

The Classical Chinese Philosophical Background

Classical Chinese philosophy emerges with the beginning of the breakdown of traditional Zhou dynasty institutions, around the seventh century B.C.E. The Zhou ruling clan had overthrown the ruling Shang dynasty by force, sometime toward the end of the twelfth century B.C.E., justifying its seizure and retention of power by means of a religious belief in “the mandate of Heaven.” This belief, in the version that comes down to us in later sources (reflecting to some extent the views of their Ruist—“Confucian”—editors), postulated a semianthropomorphic Heaven or supreme God with a strong interest in human virtue, closely related to—indeed perhaps composed of, but at least closely attended by—those ancestors of the clan who were renowned for their virtue. However, Heaven’s mandate was said to be “inconstant” and played no invariable favorites: the bestowal of power on a particular clan depended entirely on its continued practice of virtue. This practice of virtue was largely defined by a system of clan organization known as ritual propriety (禮 *li*), which involved both ritual procedures for serving the ancestors and practical customs for maintaining both a hierarchical relation among members of the clan and at the same time a sense of unity among them based on fellow-feeling, along with fair treatment for the subjects of the realm. The hierarchical aspect focused on the respecting of and deferral to elders within the clan, who presided over the ancestral sacrifices and a set of normative customs allotting privileges, material and otherwise, to them according to their rank in this hierarchy. The measures for maintaining fellow-feeling within the clan, on the other hand, included the collective possession of property among members, obligatory mutual mourning rituals when any member of the clan died, collective festival meals and so on. The two prerequisites of effective rule—internal order within the clan’s chain of command on the one hand, and its

unity of purpose and sense of identity—were presumably to be maintained by means of these measures, which pertained only to the ruling class. The common people, who tilled the fields and produced the material sustenance for the ruling class, on the other hand, were governed by penal law (刑 *xing*). Interestingly, then, Heaven punished and rewarded the ruling clan (rewarding virtue with political power), and the ruling clans punished and rewarded the common people, but in between, the ruling clans maintained order among themselves with the customary and persuasive power of “ritual” and without recourse to direct or explicit punitive strictures.

These two classes remained separate and unbridgeable within early Zhou society. However, with the increased productive power brought in the wake of new agricultural techniques, the growth of the population, and the development of trade and private wealth, this strict division between the classes, with their two very different forms of social organization, began to fall apart. Commoners began to receive education in aristocratic lore and ritual, and to take part in governing, while aristocratic families fell from power. One such son of a fallen clan, known to us as Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), looking back nostalgically to the idealized world of the Zhou golden age, which he viewed as free from the war, usurpation, and chaos that characterized his own time, took to the private education of commoners, openly advocating their study and practice of *li*, and therewith their right to participate in government. The intermixture of the classes opened two alternatives: the universalization of the penal law formerly reserved for commoners, or the universalization of the system of ritual affection, unity, and hierarchy, enforced by custom and persuasion rather than punishment, formerly reserved for the ruling clans. Confucius opted for the latter alternative, making education in the ritual mode of organization open to all interested parties, and with it the qualification to join the ruling class. His ideal called for a maintenance of the hierarchical structure of the clans, with the divisions of rank and privilege that went with it, but began to conceive this as a hierarchy with fixed ranks that could be filled by persons of any class origin. The occupancy of any given rank in this fixed hierarchy, in other words, was to be determined not—or at least not exclusively—by blood, but by merit, conceived mainly as mastery of the ritual and the underlying principle that, in his view, characterized it, which he called *ren*, sometimes translated as “human-heartedness” or “benevolence.” For the hierarchy of the ruling clans was based on a putatively “natural” relation—the affection and hierarchy existing between the senior and junior members of the same family. As such it combined both a sense of fellow-feeling and solidarity with a necessary division of roles, priority, and privilege. The ruling clans were originally known as *ren* (人), persons, while the commoners were generally known as *min* (民), the masses. The adjectival form of the noun *ren*, also pronounced *ren* (仁), was initially a descriptive term for the accomplished comportment appropriate to a member of the ruling class, one who had mastered and internalized the ritual system as opposed to the penal, who behaved “nobly,” as a noble should, motivated by his fellow-

