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1

Why Confucianism? Which Confucianism?

Has History Ended? Message from a Rising China

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama famously announced that we are at the end of history because liberal democracy is the “final form of human government,” and the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution” (1992, xi)—that is, the development of human political history ends with the best possible regime, a goal every state should strive for. More than twenty-seven years after this hopeful declaration, liberal democracies seem to be losing, not winning, ground. One important cause for this appearance is the rise of China and the (apparent and relative) fall of the “West” (Japan included), and the fact that China seems to have reached this position by not following the Western models. Domestically, the Chinese regime is not liberal democratic. In the area of international relations, China adopts the idea of absolute sovereignty and follows the nation-state model, which is in conflict with the Western ideal that human rights override sovereignty.

One may argue that China cannot continue to rise by doing what it has been doing, and it should eventually follow the liberal democratic models. But as mentioned, Western models have encountered their own problems. Domestically, newly democratized countries are often plagued with ethnic violence, and developed liberal democracies also fail to face up to many challenges, such as the recent financial crisis, the growing inequality that has something to do with globalization, and advancements in technologies, and, as a result, the rise of populism from both the Left and the Right. The election of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth American president is only the most recent and the most striking example *so far*. Internationally, it is ironic that the sovereign-state and nation-state models that China so firmly embraces also come from the West. But the nation-state model is a root cause of the ethnical conflicts in China and in many other countries. Internationally, it has caused

two world wars, which were in fact started by Western nation-states and a Westernized Japan. If China adopted this model, the logical conclusion would be that it would follow the path of Germany and Japan before and during the two world wars, because rising nation-states are destined to demand more from the rest of the world and thus to challenge the existing world order with any means necessary. It is no wonder that the rest of the world is worried about the rise of China, in spite of the fact that the Chinese government keeps asserting that the rise of China is peaceful, and the Chinese government that upholds the nation-state model has itself to blame for this worry.

In response, there are cosmopolitan attempts to transcend nation-states, but they, too, are increasingly questioned. A more aggressive form of the cosmopolitan attempt is guided by the idea that human rights override sovereignty, and it leads Western countries to intervene with some human rights violations and crude oppressions and mass killings. But recent interventions, such as with Iraq and Libya, seem to create new and even more miseries than they are intended to eliminate. Moreover, to make things right is so demanding on Western countries that oftentimes they can only pay lip service to the principle that human rights override sovereignty, which makes the rest of the world suspect that their true intention is nothing but a disguised pursuit of their national interests, and thus leads to skepticism and cynicism.

A less aggressive form of cosmopolitanism, such as the formation of the European Union and the creation of a world market, doesn't seem to do too well either, for it leads to serious domestic problems, such as the aforementioned rising economic inequality and the apparently incurable political instability that is caused by the failure to assimilate a large group of people with different cultures and religions. Examples are abundant: the trouble of maintaining the European Union because of the European sovereign debt crisis (PIIGS); in France, the problem with a large and economically depressed minority that is nevertheless culturally distinct and almost impossible to assimilate; the refugee crisis both within a state and among European states; Brexit; and again, the election of Trump, who partly ran on an isolationist and mercantilist ground.

However, the failure of present liberal democratic models doesn't mean the success of the "China models," if there are such models to begin with.¹ On the

1. Those who are selling China models should think about the curious fate of Erza Vogel's *Japan as Number 1: Lessons for America* (1979), popular during the height of Japan's apparently unstoppable rise to economic dominance. But I doubt that anyone would take this book seriously anymore, other than for the sake of looking for clues of Japan's three-decades-long stagnation. Vogel himself is now known in China for his recent biography of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese politician who kick-started China's apparently unstoppable rise to economic dominance.

domestic front, politically, the violation of rights and the lack of the rule of law in China are disturbing, to say the least. Economically, many Chinese politicians and scholars are pushing the Chinese economy to become more “liberal” and market-oriented, that is, more “Western,” rather than holding on to some “China models.” Internationally, a nationalist China will pose a threat to the rest of the world as well as to itself. Therefore, it seems that all the contemporary political models and discourses are not very adequate in dealing with the pressing political problems today, and to address these problems, we should reject the myth that history has already “ended,” recognize the problems with present models, and explore new political possibilities and models with an open mind.

Put another way, if there were no crises in liberal democratic models, and if China had not been so successful in the past few decades, few would bother to read anything related to China, this book included, even if it were intrinsically valuable. But the Chinese regime in the real world has its own problems. Now that there is more interest in things related to China, maybe a philosopher like me should take a “free ride” with the rise of China and attempt to offer a message that the rise of China should offer, instead of what it does offer, or what is offered by various China commentators.

