different functions in the world. The theme of this distinction is most essentially that the role of women is properly confined to the non-public sphere of family life. Chinese popular views of women in public life was traditionally that they were basically a dangerous force in that context. There were many stories of queens, empresses, and royal concubines who employed the power of their sexual allure to influence government -- always for the worse. Most early thinkers seems to have accepted such accounts at face value and assumed that their students or readers would understand without saying the danger of

women in public life -- but it is also a fact that no ban on women's aspirations was proclaimed or any statement made that they were, by nature, unfit or unable to achieve ideal forms of human excellence. And, in fact, one school of ancient thought, the Daoists, tended to celebrate female qualities as superior to male ones, and the key to human excellence.

The best way to approach our Classical thinkers with regard to gender issues is to recognize that the texts we are reading were written exclusively by males, and that the intended audience was also male. The assumption is that in discussing human ethics and human excellence, it is men of whom the text is speaking. But the texts also do not generally present any barriers that prevent us from reading their lessons as gender-free when we look to them for inspiration in our own, presumably less sexist age. This adaptability will be signaled by the fact that in our translations, we will occasionally employ the pronoun "he or she" as a reminder that the texts need not be an exclusive male province.

#### **4. Political culture**

The political culture of traditional China from the beginnings of the historical era until the beginnings of this century treated *social harmony* as the most desirable of all political outcomes. Values that the modern West has come to see as absolute requirements, such as the preservation of individual rights and the freedom to develop one's unique talents to the fullest, were never clearly articulated in traditional China. In large part, this was a product of the mainstream Chinese concept of the individual that laid such great stress upon the organic links that bound each person to his or her family and community. When individuals are defined largely in terms of their roles in larger communities, it is more difficult to see why a strong concept of individual rights and freedom make sense, and much more difficult to see people as possessing natural responsibilities towards the larger community that shaped their identities and nurtured their well being.

Traditional China tended to conceive the goal of social harmony in terms of an ideal picture of the perfect society. Such an ideal society would be *homeostatic*, which means that it would represent a self-regulating system. Should the harmony of this homeostatic system be unbalanced by natural or human disasters, the political institutions that structured it would be capable of responding automatically to restore harmony. The political ideals of most of the thinkers we will encounter in this course tend to reflect this traditional vision. (Note how different this is from our contemporary American excitement about the unpredictable nature



of the future, and our willingness to undertake social experiments. In the course of human history, to the degree these represent our present attitudes, our society is an unusual exception.)

For most people in traditional China, the ideal homeostatic society was structured according to the principle of a complex hierarchy of social roles, culminating in a single powerful ruler -- a king or emperor -- at the apex. This was not just a theoretical model; this was the shape of Chinese politics from before 1000 BCE on. China is the home of bureaucracy. Complex structures of court and regional appointments may be discovered in the earliest written records of China, and one of the outcomes of the political debates of the Classical period was the invention of the civil service examination system in China shortly thereafter. Moreover, the concept of a single, Heaven-mandated ruler did not flag in China until the end of the 19th century -- some people would say until the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.

Traditionally, the Chinese pictured their past and future in terms of a succession of kings. There was no calendar of consecutive years in China until 1949; instead, years were numbered according to the reigns of kings, and the sequence began anew with the accession of each new ruler. Moreover, the past was always described in terms of long eras marked by continuous dynasties of rulers, who handed the throne from father to son for generations. Even as early as the Classical period this was so. Our thinkers spoke of themselves as living in the period of the Zhou Dynasty, and described the past in terms of the preceding Shang Dynasty, and before that the Xia Dynasty. Only when thinking beyond the long distant beginnings of the Xia did Classical people describe the past differently. And still, though this primitive past included no dynasties, it was still marked as a succession of kings, legendary figures whom Classical folklore had borrowed from the realm of myth and recreated as the imaginary cultural creators and first rulers of China. (We will discuss pre-philosophical history in a subsequent section.)

## **5. Language, writing, and names**

*Phonetic and grammatical features.* Even those who love ancient Chinese admit that the language is bizarre and that it creates unusual difficulties for the study of China in Western languages.

We have little insight into the spoken language of ancient China. The texts we possess now are, being texts, all examples of the written language, and there is much evidence to support the view that spoken and written languages were very different in antiquity. In fact, as the Chinese cultural sphere expanded during the ancient period, it appears that many of the

ethnic groups it absorbed maintained their native spoken language for many generations, and employed the Chinese written language for textual communication simply because it was the only written language available.

We are able to say that spoken ancient Chinese was largely a monosyllabic language: that is, the semantic (meaning) units of the language were almost always expressed by a single syllable. Each of these semantically significant syllables constituted a word. Words were uninflected: they did not take variable endings that indicated features such as tense, number, gender, or case. All these features, which make many Indo-European languages tedious to learn, are entirely absent from Chinese. No tense, no plurals, no subject-object markers. But it is disappointing to learn that a language stripped of all these complex features becomes not easier to master but harder. In ancient Chinese, which relies almost wholly on word order and a limited set of function words to provide grammatical clues to meaning, the level of ambiguity is spectacularly high. This is one of the reasons why many of the most revered ancient texts remain imperfectly understood.