feeling with his clanmates to respect the hierarchical roles that embodied their relations with one another. Confucius adopted this term as the essence of his teaching and of the ritual system he hoped to promote, thereby also expanding its meaning. Just as the Buddha adopted terms like “Brahman” and “Aryan” in India, altering their meaning from “a member of the nobility or priesthood” to “noble or holy” in the broad sense, Confucius took *ren* and made it a universal virtue.² It remains, in his teaching, closely linked with the prime exemplar of a relation both natural and spontaneous and also necessarily hierarchical, the obedient respect and affection putatively felt by a child for his parents. Hence in the Confucian teaching, filiality is said to be the root of *ren* as a sense of fellow-feeling combined with respect for proper places and divisions, and this was seen as the real essence of ritual.

Of course, a system that works in a limited local context necessarily encounters new problems, and indeed changes in nature, when it is expanded into a new context or universalized, and the ritual ideal of Confucius was no exception. Its universalization quickly met with opposition. The second private school of thought in ancient China, the Mohists, advocated the opposite approach, discarding both the affective and the hierarchical aspect of the ritual system, and instead extending the principle of punishment as a means of social control to all classes. As noted, this was also how Heaven was thought to deal with the ruling clans, and Mohist teaching intensifies the anthropomorphic and punitive conception of God just as Ruist teaching increasingly diminishes it (it still lingers ambiguously in the thought of Confucius and Mencius, but is no longer a focus of primary interest). The Mohists reject ritual as a wasteful holdover from the past, abandoning both the noncoercive and naturally hierarchical nature of the ritual system. In place of *ren*, which the Ruists saw as rooted in both spontaneous affection and spontaneous hierarchy, the Mohists advocated “universal love” of all equally, as rooted in a system of command (in a sense even more rigidly hierarchical), threat of punishment, and centralized surveillance, prized for its putative utility in generating and distributing material goods rather than its relation to anything spontaneous in human inclinations.

Later Ruism splits sharply on the question of the relation between spontaneity and morality. Mencius (371?–289?), focusing on the spontaneity of fellow-feeling, partially in response to proto-Taoist suggestions that the spontaneous of man was morally neutral (to be discussed momentarily), holds that human nature is “good” in the sense of having spontaneous sprouts of inclination that can, if unobstructed and properly nourished, be developed into the full-fledged Ruist virtues; the positive system of ritual is in this case merely a concrete exfoliation of what is natural to man. The inability to stand the suffering of others is the sprout of (a more narrowly conceived) Benevolence; shame and dislike for certain things is the sprout of Righteousness; yielding and deference are the sprout of Ritual; and approval and disapproval are the sprout of Wisdom. Xunzi (298?–238?), on the other hand, focusing on the ritual system

as a hierarchical way of distributing roles, privileges, and goods so that excessive desire and strife are avoided, held that human nature is evil in the sense of chaotic, and that, although it may possess these inclinations among others, it cannot develop morally unless the ritual system is learned and imposed from without. Ritual for Xunzi no longer has anything to do with customary and persuasive order as opposed to a social order imposed by means of threat and punishment; he adopts the punitive system of the Mohists and grafts it onto the hierarchical distribution of ranks derived from the ritual system.

It is to be noted that both the Mohist and Ruist school focus quite centrally on social and ethical matters. Unlike the first wave of ancient Greek thinking, this tradition was initially almost completely preoccupied with cultural, political and ethical matters; the *Analects* of Confucius has nothing at all to say about the natural world, and very little to say about the metaphysical realm of gods and spirits, even, arguably, as a metaphysical justification for the ethical practices it hopes to promote—it touches “nature” only in its attention to the spontaneous affection and inclinations of human family members and social groups. Mohist texts, while having more to say about the positive characteristics of the ruling deity, are clearly also ultimately concerned mainly with human ethics and social order.