In this book, then, I try to show the problems with some of the existing political models. But instead of proposing China models that are based on the present Chinese regime and politics, I show a different kind of China model that may have contributed to the stellar performance of China, not so much in the past few decades but in the past two thousand years or more. More importantly, I show that the political models that are based on early Confucian ideas may, in theory, better address various political problems of today than other existing models. Of course, this doesn’t mean that these Confucian models can address all the pressing political problems; rather, it is just that they can handle some of these problems better than other models. The ideal regime, then, would be a mixture of these Confucian models and some other political models. But for this mixture to be possible, it needs to be shown that the Confucian models can be compatible with these other models. If this mixture is possible, and if this ideal regime would indeed be better at addressing the pressing problems of today’s politics, it would be a blessing for both China and the rest of the world.

Which Confucianism?

Confucianism is a long tradition, a big tent, under which many diverse thinkers and ideas fall. From Confucius on, the Confucian tradition has been updated, revised, and even revolutionized itself, oftentimes under the banner of going back to the true Confucian tradition. The defender of “true”

Confucianism is often nothing but the defender of *his/her* Confucianism, which, in the eye of other Confucian thinkers, is nothing but heresy. It is ridiculous, or at least presumptuous, to say “we Confucians think this or that.” “Confucianism” is a term that has resulted from family resemblance—we need to remember that over generations, members belonging to the same family tree can look quite different! I am not saying that we can’t pinpoint certain shared ideas among a group of Confucian thinkers, but it is quite challenging to define and defend these characteristics. In this chapter, I take an easy way out by specifying and clarifying what kind of Confucianism I utilize in this book (which is not to deny other readings of it).

Because of the diversity among different Confucian thinkers and texts, it is prudent to focus on one or two particular thinkers or texts. At the same time, it is desirable that the thinkers and texts we use are widely considered Confucian, so that we won’t be accused of digging up some obscure and controversially “Confucian” thinker(s) for the purpose of showing the merits of Confucianism. A safe approach, then, is to go to its roots, that is, to the early founders of what was later known as “Confucianism,” for almost no one would challenge how Confucian these founders were, and their ideas set the foundation for later developments and are thus very representative of certain characteristics of Confucianism, although not necessarily in a comprehensive manner.

There is another benefit when using these early thinkers: they are closer to the root of political problems and thus tend to address these problems directly rather than through metaphysical jargons and obscure references to early predecessors. This makes their ideas accessible to those who are not experts on Chinese philosophy but are interested in political problems shared by people with different cultures, religions, or metaphysical doctrines.

Therefore, in this book, I focus on two early founding Confucian thinkers, Confucius and Mencius, or, more precisely, the Confucius in the *Analects* and the Mencius in the *Mencius*, as well as the other two of the “Four Books,” the *Zhong Yong* (中庸) (commonly translated as *The Doctrine of the Mean*) and *The Great Learning* (大学). There is little need to explain why Confucius is included in our discussions. As for Mencius, he was always considered an important early Confucian thinker, and since the Song dynasty, he has been considered second only to Confucius in terms of importance among the Confucians.² The other two texts of the Four Books are also often closely related to the ideas of Confucius and Mencius in the *Analects* and in the *Mencius*, re-

2. Another important early Confucian thinker is Xun Zi. But his status as a perfectly Confucian thinker was challenged by some Neo-Confucians, among others. More importantly, his views are often in conflict with those of Mencius’s. It is difficult to offer a coherent picture of “Confucianism” if we wish to include both Mencius and Xun Zi in this book, and wish to do

spectively, and have been considered key Confucian texts, or two of the four essential Confucian texts since the Song dynasty. In this book, then, unless otherwise specified, the term “Confucianism” and its variations mean the ideas of Confucius and Mencius (with supplemental materials from the other two texts of the Four Books), especially when their ideas can be considered to be compatible with each other, or to be possible interpretations and elaborations of each other. When there are significant differences, I will use “Confucius’s ideas” and “Mencius’s ideas” to mark the distinctions.

The Philosophical Approach to Early Confucianism

One may wonder why we should still bother to read Confucius and Mencius, two thinkers who lived more than two thousand years ago in a region and a society so different from ours, and among a people also very different from us. One may even assert that their ideas cannot be relevant to today’s world. Especially among the Chinese intellectual historians, sinologists, and sociologists of “ancient” China, ideas of these early thinkers are taken as ideologies, something like “items in a museum,” that is, like some dead objects that are not freed from the time, space, and people from which they were produced.³ I don’t deny the possibility that these ideas can be studied this way; I merely deny that they can *only* be studied this way. Obviously, we could “ask” what Confucius and Mencius would say about democracy and human rights if they were alive today, or what they would say about the idea of promoting the public (good) by suppressing (almost) everything private, as suggested in Plato’s *Republic*. This is what a philosophical reader of Plato or Kant does to these Western philosophers all the time.

