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CLASSICAL CHINESE THOUGHT AND CULTURE AND EARLY CHINESE HISTORY

by Victor H. Mair

Victor Mair is professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania and author of [Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World](#) (University of Hawaii Press, 2006). This presentation was made at FPRI's Understanding China A History Institute for Teachers, held Oct. 21–22, 2006 at Carthage College, Kenosha, Wisconsin. The conference was co-sponsored by the Clausen Center for World Business and the School of Professional Studies, both at Carthage College, and supported by a grant from The Annenberg Foundation.. This essay is available at <http://www.fpri.org/education/china/>, where videotapes and other speakers' reports are available.

Although scientist Jared Diamond famously called China an “empire of uniformity,”¹ in fact nothing could be further from the truth. China is one of the most diverse nations on earth. Linguistically, ethnically, religiously—on virtually any basis, China has always had an enormous range of populations and cultural phenomena. It is precisely because of this great social and cultural variety that it has been hard to keep the country together. To maintain political unity has invariably necessitated the exercise of heavy-handed government from the center. China's history for the last 3,500 years documents this lesson very clearly. Whenever the central government is weak or relaxes control, the nation rapidly dissolves into a mass of warring regional and ideological factions. The current government in Beijing is no doubt keenly aware of this history, and is consequently fiercely determined not to share power with any group or constituency, be it Falun Gong practitioners, Cantonese merchants and manufacturers, or Manchurian labor leaders and industrialists.

This essay is concerned not with politics, but rather with thought (*sixiang*), although the two are inextricably linked in the Chinese scheme of things. When I first started traveling to China in 1981, the country was still rather closed. Nonetheless, as the 1980s progressed, I became increasingly familiar with Chinese society, particularly the academic side of it. I noticed that at every level of the universities (the same thing was true of factories and all other organizations in China), there was a Communist party secretary (*dang shuji*) to match the administrative, academic, and technical officials. I was surprised by how many party secretaries there were in China and how influential they seemed to be. Still, I could not understand exactly what their purpose was, and during the early '80s did not dare to ask for fear of compromising my Chinese friends.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when regulations governing relationships with foreigners started to be somewhat more relaxed, I was emboldened to ask how the party secretaries, who were given such a great amount of office space and equipment in addition to room and board, justified their existence. Every single person I asked gave the same response: “*Guan* (*women de*) *sixiang* (Control [our] thought).” For someone who has never lived in a totalitarian society, it is practically impossible to imagine how thorough is the apparatus for making sure that people's thoughts do not go astray. Obviously, “thought” must be something of extreme importance in China to warrant devoting so many resources to controlling it. Modes of thinking were also very important in China's past, and were referred to as this or that *jia* (“school”) before the more modern term *sixiang* was introduced. Chinese governments have always been obsessively concerned with the matter of what they perceived to be the necessity for “correct” thinking on the part of their subjects.

The foundations of classical Chinese thought were laid during the Warring States period (*Zhanguo shidai*), 475-221 BCE. Notwithstanding that this was a time of great bloodshed, it was also the Golden Age of Chinese thought. With one major exception that I will discuss later, all of the major schools of Chinese thought that lasted up to the modern era were established during this two-and-a-half-century period of incessant warfare.

The *Dao De Jing* / *Tao Te Ching*--*Jing* in book titles signifies “classic,” “scripture,” or “sutra” (Buddhist scripture); I will discuss the meanings of *dao* and *de* below--is the most frequently translated and best-known Chinese work outside of China, although Sun Zi's *Art of War* (*Sun Zi bingfa*), with its military and business applications, is starting to challenge it.² Often misunderstood as a mystical treatise, the *Dao De Jing*, like nearly all early works of Chinese thought, was primarily intended as a guidebook for rulers. Early Chinese thought, by and large, was sociopolitical philosophy; it was not concerned with abstract, theoretical, matters such as ontology, epistemology, or even logic. It was very much a practical affair. The *Dao De Jing* advised that the most effective way to govern was through *wuwei* (“inaction” or “nonaction,” but it is better to think of this elusive concept as “disinterested action” or “action without attachment”). It is similar to the principles advocated in

¹ Jared Diamond, “Empire of Uniformity,” *Discover*, March 1996. See my review in *Sino-Platonic Papers*, January 1999.

² My own translation of the *Sun Zi* for Columbia University Press will come out in 2007.

the ancient Indian classic *Bhagavad Gita*.³

The *Dao De Jing*'s title serves as a good springboard to make some general observations about early Chinese thought. Virtually all early schools of Chinese thought accepted *dao* and *de* as basic components of their reasoning. Their interpretations of the terms differed greatly, however. For some, *dao* (literally, "the Way") was a universal, cosmic principle, like *Brahman* in the Indian tradition. For others, *dao* was more like a method or technique, rather mundane in comparison with the former approach. The differences in understanding *de* were equally great. For those like the Taoists, who looked upon *dao* as universal, cosmic principle, *de* was its manifestation in the individual ("power" is one popular translation; I might prefer "charisma"), whereas for the Confucians, *de* was an ethical concept very close to English "virtue." Unfortunately, people have a tendency to translate *de* as "virtue" in all cases, and sometimes it is wholly inappropriate, as when we talk of "inferior *de*" or "evil *de*." The source of our word "virtue," Latin *virtus*, would do as a general translation for *de*, since it means "manliness," "inner strength of character," and that is very close to what the old Chinese word *de* meant.