In sharp contrast to this, at least apparently, is the school that comes to be known as Taoism. The earliest known stratum of the *Laozi* text (as found for example in the Guodian discoveries³), and certain other early sources (e.g., the “Neiye” [“Internal Work”] and “Xinshu” [“Heart/Mind Craft”] chapters of the *Guanzi*), present an interest in cultivation of the person to make one fit to be a ruler; not the explicit study and practice of ritual, in this case, but a quieting of certain interferences, preconceptions, and desires that are, at this point, viewed as obstacles to the development of the true virtues. At this stage, this cultivation and ataraxy are viewed not only as consistent with the ethical virtues advocated by other schools, but indeed as somehow promoting their flourishing. By the time the *Laozi* text takes its current shape, however, this situation has changed dramatically.

In the interim, the shadowy figure of Yang Zhu (c. 350 B.C.E.) had emerged. Yang Zhu is depicted in Ruist texts as a straw man advocating exclusive concern for self and indifference to social and political matters, an archegoist “who would not sacrifice a single hair on his body to *benefit* the whole world,” but his doctrine was more likely that one should not be willing to trade even a hair of one’s body even if one were to *gain possession* of the empire by doing it.⁴ This is a prioritizing of the person, especially the spontaneous, precultural body, as more important than the objects of desire pertaining to the social or ritual network, and a definition of true benefit as belonging to the care and cultivation of the former, not the latter. Yang Zhu’s “egotism” is a way to preserve and maintain one’s bodily existence and health—staying out of dangers caused by ambitions for glory and power, or wearing oneself out in pursuing material gain. The value relation between culture and nature of the Mohist and Xunzian

positions is powerfully reversed here, and a decisive step has also been taken away from the notion of their contiguity and consistency as held by Confucius, Mencius, and the “proto-Taoist” texts. The final version of the *Laozi* text carries this line of thought a step further. We now find a across-the-boards rejection of all moral cultivation, a sharpening of the previous reversal of priorities into a virulent critique of all value preconceptions, all deliberate and purposive moral action or cultivation. Benevolence, righteousness, ritual, learning—the primary Ruist virtues—are not only useless, they are actually harmful. Indeed, the received text includes a primitivist and naturalist strain that rejects not only the present forms of society, as the other schools did as well, but also, to some extent, centralized political organization in general, advocating rather a small village society where, just as in the aristocratic clan society of the early Zhou, order was maintained without recourse to punitive laws or preestablished moral strictures, and indeed in this case, in contrast to the aristocratic *li*, free of any well-defined hierarchy, any complex system of obligations and responsibilities, or any extensive knowledge about the other parts of the realm, as was required for members of the ruling class. The best ruler, if there must be one, is one who interferes the least with this spontaneous ordering.

Similarly, the punitive Heaven who rewards virtue is no longer needed; instead, the world as a whole is ordered by the Tao, which does nothing and yet leaves nothing undone, has no deliberate plans or morality, and yet by means of its noninterference allows things to order themselves. It is here that “metaphysical” thinking in China finally begins. The term Tao (“Way”) is initially used by both the Ruists and Mohists to denote their way of doing things, a guiding discourse prescribing a set of practices (e.g., the system of traditional ritual). When these practices are mastered and internalized, one has “attained the Way” in question, and this “attainment” (*de*) is what is known as “virtue” (*de*). The term “Tao” is cognate with the term for “to lead or guide,” and can also mean “to speak.” Hence its prescriptive force is particularly pronounced. It is perhaps best translated in this period as “guiding discourse.” The present *Laozi* text begins with the well-known paradox usually translated as something like, “The Way that can be spoken of is not the Eternal Way,” but in the context of early Chinese thought its original sense is probably something closer to “Guiding ways can be taken as guides, but they are then [no longer] constant [or reliable] guides.”⁵⁵ Here we have the prescriptive sense of the term pushed to its extreme and thus stood on its head and annulled. This means that the esteeming and commitment to a particular value perspective is precisely what undermines the attainment of the desired value. The idea rests on a wholesale critique of knowledge and valuation, which are seen as inextricably related. For the desired value, in the view developed in this text, is actually part of a whole, and depends also on the rejected antivalue parts of that whole for its existence. If one commits to a value and dedicates oneself to eliminating the conflicting antivalue, one is destroying the roots for the value in question.

