

### III Traditional Chinese categories of philosophy

#### III.1 Overview

There existed before 221 BCE no state that could adequately be called “China.” It was only then that one of the several independent warring states succeeded in conquering the others. This was the state of Qin whose emperor is well known for his terracotta army. “Unifying” all the separate states, he established what became known as the Qin dynasty, calling himself Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝 (259–210 BCA), “First August Emperor of Qin.” Perhaps the name “China” is derived from the word “Qin.” But this is not sure. It is mainly for the sake of convenience that I follow established usage when speaking of China and “Chinese” philosophy even when referring to texts that originated hundreds of years before 221 BCE, and when I call “Chinese” the jade carvings created in Neolithic cultures that were located within the borders of 21<sup>st</sup> century China. Speaking of ancient philosophical texts as “Chinese” philosophy, could, however, be justified by pointing out that they were written in a language or with characters similar to the language and graphs used in Chinese history since Han times (206 BCE–220 CE).

In the second century BCE, the historian Sima Tan 司馬談 distinguished six schools of philosophy—though he did of course not speak of philosophy.<sup>14</sup> He conceived of these schools as groups of thinkers who dealt with similar problems in similar ways. They needed not even know each other personally. Sima Tan referred to these schools as united by family (*jia* 家)-like similarities, naming them *rujia* 儒家, so-called Confucianism, *daoja* 道家, Daoism, *moja* 墨家, Mohism, *fajia* 法家, Legalism or Legism, *mingjia* 名家, School of Names, and *yinyangjia* 陰陽家, the School of Yin and Yang. Besides these schools, *bingjia* 兵家, the “School of War,”<sup>15</sup> and *nongjia* 农家, Agriculturalists,<sup>16</sup> and other groups are often mentioned by historians. All of them flourished during the Spring and Autumn (772–481 BCE) and Warring States (5<sup>th</sup> century–221 BCE) periods, and they were engaged in lively and often harshly disputing each other. Even the designation of “Onehundred [that is, many] Schools” was used.

However, in my discussion of the various Chinese philosophical schools, traditions, and strands, I prefer as general distinctions designations such as “epistemology,” “ethics,” and “aesthetics.” Though the respective Chinese terms *renshilun* 認識論, *lunlixue* 倫理學, and *meixue* 美學 are mere calques, reflections about questions of how to arrive at valid knowledge,

how to lead a good life, and how to pursue ideals of beauty are documented in Chinese texts the origin of which dates back at least to 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term “Confucianism” refers to a number of schools, traditions, and teachings the fundamentals of which are incompatible with each other. Using such terms as “Confucianism” or “Daoism” thus often insinuates a unity that simply did and does not exist. More important, because of the terms’ ‘Chinese’ ring, they evoke a kind of ‘otherness’ that can be misleading. Speaking instead of ethics or aesthetics in Chinese history expresses more clearly that traditions like “Confucianism” are ways of thinking that comprise philosophical reflections. My approach is thus comparable to an overview of Western philosophy arranged according to disciplines, whereas a respective history could be ordered according to such designations as Platonism and Aristotelianism.

Admittingly, use of categories like “ethics” may have a ‘Western’ flavor, but, similarly, applying terms like “social philosophy” to (parts of) Platonism, does not sound very Platonistic. And the Beijing Man would never have called himself “Beijing Man.”

Subsumed under such labels as for instance “logic,” I of course explicitly refer to, and discuss, the various Chinese schools too. As far as a teaching can be attributed to an individual philosopher, I also deal with this philosopher. My approach can thus be compared to a *systematic* account of philosophy in European history that in chapters on epistemology and aesthetics thematizes theories of knowledge and beauty such as those developed in Platonism or by Aristotle or Kant. Since my approach leads me to repeatedly thematize the same Chinese schools and philosophers, I will, however, provisionally explain the traditional Chinese designations and philosophical orientations beforehand.