The twentieth-century Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan (冯友兰; also spelled as Fung Yu-lan) introduced a distinction that nicely captures what was discussed above. He distinguished between two approaches of studying and teaching Chinese thought: a faithful reading (照着讲), that is, studying Chinese thought as it was originally; and a continuous reading (接着讲), that is, studying it against an ever-changing context and taking it as a continuing and living tradition (1999, 200). As is said in the Confucian canon the *Book of Odes*, “Zhou is an old state, but its mandate/mission is ever renewing”

justice to their sophisticated ideas at the same time. This is why Xun Zi won’t be mentioned much in this book, and this doesn’t in any way deny his significance to Confucianism.

3. Here I borrow the phrase from the sinologist Joseph Levenson, who claimed that Confucianism in the past hundred or more years has gone through the process of “museumization” (1968, 160).

(周虽旧邦其命维新).⁴ The latter approach sees Chinese thought as a living tradition, and believes ideas of thinkers such as Confucius and Mencius have lives of their own.⁵

To be clear, the distinction between the more empirical and the more philosophical approaches is a matter of degree. To insist on the purity of the empirical approach presupposes two metaphysical tenets: first, the original author has a definite and objective idea in his or her mind; and second, the empirical researchers can somehow have access to this idea.⁶ But these tenets have been seriously challenged by Ludwig Wittgenstein, W.V.O. Quine, and other philosophers. On the other hand, to insist on the purity of a philosophical approach may lead to a frivolous reading of the original author (although this reading could be interesting in its own right). As a philosopher, I have adopted the “continuous reading” or a more philosophical approach to early Confucianism, while trying to do some justice to it in its original context.

However, the philosophical approach to Chinese thought has been under attack or just ignored by many. To take Chinese thought as a philosophy—in the way I illustrated above—is to acknowledge its universal dimension and its continuing relevance. Attributing the defeat of China by Western and Westernized Japanese powers to traditional Chinese thought, many scholars of Chinese thought and history only study Chinese traditions to show what is wrong with them, or at best study them as dead objects in a museum, famously expressed by the slogan of “sort out the old things of the [Chinese] nation” (整理国故). After the communist revolution, especially under Mao Zedong, this trend of not taking Chinese thought as a living tradition was reinforced by the fact that only Marxism was taken as a living and viable philosophy. All this leads to the curious phenomenon that many empirical researchers of traditional China are simultaneously staunch antitraditionalists—Hu Shi (胡适) and Fu Sinian (傅斯年) being two representatives and influential figures in this group, whose influence still remains in today’s academia of greater China

4. 诗经·大雅·文王

5. For a similar attitude toward how to approach Confucianism in the contemporary world, see J. Chan (1999, 213).

6. This is almost like an internalized version of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*, and it is, not surprisingly, similar to what the Platonist Gottlob Frege called “sense” or “thought” (while he used “idea” to refer to the more subjective aspect of thinking) (Beaney 1997, 184–85nG; see also 154 and 156nE). That is, other people can never fully understand the idea of the original author and are thus doomed in the realm of appearances, the “cave,” while only the author himself or herself (and, miraculously, the empirical researchers) has access to the idea (or the Idea) in his or her mind.

(mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), and among scholars from other parts of the world who are educated or influenced by people from Greater China. For these antitraditionalists, Chinese thought, especially Confucianism, is something particular to the Chinese and is thus a culture, an outdated one that has to be replaced in order for China to become a “better”—that is, Western—state. All these factors have led to the exile of Chinese thought from the philosophical world.

Ironically, there are some so-called cultural conservatives—those who are sympathetic to Chinese traditions—who also insist that Confucianism is the root of Chinese culture, and thus China needs to adopt a different polity from the West’s, which, they believe, is rooted in Christianity.⁷ In spite of their assertive attitude toward things traditionally Chinese, they are actually adopting the language of those who deny their contemporary relevance.

More importantly, the alleged “fundamentalist” attitude is actually a betrayal of the Confucian “fundamentals,” or the consensus of early Confucian thinkers. That is, Confucius and Mencius never thought that they were developing ideas only for peoples from the states of Lu and Zou (Confucius’s and Mencius’s home states, respectively), but for all the *xia* (夏) people. The term *xia*, or *hua xia* (华夏), is now used in reference to the Chinese, but in early Confucian classics, it was used as the opposite of “barbarians.” That is, it means “the civilized” and is not referring to a particular race or people.⁸ Confucius even expressed the confidence of turning barbarians into *xia* if he or some Confucian gentleman moved to a barbaric place (*Analects* 9.14).

Different from the antitraditionalists who actively attack Chinese thought as a philosophy, another trend is simply to ignore the philosophical dimension of Chinese thought. This has something to do with the hubris of Western supremacy. That is, for many, if not most, Western philosophers (those who are doing Western philosophy but who are not necessarily Westerners), philosophy is Western philosophy. In Europe and North America, few mainstream philosophy departments offer courses in Chinese philosophy, and even fewer

7. See, for example, the contribution of contemporary Confucian thinker Jiang Qing (蒋庆) in Fan, Bell, and Hong (2012, part 1, 27–98). A more moderate view on this issue is that “philosophy” is a Western category, and it is then deeply problematic to put Confucianism under this category. Rather, it should be studied as the traditional *jing xue* (经学) (Confucian canonical studies) scholars did. But I argue later in this chapter that if we take a broader understanding of “philosophy,” it is at least possible that we study Confucianism as a philosophy.