The justification for this view is both epistemological and metaphysical.

The text relates valuation to inherently evaluative social and linguistic practices, which have a determining effect on what human consciousness focuses its attention on. Once we have words contrasting the fragrance of the flower, for example, with the stench of the fertilizer, we “look for” the flower and ignore the fertilizer. Failing to see the interdependence of the two, we commit ourselves to the “good”—we try to attain the fragrance without the stench, severing the relation, thereby killing the flower. In this connection, the received *Laozi* text can be read as distinguishing between two forms of desire, those pertaining to the “stomach” and those pertaining to the “eye.” The former, “stomach” desires, do not depend on a particular conscious image, are not lured forward by deliberate purpose—they arise spontaneously, have no explicit object, and have a natural level of satisfaction: when the stomach is filled, one is no longer hungry for a while (or, in the more vivid imagery of the text, the infant male may have an erection in spite of his ignorance of sexual intercourse, his lack of any mental image of it). A natural periodic cyclicity is implied.

The latter, “eye” desires, are based on culturally informed systems of valuation—the ritual system and moral practices of society, on the one hand, and material gain, fame, and power on the other hand. These present a particular image of what is desirable to consciousness, and have no built-in level of satiation; indeed, they lead to ceaseless, unbalanced desire for more and more of the valued thing, more and more pure versions of it, which in fact make the satisfaction of its wholesome, stomach equivalent or substratum (with its necessary association with and periodic collapse into its opposite) impossible. The text notes that all valued things emerge out of nonvalued things, and in general what we regard as “Being” (literally, “having,” as opposed to “not-having”) comes out of Nothing (not-having—also, initially, primarily value terms here). When still part of the spontaneous stomach form of the life process, the two extremes tend to have a cyclical existence, serve as roots for each other, so that when one reaches its extreme, it dissipates and is succeeded by the other. The stability of both the value and the nonvalue depend on maintaining the intrinsic relation between them. In general, “the Tao” is a marker within the divided terms of discourse that points to the spontaneous, nonevaluative side of things, the neglected and negatively valued, from which the valued and the evaluative emerge, and this Tao does indeed take on a metaphysical dimension here. It is: 1) the unseen and unseeable source and end-point of all concrete existences; 2) their course in the sense of this tendency to “return” in a bell-shaped pattern; and 3) the stuff of which they consist in the sense that the raw material of a utensil points to both what is left over when the utensil has been chipped away (the value, that is, from the unhewn, undifferentiated prevalued stated), and also the whole of that unvalued, unhewn stuff itself.

The Tao is the “unhewn” in the sense of both “prevalued” and “disvalued.” The disvalued is, as it were, the direct disclosure of the prevailed, the state prior to the evaluative split, or cut. The Tao, then, by directing attention to the neglected disvalued side of any value pair, simultaneously discloses the relation

between the two sides, and the whole relationship, and their common grounding in the unnamable prevalued substratum of both. It is a word for both one part of the whole (the neglected, disvalued background) and also, thereby, for the entire whole (the prevalued totality of the relationship, the stuff of which both halves are composed, the regularity of reversion between the two). In addition, the Tao retains its prescriptive sense, now in a somewhat unresolved paradoxical sense: it is the course to be followed in handling the course of things. The text as we have it now, read as a whole, seems to recommend a freedom from the desire and knowledge of explicit values as a means by which, paradoxically, to attain them spontaneously in their true, nonpurposive, stomach forms, maintaining the relation of both sides of the value contrast by exalting the prevalued/disvalued side of each apparent value dichotomy.