*Chinese characters.* Perhaps the most striking feature of the Chinese language is its graphic form. Chinese uses no alphabet. Instead, every word is assigned a “character” which calls up both its sound and its meaning. The largest Chinese dictionaries list about 50,000 characters; a fully literate person needs to know about 5,000. The system of writing in characters seems to have evolved during the Shang period; the earliest surviving texts date from that era, and the characters used in these are far more rudimentary and unstandardized than those we see later.

Learning Chinese characters can be a tedious chore, but learning *about* them is fun. The characters can be understood as the products of several approaches to representing a word in graphic form. Characters represent words, and words may be thought of as consisting of two major components: a sound and a meaning. The chart below illustrates the multiple principles that guided the development of Chinese characters.

PICTOGRAPHIC FORMS	
子 child (ancient form: 𠂔 )	日 sun (ancient form: 𠂔 )

	木 tree (ancient form: 𣎵 )	月 moon (ancient form: 𠄎 )
	女 woman (ancient form 𡚦 : a kneeling figure)	
	<b>IDEOGRAPHIC FORMS</b>	
Simple:	一 one      二 two      上 above      下 below      本 root	
Complex:	好 good (woman + child)	明 bright (sun + moon)
	<b>EXAMPLE OF A LOGOGRAPHIC FORM</b>	
時	<p>This is the character for <i>shi</i>, a word denoting ‘time’ or, more properly, ‘season.’ The graph combines the graph for ‘sun’ on the left with an unrelated character, <i>si</i> 寺 on the right, which was selected solely to indicate how the character should be pronounced (during the ancient period, the element <i>si</i> and the word for season, no pronounced <i>shi</i>, were very nearly homophonous). The left-hand element (pronounced <i>ri</i> [like <i>mi</i>] when alone) contributes only towards indicating the meaning, in that the notion of season is related to the position of the sun; the <i>si</i> on the right (which means ‘hall’ or ‘temple’ when appearing independently) contributes only phonetic value.</p>	

Characters may be derived from simple pictographic representations of the meaning of a word. On the chart, the first three graphs stand for the words *zi*, *mu*, and *nii*, which mean “child,” “tree,” and “woman.” The graphs do not relate to the sounds of the words, but simply derive from a crude sketch of the noun that the word refers to.

The second set on the chart, “ideographic forms,” shows how characters were developed for more abstract words. The characters for the low numbers convey in a simple form the meaning of the numbers (again, without regard for sound), and the graphs for “above” and “below” are also representations of abstract ideas, rather than pictures. The set of compound graphs illustrate how abstract ideas could be conveyed through characters that were combinations of pictures pointing to a meaning beyond themselves. For example, a graph including the sun and moon did not mean “the sun and the moon,” as a pictograph would, it meant “bright,” an idea conveyed indirectly through pictures.

The final type of character, a very common one, conveys its meaning by a combined approach to both sound and meaning. In the example given, the problem is to figure out how to represent in writing the concept of a calendrical time or season, as denoted by the spoken

word *shi*. The solution is to write the character for “sun,” closely associated with time and the progression of the year, on one side, and on the other side to borrow the character for a nearly homophonous word *si* (the meaning of which bears no relation to time). Readers then can understand the sense of the character to be a concept associated with the sun, and the pronunciation to be much like *si* (during the Classical period, *shi* and *si* would have been very close, being pronounced, very roughly, like *dʒiŋ* and *diŋ* respectively).

There are actually a number of other ways in which characters could be formed, some of them very subtle, and the manner in which characters convey meaning is a source of analysis that is both endless and unusually entertaining. Even more significant for understanding Chinese culture is the analysis of the psychological and aesthetic effects of a written language composed of graphs rather than an alphabet. After long exposure to written Chinese, the impression grows that processes of understanding occur during reading that have no comparable equivalent for alphabetic scripts. These processes, both aesthetic and more generally cultural, made the Chinese written language appear as a near-sacred gift to the people of Classical China.

*Names.* Chinese is a language which allows for very few possible syllables. Not counting the tonal intonations that are an integral part of each word, but do not appear in transcription, there exist only about 450 distinct syllable-sounds in Chinese.

The norm in ancient China was to have a surname of one or two syllables (one was the norm) and a personal name which followed it of one or two syllables (one was the norm, but two-syllable personal names were quite common). When Chinese names are rendered in the Roman alphabet, the result is that they tend to look very much alike. In Chinese, the characters disambiguated personal names easily, but the homogeneity of names in transcription is a special headache for Western students of China.

To make the problem of names more severe, in ancient China, individuals, particularly males, possessed a variety of personal names, nicknames, and honorific names which they acquired at different stages of life. They also acquired various titles by which they were known (the Minister of This-or-That, and so forth). A single text may refer to a particular individual by any and all of a half-dozen names in the course of a single narrative. It is only because early commentary traditions often began by identifying the multi-named individuals of ancient texts that we have any hope of knowing who is meant.

You should assume that in every case, *the surname precedes the personal name*. Sometimes a surname will have two syllables and the personal name one or two (e.g., Bogong You); much more often the surname is a single syllable and the personal name two or both will be one syllable. If the syllable “zi” appears, it generally is not a name but an honorific, “Master,” as in Confucius’s Chinese name, Kongzi 孔子 : Master Kong.