8. See, for example, Mencius’s claim that someone from the state of Chu, often considered a barbaric state, became a *xia* person because of his devotion to the Confucian classics, whereas someone from the state of Song, often considered a *xia* state, degenerated into a barbarian by abandoning Confucian teachings (*Mencius* 3A4).

faculty members are specialized in Chinese philosophy. Worse still, few philosophy faculty members consider Chinese philosophy as an important sub-field to strengthen a philosophy department.⁹ As a result, many researchers of Chinese thought are in the field of sinology, and their own disciplinary bias against the philosophical approach to traditional Chinese texts and the impression that they give to philosophers reinforce the neglect of the philosophical dimension of Chinese thought, constituting a vicious cycle.

Yet another reason to deny the significance of the philosophical approach to Chinese thought is the evasion and rejection of philosophy in general. One reason for this rejection is science-worship. Many twentieth-century nonphilosophical researchers of Chinese thought—again, the aforementioned Hu Shi and Fu Sinian being two influential figures in this group—take this position. For them, the archaeological, historical, social, and linguistic approaches to Chinese thought, being “scientific,” offer the “objective” and absolute truth about it, whereas the philosophical approach to it is nonscientific, speculative, subjective, and arbitrary. It is curious to note that the assertive tone among many nonphilosophical scholars of Chinese thought (in this and previous centuries) who have an overblown sense of the objectivity of their research is perhaps more difficult to find among those who are doing real “hard-core” (natural) sciences.¹⁰

This is not the place to explore an adequate answer to this scientism-based antiphilosophy attitude, but let me just make the following points: First, the belief in the objectivity of empirical studies is often rooted in the fact-value distinction, but this distinction is itself a value, or laden with values. Second, with a strong worship of modern natural sciences, some empirical researchers of traditional China seem to believe in the objectivity (understood as authority-giving and truth-giving) of their studies. But as discussed earlier, this belief is based on an internalized version of the cave metaphor, which is shown to be problematic by many contemporary philosophers. Third, if we understand how modern natural sciences are conducted, we should know the issue of the so-called underdetermination thesis. That is, logic and empirical facts alone don't seem to determine the truth of one theory over a competing theory. If even “hard” sciences are underdeterminate, how much “objectivity”

9. In a recent online poll on the ranking of specialties in terms of their importance to a strong (Anglo-American?) PhD program in philosophy, “history of non-Western Philosophy” was voted the twenty-sixth among the twenty-seven specialties considered. See <http://warpwftandway.com/we-are-not-last/>.

10. This group of people admires the stunning achievements of modern natural sciences, and not doing these sciences firsthand, they then turn this admiration into science-worship. See Bai (2009c) for an example and further discussions.

and “truth” can we expect from “soft” sciences such as history and linguistics? Unfortunately, this sophisticated understanding of natural sciences often fails to reach the worshippers of natural sciences.

Another reason to reject philosophy completely is apparently the opposite of the worship of science: the rejection of philosophy as the search for truth and the denial of objectivity. Out of this rejection and denial, some relativists and postmodernists embrace Chinese thought as a “discourse,” a trendy and “new agey” one at that. Sometimes, the science-worship with a narrow field of empirical studies and the postmodernist attitude toward philosophy can even be strange bedfellows, for dogmatism and relativism are often two sides of the same coin. The issue with relativism and postmodernism is also too complicated to be handled here, but let me just say that I reject this postmodernist attitude toward Chinese thought.

All these trends—from the radically antitraditional attitude that demotes Chinese philosophy into the rank of a particular culture, to neglecting the philosophical dimension of Chinese thought, and to the rejection of philosophy in general—contribute to the dominance of the sinological approach to Chinese thought. I have offered some criticisms of these trends, but they are not comprehensive. Although I am disturbed by the dominance of the sinological approach to Chinese thought, I am not denying the significance of this approach. Rather, I only call for modesty from these empirical researchers and charity toward the philosophical approach to Chinese thought, early Confucianism included.

Can Early Confucian Texts Be Read Philosophically?

If we decide to take the philosophical approach to early Confucianism,¹¹ an immediate obstacle is that early Confucian classics don’t look like Western philosophical texts, which explains why people who are familiar with Western philosophy reject the idea that these texts are philosophical texts. The *Analects*, for example, appears to be a random collection of conversations and lacks systematic argumentation.¹² This argument against studying early Confucian texts philosophically presupposes that philosophy is rooted in arguments. But has this presupposition been argued for?