The Confucians and the Taoists were at odds on almost every issue about how human beings should relate to each other in society. The Confucians stressed *li* ("civility, etiquette, ritual"), *ren* ("humaneness, benevolence"), and *yi* ("justice, righteousness"), among other related, ethical concepts. The Taoists, in contrast, believed either that these concepts were ineffectual or that they actually jinxed human relationships. They would permit people to behave more naturally, freed of artificial norms and constraints. But the Taoist and Confucian outlooks were by no means the only two positions on the spectrum of early Chinese thought. Among numerous other schools were the Mohists (followers of Mo Zi [Master Mo]), who displayed great affinity with Christianity in emphasizing the need for universal love; the egoists, or epicureans/hedonists, who advocated self-interest and personal enjoyment above all; the technicians, who believed that skillful methods were all that was necessary to run a smoothly functioning government, and perforce, society; and the Legalists, who insisted that the only way to ensure a peaceful, orderly society was through the rigorous, inflexible application of law. In the end, the Legalists won out, as might well be expected, considering the chaotic situation that had to be overcome. It was the short-lived (221-206 BCE), legalistic Qin Dynasty that established the fundamental bureaucratic institutions by means of which China was governed for the next 2,200 years--when it was governed at all, that is, since there was a succession of many dynasties and almost constant contestation for power, often erupting into rebellions, revolutions, and full-scale war.

Despite its brevity, the Qin Dynasty made some remarkable contributions. The tomb of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty, outside the city of Xi'an in Shaanxi Province, provides a sense of his overwhelming power. Thousands of life-size terra cotta warriors protect him in death. He was the Mussolini of ancient

China, as it were. He made the trains run on time. He unified axle widths, weights and measures, and the writing system, and even tried to shape thought into a single system. In the end, his totalitarianism was too harsh, and the Qin Dynasty was soon replaced by the Han Dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), which operated under a mixed Confucian-Legalist-Taoist system of thought but steadfastly maintained the basic bureaucratic structures established by the Qin. Han gradually ran out of steam, experiencing a brief interregnum in the middle when a renegade named Wang Mang (r. 9-23 CE) tried to institute radical policies. Still today, the majority of the Chinese people honor the Han Dynasty by calling themselves *Hanren* ("Han people") or *Han minzu* ("Han nationality") and their language *Hanyu* ("Han language"). (The Cantonese speak a language that is very different from the modern standard form of *Hanyu* that is normally called Mandarin, and they prefer to call themselves *Tangren*--i.e., "people of the Tang," 618-907).

By the first century CE, monumental transformations began to occur in the intellectual and religious landscape of China. This was when Buddhism arrived via three routes: Central Asia (the Silk Road), the southwest (Assam, Yunnan, Sichuan), and the ocean (via Southeast Asia). The impingement of Buddhism was not just a matter of gaining a new (foreign) religion. Since Buddhism came with a lot of cultural baggage and social implications, its influences in many areas of life were enormous: language (some 35,000 new vocabulary items, more attention to grammar and phonology, polysyllabicization of words), literature (prosimetric [alternating between prose and verse] form, fiction, belles lettres, prosody, literary criticism), social relationships (life outside of the family unit, democratic impulses), economy (monastery holdings, mills, checks), politics (loyalty to the Buddha, not the emperor), etc. It is amazing that Buddhism could take root and thrive in China, so alien was it from indigenous Chinese values and practices. This is not to say that Buddhism had an easy time of it in China. Indeed, it encountered tremendous opposition from Chinese intellectuals, and from time to time was even persecuted by the government. Ultimately, however, it became an essential part of the cultural landscape of China, stimulating the growth of Taoism as an institutionalized religion rather than simply a system of thought, and serving as the faith of hundreds of millions of devotees.

China is characterized by a multiplicity of intellectual approaches and outlooks and by a wide range of cultural styles and preferences. So, what then is China? Chinese history has witnessed a seemingly endless succession of dynasties and rulers, many of whom were wholly or partially non-Sinitic (e.g., Manchus, Mongols, Turks, etc.). What persisted throughout was a mode of governing and being governed--and that includes social organization--that was established more than 2,000 years ago. This mode was premised chiefly upon a combination of Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, with a significant, subsequent overlay of Buddhism. The coming decades will tell whether this mode of governing and being governed is compatible with democracy, especially now that it has been reinforced by Marxism. In particular, the immediate future, the run-up to and aftermath of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, are certain to prove eventful (if not tumultuous) for China and its people.

³ See the Afterword and Appendix to my 1990 translation of the *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (Bantam Books).