Now, with regard to pre-Qin philosophy, it is often difficult, or even impossible, to saveily attribute a book or part of a book to a certain author. Many classics were compiled years after the death of the philosopher whose teachings they supposedly include. Moreover, most received editions are of even much later dates. Also, they comprise rather different teachings. These three points apply even to the *Lunyu*, often simply referred to as a work of Confucius. Because of such philological problems and problems of textual history, whenever I use, or mention, the name of a pre-Qin philosopher, if I do not explicitly attribute a teaching to him personally, I actually refer to the respective texts. Otherwise I would often have been forced to express myself in quite a roundabout way.

### III.2 The name “Confucius”

Confucius is supposed to have lived from 551 to 479 BCE. This is probably correct. However, not much is known about Confucius' life. Most reliable are perhaps certain passages in the *Lunyu*. This text has been repeatedly translated into English.

The common Chinese name of Confucius is “Kong(fu)zi 孔(夫)子,” usually translated by “(Honorable) Master Kong.” Thereby, *zi* rather refers to a kind of intellectual and social than technical competence, and always designates a man whom a certain group acknowledges as a kind of teacher. It is a little bit reminiscent of the Latin *magister* (“master”) in the European Middle Ages, though, other than “magister,” it is no degree. To be acknowledged, or even honored, as a teacher meant to be recognized as a learned and cultivated person, especially versed—as we would call it—in practical philosophy, and in many cases also in literature. Accordingly, the ‘Confucians’ Mengzi, Xunzi, and Zhuzi (or Zhu Xi); the main representative of the *bingjia*, Sunzi 孫子 (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE); the founder of the *mojia*, Mozi 墨子 (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE); the Daoists Laozi 老子 (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE?) and Zhuangzi; and the Legalist Han Feizi 韓非子 (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), and many others, were also labeled *zi*.

Confucius became famous as a culturally refined person mainly interested in civilizing men and society. And he is still regarded as a ‘connoisseur’ and advocate of literature and music, a paradigm of beautiful and becoming conventional manners, and, last but not least, as an outstanding educator and competent political advisor.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, he is supposed to have been less interested in military ‘arts.’<sup>18</sup> All these features can be ‘deduced’ from the *Lunyu*, but they rather characterize an ideal than a historical person.

Although Confucius failed in having his humane political philosophy realized in Chinese history—and this applies to Chinese politics in the 21<sup>st</sup> century too—, his ethics of individual integrity and exertion—especially moral-selfcultivation and learning—has been, and remains, influential. The same applies to Confucius' concept of government by virtue, to which even the Communist Party pays lip service when arguing against ‘Western’ democracy and what it regards as an oversimplified idea of government *of* law.

### III.3 The label “Confucianism”<sup>19</sup>

Though I speak of Confucianism, and also use this word in the following, one ought to be aware that it could be misunderstood, for it insinuates a unity of traditions, schools and teachings that never existed. I do employ it only when usually used in contexts I then thematize. The word refers to what in Chinese is called *rujia*, a class of literati, scholars and scholar-officials. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the common designation is *rujia*. For the sake of convenience, one could perhaps render it “School of the learned,” though only perhaps. The so-called Confucians were referred to as *ru* 儒. Originally, *ru* may have meant “weakling” or “meekling.”<sup>20</sup> If this is true then the label *ru* could have been coined by *ru*-opponents who regarded the *ru* conceptions of individual integrity and government of virtue as utterly impractical, if not even as dangerous illusions. Whoever held positions like the *fajia*, advocating government *by* law (note: not “*of* law”) and by reward and punishment, could have been of such an opinion. According to another explanation, however, *ru* rather meant “teacher.”<sup>21</sup>

Thus, “*rujia*” is a broad name that covers various schools, traditions, strands, and teachings, whereas “Confucianism” suggests a uniformity that never existed. Some of the so-called Confucian teachings even significantly contradict each other. To repeat, the ‘Confucian’ Dai Zhen sharply criticized the ‘Confucian’ *lixue*, the “School of Principle,” by asserting that *li*, “principle,” could be used to kill people.