11. For a detailed and systematic treatment of the issue of whether there is Chinese philosophy, see Bai (2014b).

12. For example, the scholar of Chinese philosophy Bryan van Norden argues that the *Analects* should not be taken as a philosophical text because it lacks the kind of systematicity a philosophical text must have (2002b, 230–31).

Indeed, to say whether something is a philosophy or not, we have to define what philosophy is and draw a sharp line between philosophy and non-philosophy. Twentieth-century philosophers of science try to draw a sharp line, or to have a consensus on this line, between science and non-science—a line that seems to be obvious and easily drawn—but they have failed. Should this failure tell us anything, it should tell us of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of making a demarcation between philosophy and non-philosophy.

If, however, we wish to answer the question of whether early Confucian texts can be read philosophically, we must first define what philosophy is. In the following, I take a constructive approach in defining philosophy and examine whether early Confucian Chinese texts can be considered philosophical texts on the basis of this definition. Those who don't accept my definition are free to define philosophy in their own way and offer their own examinations.

Although it is my own definition, it is not purely arbitrary. On the one hand, the definition of philosophy should not be so broad as to include what is usually not considered a philosophy; on the other, it should not be so narrow as to use a particular branch of philosophy (e.g., analytic philosophy) as the only legitimate way of doing philosophy. Obviously, to achieve such a balance is an art and not a science.

With all these cautionary notes, here is my definition (which was already alluded to earlier in this chapter): Philosophy is a systematic reflection on “philosophical problems” (to be defined separately).¹³ Philosophy should be fundamentally reflective. This means that it shouldn't merely consist in social customs and one's own habits but in reflections on them. These reflections are also open to further “higher-order” reflections, which will lead us to make these reflections a coherent whole. This is why philosophy should be systematic reflections,¹⁴ the object of which are “philosophical problems,” that is, problems that transcend a certain time, space, and people; the problems that human beings have to face but cannot solve once and for all. If the problems are restricted to a certain time, space, and people, they are problems of history, area studies, geography, sociology, anthropology, and so on, but not of philosophy. If the problems can be solved, they are problems of modern sciences and thus should “emigrate” out of the philosophical realm.

With philosophy so defined, some may still reject the philosophical approach to early Confucian texts, because, as mentioned earlier, argumentation

13. As we will see, this definition is close to Feng Youlan's definition of philosophy as “systematic, reflective thinking on life” (1966, 2).

14. By “systematic,” I don't mean to say that a philosophy should offer a comprehensive treatment of all philosophical problems. Rather, what I mean by it is that there should be coherence among one's reflections, thus making them a system or a coherent whole.

seems to be lacking in these texts. But this is to confuse systematic reflection with argumentation. For argument's sake, however, let's suppose that argumentation is an important form of expressing systematic reflections, and let's see if there is argumentation in the *Analects*.

In the *Analects* 17.21, there is a discussion between Confucius and a pupil (Zai Wo 宰我) over the "three-year mourning" ritual. This ritual should be a code of conduct from the ritual system of the old regime, and if Confucius were merely an unreflective follower of the old, this discussion would end pretty quickly ("This is how it has been done—end of question!"). But in this passage, both sides offered arguments that do not rely on custom and authority. Of course, compared to the discussion in 17.21, many conversations in the *Analects* are very brief and apparently cannot be considered as argumentations. For example, in the *Analects* 14.34, when asked about his thoughts on the idea of repaying a heinous deed with kindness, Confucius answered, "What do you repay a kind deed with?" Although extremely short, this answer concisely and incisively shows the problem with the idea of "repaying a heinous deed with kindness": this idea sounds very noble and forgiving, but the tolerance of evil deeds is actually an injustice done to the virtuous people in the world.

Generally speaking, the apparent lack of argumentation in some traditional Chinese texts doesn't mean that they don't contain argumentation. Rather, they may have simply skipped many argumentation steps and offered instead an "argumentation sketch," or the key and most difficult steps in an argumentation. In fact, even in works of physics and mathematics that are known for their rigor, argumentation steps are often skipped, and the failure of a reader to understand them is often not a sign of the lack of rigor of the works in question but the lack of the reader's competence in becoming a good physicist or mathematician. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it in his discussion of the beauty of the aphoristic style, "In the mountains the shortest way is from peak to peak: but for that one must have long legs. Aphorisms should be peaks—and those who are addressed, tall and lofty" (1954, 40 [part 1, sec. 7, "On Reading and Writing"]).

But why an argumentation sketch? The reasons are to save time or simply to be realistic (a rigorous proof in an axiomatic system can be impossibly long), to show off, from an "aristocratic pride" that despises the plain and the common, and so on. But there is also a philosophically relevant reason for it: every complicated problem may demand countless steps of argumentation if we want truly rigorous argumentation, but the readers may be distracted by and lost in all the trivial arguments. An argumentation sketch, then, may be advantageous in that it offers readers the big picture with important signposts, and a qualified reader can fill in the missing steps. This incisiveness, and the

ability to see and show the big picture, I believe, is what makes the great thinkers—whether great philosophers or great scientists—great.