The *Zhuangzi* was traditionally regarded as the work of Zhuang Zhou (fourth century B.C.E.), but is now regarded as the work of many hands, reflecting many distinguishable strains of early Taoist thinking.⁶ The part of the text thought to come from Zhuang Zhou himself (the “Inner Chapters,” or the first seven of the thirty-three chapters of the present version) takes the next logical step from the earlier Taoist preoccupation with the spontaneous bodily life over purposive cultural aims to a critique of the fixed valuation of even the concept of “life” itself, as part of the general critique of valuation and conceptualization in general. This is achieved by means of an intricate epistemological and linguistic agnosticism and perspectivism, rooted in insights into the indexical nature of evaluative knowledge and language, their dependence on perspective, and the unceasing transformation of these perspectives. All knowledge depends on a “this” as opposed to a “that,” the defining of a system of coordinates. These terms are obviously indexical, i.e., their denotation changes depending on what one is pointing to when they are uttered. But this defining of coordinates necessarily involves a value orientation that is equally indexical. Indeed, in ancient Chinese, one of most common words for “this” also “right”, means a fact that Zhuang Zhou exploits extensively in his exposition of this point. Valuations depend on perspective, and perspective is constantly changing. This constant change of perspective is what is truly spontaneous, and its source is unknowable, since all knowledge is posterior to and conditioned by it. But this unknowable emergence of differing perspectives is itself regarded (in a now admittedly and unavoidably biased and temporary evaluative and cognitive perspective) as the Tao, that is, as the source, course, and stuff of all experience. This is embodied in a state of “forgetting,” “mind-fasting,” freedom from a fixed perspective or identity or sense of self, and from any predetermined evaluative standard, allowing one to go along with all the varying value perspectives that emerge from it without cease. Zhuang Zhou calls this state the “pivot of Taos,” “traveling two roads at once,” “the obvious” (*ming*), or “the torch of chaos and doubt.” The sage, says Zhuang Zhou, uses his mind like a mirror, accepting and reflecting everything (including every value perspective that might arise), but storing nothing. He gives the example of a monkey trainer who offered his monkeys

three chestnuts in the morning and two in the evening. When the monkeys objected, he reversed the distribution, and they were all delighted, although their total ration remained unchanged. The point is, first of all, that whatever happens, however things are arranged, it is all equally good; we are in the same total world, all is one, all things proceed from the same source, and thus are equally valued, however arranged. Zhuang Zhou describes this as “hiding the world in the world.” But this point falls victim to the perspectivism of its own premises, and so Zhuang Zhou undermines any substantiality to this “oneness.” The ultimate point, rather, is that the emerging of each situation from an unknown source, and establishing itself as the perspective-defining “this,” is the real oneness here, for it is this that is common to all things. The monkeys have their own value perspective, their own “this/that.” The trainer does not inquire into the reasons for it—that would be futile, since he would be gaining knowledge only from his own perspective—or try to change it. He goes along with it, even while maintaining his own aloofness from it; he neither adopts nor rejects their perspective, simply follows along with it as another in a long chain of new perspectives that are always arising, and between which no single objective hierarchy can be discerned. Nor, indeed, does he try to convince them of the folly of their commitment to this one arbitrary perspective, so that they can learn to be free of it like him. He “travels two roads at once,” guided by “the obvious” (the ever changing conflicting perspectives), the “torch of chaos and doubt.”

Zhuang Zhou addresses the paradox of his own perspective first by redefining knowledge as the state of mind of the sage, after having dismissed the possibility of reliable objective knowledge (“there is ‘true knowledge’ only when there is a ‘true person’”). He goes on to suggest in various ways how this stand-in for knowledge (this state of mind that is characterized by the following-along with each emergent perspective, this chaos and doubt, this nonknowledge) does all the jobs that knowledge was supposed to do, to the extent that they are possible at all, but better. For example, it allows one maximum success, in terms of any given value perspective that happens to be operative, in human relations, politics, artisanship, the old Taoist ideal of cultivation of bodily life, in governing things, handling things, communing with things, and so on.⁷ It is notable that the figure of Confucius plays a humorously ironic role in this text, sometimes standing for the arch morality—and knowledge-monger, sometimes as a spokesman for Zhuang Zhou’s own ideas. This ambivalence toward the relation between Taoism and Ruism (perhaps relatable to the two-sided nature of Confucius’s teaching itself, i.e., its equal stress on spontaneous affection and on social hierarchy, which it views as extensions of one another) is another point that will be of great importance to Guo Xiang’s project. The Tao and the spontaneity that is here called Heaven (the incomprehensible process of ever emergent perspectives) are “crossed out” by Zhuang Zhou’s agnosticism, even as he praises them: even “Heaven” versus “man” is another “this/that,” an indexical identification based on a perspective that has emerged from somewhere