First of all, one has to distinguish between philosophical Confucianism, political or State Confucianism, and popular Confucianism. Philosophical Confucianism then subdivides into classic Confucianism (classic *rujia*), Neo-Confucianism (*xin rujia* 新儒家) and Modern Confucianism (*dangdai xin rujia* 当代新儒家; *xiandai xin rujia* 現代新儒家). Classic Confucianism is formulated in the *Lunyu*, *Menzius* (or *Mengzi*), and *Xunzi*, though some of the central teachings put forward in these texts date back hundreds of years prior to Confucius. This applies in particular to the notion ‘rule by/of virtue’ as advanced in the *Shujing* 書經, the “Classic of Documents,” and the *Shijing* 詩經, the “Classic of Poetry,” both of which argue for humaneness and openness for criticism, rejecting despotism, harsh punishment and the punishing of people whose guilt could be doubted.<sup>22</sup> The two collections are traditionally counted as ‘Confucian classics.’ That their existed ‘Confucian’ teachings before Confucius is another argument against translating *rujia* by “Confucianism.” One could of course argue that it was Confucius who by integrating older doctrines into a more comprehensive philosophy actually established “Confucianism.” But then it would be even more confusing to call theories that

significantly differ from Confucius' classic 'Confucianism,' 'Confucianism' too.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, if one counts as classic Confucianism every teaching that, in the first 200 years after the death of Confucius, conceived of itself as 'Confucianism' or was later called 'Confucianism' (*rujia*), one had to further distinguish between rival kinds of classic Confucianism. For the sake of clarity, I use "classic Confucianism" in the narrow sense, only referring to the *Lunyu*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. Otherwise the notion would be too vague. Many teachings that originated after the death of Confucius and are labeled "Confucian" are characterized by eclecticism, metaphysical speculations, and notions of mechanical ritualism incompatible with the common sense and this-worldly philosophy of the *Lunyu*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi*. As far as I deal with such teachings, I explicitly refer to them as non-classic positions.

Basic positions of classic Confucianism can be characterized as follows:

- (i) Every man ought to endeavor to become an ideal person (*junzi* 君子).
- (ii) Self-cultivation (*xiu ji* 脩己 or *xiu shen* 修身), especially broad and intensive learning (*xue* 學), and openness to criticism, is indispensable for realizing this goal.<sup>24</sup>
- (iii) If decisions are of moral significance, especially if fundamental questions of humaneness (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義) are involved, they ought to be determined by humaneness and righteousness.
- (iv) Violence is no ready means for molding men's individual character and behavior, or for
- (v) winning and exercising political power.
- (vi) Government ought to be ruled by virtue (*de* 德), with humaneness and righteousness being the cardinal virtues.
- (vii) *Critical* loyalty (*zhong* 忠) is indispensable for comprehensively realizing virtue.

"Critical loyalty" meant not to shrink from criticizing the faults of superiors, fathers, or friends. It is opposed to unconditional submission. Classic *rujia* is probably the most rational and humane kind of *rujia* philosophy, though some much later philosophies as for instance the philosophy of Dai Zhen included important classic elements such as rejection of highly speculative ontology.

As to Neo-Confucianism, one could distinguish between more than a dozen rival schools or strands. The two main branches, however, are *lixue*,

the “School of Principle,” and *xinxue* 心學, the “School of Heart-and-Mind.” *Lixue* was mainly developed by Zhu Xi.<sup>25</sup> Because of its ontologized speculative ethics, its dualism, and its criticism of emotions, *lixue* differs fundamentally from the rational pragmatism of the *Lunyu*. Zhu Xi holds that everything that exists is based on, or a function of, exactly two factors, namely *li* 理, “principle,” and *qi* 氣, “material/vital/life force,” “energy flow,” or “ether.” Translations vary according to context. *Li* is the fundament of everything good including originally good human nature (*benxing* 本性). Everything bad is a function of *qi*. Though not advocating an ontological idealism, but similar to Plato’s (5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), and even more Plotin’s (205–270 CE), dualism who regarded the material as the enemy of the spiritual (e.g., the body as the enemy of the soul), Zhu Xi characterized *qi* as a force in important respects opposed to *li*. Accordingly, Zhu Xi censored all desires (*yu* 欲) and almost all other emotions (*qing* 情) as obfuscations caused by *qi*. The name *lixue* indicates the importance Zhu Xi ascribed to *li*. Besides the *Lunyu* and the *Mencius*, Zhu Xi elevated two other texts to canonical ‘Confucian’ works, namely *Zhongyong* 中庸, “Doctrine of the Mean,” and *Daxue* 大學, “Great Teaching.” Though both originated before Qin times, they differ markedly from *Lunyu* and *Mencius*, and even more from the *Xunzi*. They include metaphysical speculations foreign to the classics. Under the name “Four Books” (*sishu* 四書), Zhu Xi’s selection became a canon of Neo-Confucian philosophy.<sup>26</sup>