In short, an argumentation sketch may be able to inspire and lead us in our reflections. We can take one step further by acknowledging that there may be other ways—for example, the aphoristic and even mystical style exemplified in the *Lao Zi* and to some extent Nietzsche's writings—to express (the author's) and inspire (the readers') reflections than argumentation (argumentation sketch included). This style has its benefits, especially if what is to be expressed has some form of internal tension, or if what is to be said is ineffable in a way. This is the issue underlying the problem of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the problem of speaking about the unspeakable Dao in the *Lao Zi*, the problem of how to express oneself without being trapped in one's words in the *Zhuang Zi*, and the problem of how to assert nothingness in Buddhism.

Therefore, reflections can be found in traditional Chinese texts. But it cannot be denied that they often look scattered and unsystematic in contrast to treatises, the common form of Western philosophical writings. One important reason, as the Chinese historian Qian Mu (钱穆) has pointed out, is that from the so-called Spring and Autumn period (which began around 770 BC) on, the Chinese intellectual elite had the opportunity to become part of the ruling elite, which was sharply different from the situations in medieval Europe (2005a, 21).¹⁵ In contrast to thinkers in medieval and even early modern Europe, the Chinese intellectual elite in the past had far better access to the upper echelons in politics. As a result, they could put their political thoughts and theories into practice, and had little need (and leisure) to formulate them in the form of treatises detached from practice. In fact, the early modern European thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau made a claim that supports Qian Mu's account. He wrote in the opening paragraphs of *On the Social Contract*, "I shall be asked if I am a prince or a legislator, to write on politics. I answer that I am neither, and that is why I do so. If I were a prince or a legislator, I should not waste time in saying what wants doing; I should do it, or hold my peace" (1978, 46). In contrast, many political writers in Chinese history were in the center of politics, and it was already the case during the SAWS.

Of course, this defense only explains why the writings of many Chinese political writers are different from those in the Western tradition, and suggests that if given the opportunity (or, more accurately put, the lack of opportunity

15. Feng Youlan also claimed, "from a [traditional] Chinese philosopher's point of view, to write books so as to disseminate one's ideas is the worst luck [for the philosopher], and has to be the last resort" (2000, 7; my translation). The reason Feng offered is the traditional Chinese philosophers' belief in "sageliness within, and kingliness without," but I think that Qian Mu's explanation makes more sense than Feng's.

in real-world politics), these Chinese writers could have written works that bear more resemblance in style to the writings in the Western tradition. But the apparent lack of a system in traditional Chinese texts doesn't mean that there is no hidden system in these texts. Feng Youlan expressed a similar view, claiming that there are two kinds of systems, the formal and the real, and the lack of a formal system in Chinese philosophical texts doesn't mean the lack of a real system (2000, 10).¹⁶

How to Read Early Confucian Texts Philosophically

Early Confucian (and Chinese) classics can be read philosophically, if philosophy is understood as I suggested above. This understanding of philosophy then implies certain methods of reading these texts. It requires us to clarify and enrich the argumentation in these texts by making up the missing steps, and to tease out the hidden systems in these texts, always with their contemporary relevance in mind and with a sensibility to their original contexts simultaneously.

To apply these methods to traditional texts, the first thing we need to do is to discover the apparent discrepancies and even contradictions within an argument and among different arguments in the same text or by the same author. After actively making these discoveries, however, we should not do what an analytically minded thinker of classical Chinese texts tends to do, such as claiming that the author failed to see the contradictions, he didn't know logic, and so on. Rather, we should apply the principle of respect and charity to the reading of these texts, for since ancient Greece or pre-Qin China, there haven't been many great thinkers in human history (which is why we call them "great thinkers"). If we can easily find apparent confusion and contradictions in their works, a reasonable guess is not that they didn't think clearly but that we didn't; that is, we failed to appreciate the depth of these most profound thinkers in human history due to our own limited intellectual capacity or being confined to our own context. In this sense, to respect "authority" (great thinkers and their texts) is to think critically and to criticize and transcend the authority of today (our own prejudices and close-mindedness). Therefore, after discovering the discrepancies, we should try to see if we can make up the missing steps, or reconstruct hidden coherence between apparently contradictory arguments.

Indeed, when reading classics, what immediately makes sense to us may be of little worth, and what seems to be confusing and even contradictory at first

16. According to Zheng Jiadong (郑家栋), similar distinctions were made by Wang Guowei (王国维), Hu Shi (胡适), and Cai Yuanpei (蔡元培) before Feng's (Zheng 2004, 8).

sight may have been the most interesting part of the classics (“I study it because it is absurd,” to revise an expression attributed to the theologian Tertullian). We should give them the most attention and care, utilizing the methods from the traditional Chinese commentary tradition or, more generally, the philosophical hermeneutics, and combining rigorous analysis with a lively imagination, in order to discover the hidden and deeper meanings of the classics.