unknowable. Zhuang Zhou says, therefore, “How do I know that what I call Heaven is not really man, and vice versa,” and it is this “how do I know?” that is the real “Tao” to which he wants to revert, the torch of chaos and doubt, the constantly shifting perspectives of the obvious. There is no need to unify these appearances into a single consistent system or attach them to an overarching single Tao in a positive sense. The sage’s one is one, and his not-one is also one, says Zhuang Zhou: whether one sees things as one or as not-one, each is just an emergent “this,” coming forth from an unknowable nowhere, and affirming itself, and this self-affirming emergence is as much of a real “one” as he will give us. As we shall see, this idea is picked up and thought through to great effect by Guo Xiang.

The later sections of the present *Zhuangzi* text develop these ideas and sometimes diverge from them. The radicalism of Zhuang Zhou’s relativistic perspectivism is effaced, sometimes in favor a fixed picture of the distinction between benefit and harm, or of the division between the natural and the artificial—the standard fault lines of older Taoism. The text includes both critiques of Ruist values and praises of them, syncretic systems and extremist primitivisms, anarchism and conservatism, “rationalizing” and “irrationalizing” tendencies, all of which stand side by side in the text as a whole as it currently exists. For example, in the chapter “Autumn Floods” (“Qiushui”), characterized by Graham as a “rationalizing” chapter, we find a systematic expansion of the relativism of the Zhuang Zhou writings. Nothing is big or small or good or bad in itself, in this exposition; we call something big when it is bigger than something else, and thus “big” is a predicate that can apply to anything at all, and does not pertain to the thing itself. The same goes for all predicates, even for “existence and non-existence.” Similarly, each thing affirms itself and negates all others, meets its own standard and fails to live up to the standards embodied in other things—an idea derived from the “this/right” conflation in the Zhuang Zhou writings and that was again to bear great fruit in the Guo Xiang commentary. But at the end of this discussion in the “Autumn Floods” version, we are told that these considerations give some real knowledge about how things are (i.e., all things are free of intrinsic characteristics, susceptible to relative valuations and attributions, etc.), and that this *knowledge* aids a person in living well in the world, in understanding what is truly harmful and beneficial. This is a step back from the Zhuang Zhou writings, a subtle shift that nonetheless alters the significance of this whole line of thought significantly. The text then, in direct contradiction to Zhuang Zhou, sets up a fixed division between the “human” and the “heavenly” (or spontaneous), i.e., the artificial and the natural, as if these could be known in a way that was not purely perspective-dependent. A horse has four feet—that is the natural, the spontaneous, the heavenly. A horse has a saddle on its back and a bit in its mouth—that is the human, the artificial. Where Zhuang Zhou had said, “How do I know that what I really call heaven is not man, and vice versa?” the author of this chapter tells us once and for all what is spontaneous and what not. Where Zhuang Zhou had, after

suggesting that the human not be allowed to interfere with or try to help along the spontaneous, goes on to describe a state where “neither heaven nor man wins out over the other” (where, indeed, nothing wins out over anything else once and for all), this text stops at the first step without taking the second. This has practical consequences as well. Another set of texts collected in the current *Zhuangzi*, characterized by Graham as the “primitivist” chapters, adopt a similar definition of the spontaneous and the artificial, buttressed somewhat by some of the anticivilization riffs in the *Laozi*, considering all pursuit of objects of conscious knowledge or valuation as disruptions of man’s original spontaneous nature. This applies equally to material gain and to morality, both of which are “external” to man’s true nature. Here the division between “inner” and “outer,” and between “natural” and “artificial,” is regarded as knowable and fixed. Zhuang Zhou had suggested that by following along with the shifting perspectives, the torch of chaos and doubt, one could “do good without getting famous, do evil without getting punished.” By this he meant, it seems, that one might find oneself doing what is defined as good or evil according to some perspective at any given time, but that one would not be committed to any single course of action to the extent that would bring one to the extremes of either fame for goodness or punishment for evil in any case, either of which would require cumulative, extended, consistent behavior according to a particular enduring value perspective. The author of the “primitivist” chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, tells us that he would be ashamed to commit either good or evil, understood here in the fixed sense of benevolence and righteousness on the one hand and theivery and self-indulgence on the other; both disturb his true, spontaneous nature, identified with the Tao as a metaphysical absolute. From these examples we can see some of the ambiguities involved in the Zhuangzian line of thought, and the variety of conclusions to which it can lead when subtle shifts are made in its premises.