The other main branch of Neo-Confucian philosophy was inaugurated by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). In contrast to Zhu Xi, Wang, in his *xinxue*,<sup>27</sup> emphasized the unity of reason, emotion, and will, and even advanced the idea of a ‘unity’ of knowing, or insight, and action (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一). He held that knowledge is knowing what is ‘good.’ It is the beginning of action, and action is the completion of it. Moreover, one does not ‘really’ or ‘honestly’ know if one does not behave accordingly. There is indeed a kind of understanding or ‘feeling’ that one ‘contradicts’ oneself, if one does not behave according to one’s knowledge. From this, one could ‘deduce’ that such knowledge is somehow ‘deficient,’ for otherwise there would not be a contradiction, and one could further ‘conclude’ that knowledge that deserves to be called ‘real’ or ‘perfect,’ leads to a behavior consistent with it. Perhaps the phrase, “You don’t (really) know what you are doing,” indicates such convictions. Independent from such explanations, however, Wang’s teachings too have a metaphysical and speculative character though they lack the dualism and anti-emotionalism of *lixue*. It was because of Wang’s notion of the “heart-

and-mind” (*xin*) as a comprehensive and unifying faculty of knowledge, will, and a source of an activity directed to the outside world, that his philosophy was named *xinxue*. Sometimes, *xinxue* is called “idealism.” This is misleading since Wang does not put forward any ontological idealism. He is far from maintaining that ‘true being’ is immaterial, or that everything is ultimately grounded on, or a function of, an immaterial basis.

Neo-Confucianism was influenced by Buddhist metaphysics, especially ontology, which entered China since about 300 CE. Earlier transmissions of Buddhist teachings from ‘Indian’ cultures date back to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.

As already pointed out, Modern Confucianism arose as a reaction to Western philosophy and science, especially Kant, human rights philosophy, Marxist humanism, and Western technology and medicine.

What I call political or State Confucianism originated in Han times (206 BCE–220 CE). This ‘Confucianism’ favors an ideology supportive of the ruling powers. Instead of emphasizing critical loyalty it tends to advocate submissiveness. Including features of Daoism, Legalism, and Yin-Yang-doctrines, it further contradicts basic teachings of classic Confucianism. Similar to Neo-Confucianism, its philosophical doctrines display strong metaphysical interests. The traditional Chinese saying *wai ru nei fa* 外儒内法, “Outside ‘Confucian,’ inside Legalist;” that is, “In appearance Confucian, in truth Legalist,” adequately expresses the essence of this ‘Confucianism,’ namely that its teachings in fact favored inhumane politics though it adherents payed lip service to ideas of humaneness.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps the most important figure in the formation of State Confucianism was Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (180–115 BCE). Though he also spoke of the importance of *ren* and *yi*, some of his basic assertions, his metaphysics, and obscurantism were actually supportive of imperial power. Though there were also Han philosophers like Jia Yi 賈誼 (ca. 201–169 BCE) who concurred with Mencius and Xunzi, their teachings did not become as influential as Dong Zhongshu’s which dominated imperial ideology till about 1911. The differences between the two strains of ‘Confucianism’ can be indicated by quoting key assertions. Whereas Dong Zhongshu held that “he who rules the people is the basis of the state” or “the root of the state,”<sup>29</sup> Jia Yi repeatedly emphasized that “the people are the root.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, while Dong taught that heaven and men mutually influence each other, with heaven being a numinous entity, Jia Yi, like Xunzi, maintained that “good fortune” and “misfortune” are “one’s [i.e. man’s] own doing.”