The key to my hermeneutic method is the principle of holism. That is, we should try, as best as we can, to take a philosophical classic or classics by the same author as a whole that expresses a coherent system of thought. But this holistic approach has been challenged. In the West, for example, it is often argued that different parts within the same dialogue and different Platonic dialogues were written by Plato over a period of time, and they don’t represent a coherent thought system but show development and even changes in Plato’s philosophy. In China, the integrity of classical texts has been even more seriously challenged by the aforementioned worshippers of science, for example, the Chinese *gu shi bian* (analysis of ancient history; 古史辨) school of the early twentieth century and its contemporary followers, such as Li Ling (李零).¹⁷ On early Confucian texts, in their controversial book *The Original Analects*, for example, E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks also offer one of the most radical challenges to the holist understanding of the *Analects* (2001).

One common challenge to the holism of reading a classical text is that it was actually written by different authors and thus couldn’t be read as offering a coherent message. An important proof often cited for the claim of multiple authorship is stylistic discrepancies in a text, the thought being that these different phrases and styles were developed over a period of time and couldn’t be mastered by the alleged author. However, can we really ascertain that these styles and phrases only came after the alleged author? Even if they did, how often do these “new” styles and phrases occur in the text? If they didn’t occur often, why shouldn’t we take a moderate stance, claiming that there are problems with these places where these phrases and styles occur but not doubting the overall authenticity and integrity of the text? Moreover, considering the fact that many of the classics were lost and rediscovered, or were transcribed through many hands, isn’t it a reasonable guess that these discrepancies may have been introduced by the transcribers, and, although these transcribers used later styles and phrases, they nevertheless didn’t change the content of

17. Although it has roots in the Chinese traditions (I thank Stephen Angle for reminding me of this point), this skeptical attitude toward the Chinese classics may have been strengthened by the worship of modern science.

the classics, or, even if they did make some changes, we can nevertheless discern them and eliminate them?¹⁸

Generally speaking, some historians and linguists seem to have a very strong faith in the “hardness” of the evidence and logic they employ. I suspect that this not-so-scientific attitude toward empirical (historical and linguistic) evidence and logical analysis results from a worship of the natural sciences. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this “faith” is philosophically naive and is quite alien to how many natural scientists understand science. If we realize that there is an underdetermination by experience and logic even in the “hardest” science such as physics, we should see that the underdetermination by linguistic and historical evidence and logic in the studies of classics should be much harder to eliminate.

To be clear, I am not in any way denying the worth of historical or linguistic studies of the classical texts but am only calling for a more cautious (and truly scientific) attitude toward their findings. More importantly, I am calling for tolerance of a philosophical hermeneutics that is based on the principle of holism, if the evidence against the integrity of a classical text is not conclusive (i.e., beyond a *reasonable* doubt).

Moreover, even if a classic is proven to have had multiple authors, it could be the case that these authors tried to offer a coherent system of thought. Even if this were shown not to be the case, as long as the text in question was considered a whole in the history of thought, and was treated accordingly by some great thinkers (e.g., Wang Bi’s [王弼] commentaries on the *Lao Zi* [1991], or Zhu Xi’s [朱熹] commentaries on the *Analects*), it is still meaningful to apply the principle of holism to this text in order to understand the coherent thought that was not intended by the original author(s) but has been adopted by some later thinkers.

Indeed, the principle of holism is often challenged on a much “softer” ground than the linguistic evidence mentioned above. The speculations that a text has multiple authors or an author changes his or her views over time are often introduced to solve the apparent discrepancies within a text or among texts that are commonly believed to be by the same author. To use these speculations to object to the principle of holism seems to be a circular argument: a coherent reading cannot be given to some texts because they have different authors or the author has changed his or her mind, and the text(s) have different authors and the author has changed his or her mind because a coherent reading is not yet given to the text(s). Of course, sometimes, there

18. For a solid case study along this line of argument, see section 1 of Han (2008), in which he offers interesting criticisms of the skepticism of the integrity and wholeness of the *Zhuang Zi*.

are independent evidences for these speculations, but as we have seen, they are likely to be inconclusive.¹⁹

Philosophically speaking, to resolve the apparent discrepancies by resorting to multiple authorship and the change of the author's mind is rather cheap. If a book could only be dissected into simple, disconnected, or even contradictory ideas and doctrines, it wouldn't be philosophically interesting. If we couldn't resolve a conflict in the classics with our philosophical hermeneutics, but there is no independent hard evidence to suggest multiple authorship or the change of the author's mind, we should honestly acknowledge the fact that we don't know how to understand the text in question.²⁰

Drawing together all the above considerations, I think that the principle of holism can be applied to the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, the texts that will be the focus of this book, as well as other classical texts such as the *Lao Zi* and the Platonic dialogues. But I do not suggest that this principle can be applied to every classical text, especially those that have always been reasonably believed to have multiple authors with no shared intentions, and thus have rarely

19. I am not saying that an author never changes his or her mind. In the *Analects* 2.4, for example, Confucius described what characterized him at different ages, and these different characteristics implied a possible change of his thought with regard to certain matters.