The thought of Guo Xiang is available to us entirely in the form of a commentary on this text, the *Zhuangzi*. Between the composition of the text and its commentary, however, both the philosophical and the sociopolitical scene had changed considerably. China had been reunified under a Legalist regime in the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.E). Legalism, extending the Mohist/Xunzian attitude toward social order, dispenses with ritual altogether, opting instead for a strict system of punishment and reward, and also dismisses the value of education for the people and the graduated ranks of the ritual system. Now punitive law applies to all equally, with the sole exception of the ruler.

After the fall of the Qin, the Han dynasty was founded, initially adopting a version of Taoist political thought, and then a modified version of Ruism. This new Han Ruism extended the application of Ruist ideals to the world of nature that had begun in the commentaries to the *Book of Changes*, composed toward the end of the pre-Qin period. This was originally a text for prognostication, and it is noteworthy that it comes to play such a central role in later

Chinese intellectual history. The earliest stratum of Chinese history shows no evidence of a founding creation myth, but does show extensive interest in prognostication. Ancient mythology generally consists of stories accounting for the origin of the world as a whole, of mankind, and of the overall human condition. In many ancient cultures, when the veracity or moral wholesomeness of the old myths became susceptible to doubt, these myths were either rejected as false (as in Plato, for example) or efforts were made to reinterpret them in terms as allegorical representations of newer philosophical and moral ideas (Philo and the Christian Fathers treat the Old Testament this way, and the Neo-Platonists do the same for Greek myth). In the Chinese case, these rationalizing energies were devoted not to reinterpreting myth, but to reinterpreting the ancient art of prognostication. We may detect here an interest in particular situations, the ways they emerge and transform, and the optimal human responses to them, rather than objective knowledge about a once-and-for-all “way things are,” and this interest in ever new encountered situations as a form of “ultimate concern” is something we will find both in the Guo Xiang text, and in much of later Chinese thought. In the commentaries to the *Book of Changes*, man was depicted as a microcosm of natural forces, above all the Yin and the Yang, the receptive and the creative (the dark and the light, the female and the male, the completing and the initiating forces), which combined in various ways to form certain prototypical situations, each of which called for a particular responses from man by which it could be brought to its ideal completion, i.e., could fully manifest the value implicit within it. This value was both moral and utilitarian. The *Book of Changes* commentaries look upon the ceaseless production of life, or of change as such, the unending generation of new situations and beings, as an ultimate good. This process is a function of the interaction of the forces of Yin and Yang, and man’s moral activity as both rooted in and aimed toward the participation in this process of life. Here the naturalness and spontaneity of Ruism morality—including both “benevolence” and the ritual system—is once again affirmed, but no longer on the basis of human inclinations themselves, but rather in terms of the root and implication of these tendencies within the natural world as a whole; man is a microcosm of the universal process of life. The Han version takes this idea and runs with it in a rather literal-minded manner. Now the particular social and institutional forms presiding in the Han empire are read in toto as direct reflections of the cosmic order, rationalized as built into nature. Heaven recovers some of the anthropomorphic qualities it had lost in pre-Qin Ruist thought here, or at least is said to respond very directly to human improprieties with catastrophic consequences (natural disasters and anomalies), although these are now pictured as built into a universal system of natural forces that includes moral responsiveness.