20. What I am defending here is a philosophical approach to the classics against a dogmatic and assertive attitude by some "classicists." However, the doubts of the authenticity and integrity of the classics might be neglected by many scholars in contemporary China. If this is the case, perhaps such doubts, if used properly, can be a healthy balance in the above context. The philosophical approach I defend here is similar to that of Han Linhe (韩林合), although there are also some differences (2008). For example, I think that different principles in his approach, for instance, the completeness principle (完全性原则), the systematicity principle (系统性原则), and the coherence principle (一致性原则), are the expressions of one and the same principle, the principle of holism. Although presented differently, he and I share similar doubts about the dogmatic stance often associated with the "classicist" approach, and his principle of creative reading (创新性原则) is in line with my call for a reconstruction of a hidden system of argumentation. However, my reconstructive reading is more "conservative" than his creative reading. That is, based on the principle of respect (Han also has a similar idea), although I don't pre-eliminate the possibility that classical authors fail to think through some issues, I will only consider this possibility as the very last resort. Although I acknowledge the fact that my approach is philosophical and is not necessarily faithful to the original intention of the classical authors, I don't exclude the possibility that my reading is merely teasing out the hidden meaning that the classical author was aware of or even planted in the text intentionally, or the possibility that my reading is what the author would have said in the new context. Moreover, in a conference in which he and I presented our approaches to the classics, Han expressed the view that there is no philosophy in (traditional) China, which is what I have been arguing against in this chapter.

been treated as coherent texts.²¹ One might argue that the principle of respect suggests an attitude of disrespect toward more recent challenges to the classics. This may well be the case. But this attitude of “disrespect” is also based on a similar commonsensical consideration. That is, recent challenges have not themselves been thoroughly challenged by various thinkers over time and are likely not as reliable as those that have been tested by time. Moreover, encouraged by an emulation of the perceived scientific method, contemporary scholars seem to value new ideas more than preserving the traditional ones. Understanding this zeal also lends reasonable doubt to the doubts (challenges) by contemporary thinkers. The emphasis on the respect for traditions can serve as a counterbalance against a progressive view of the history of ideas and against the fetish of the novel.

But the philosophical approach to Chinese classics that is rooted in elucidation and systematization has been criticized by some, because, according to these critics, this approach would ruin the beauty of Chinese philosophy. For example, after explaining Feng Youlan’s philosophical approach to Chinese classics, which bear many similarities to what I have offered, the contemporary Chinese intellectual historian Zheng Jiadong (郑家栋) criticizes this approach. According to him, “elucidation and systematization” have become essential to “modernizing” Chinese philosophy, and Feng Youlan thinks that the brevity with which ideas in traditional Chinese texts are expressed demands that scholars studying Chinese philosophy in a modern sense make up the omitted steps of argumentation in these texts through logical procedure. Feng’s contribution lies in this elucidation and systematization effort, but here also lies a heavy price. For example, Feng’s consistent attempt to use Western philosophical concepts to interpret ideas in the *Lao Zi* diminishes the wisdom in this book, turning it into fourth-rate metaphysics or worse (Zheng 2004, 8). Zheng also criticizes the trend that, under Feng’s influence, many contemporary scholars of Chinese philosophy focus their attention on the ontology and metaphysics of Chinese philosophy (ibid.). Indeed, according to those who hold attitudes even more radical than Zheng’s, Chinese philosophy is a way of life that emphasizes moral cultivation and personal enlightenment, and Chinese philosophy can only be understood by Chinese who use original and unique Chinese concepts.

The latter position is a form of mysticism about Chinese philosophy, and it may eventually fall into the trap of private language, or a form of radical relativism. That is, we can ask a believer in this position how he or she can know what that unique thing called Chinese philosophy is: Does he or she somehow get

21. I thank Paul Goldin and Stephen Angle for reminding me of the limit of the principle of holism.

into the mind of the traditional Chinese thinkers and see the truth of their ideas? If the answer is no, he or she may have to accept the conclusion that he or she is trapped in his or her own mind. Indeed, this person may eventually be forced to admit that his or her thought at a particular moment can only be understood by him or her at that particular moment, a linguistic version of the strange claim that one cannot even step into the same river twice! Moreover, as mentioned earlier, if a thought belongs only to China or the Chinese, it is a subject for anthropology or sociology, not for philosophy.

Of the view that Chinese philosophy is a way of life, as Chinese philosophy scholar Franklin Perkins has shown (2012), there is such a tradition in Western philosophy as well. Moreover, this claim actually mistakes some particular readings of some particular schools as the whole of Chinese philosophy, and it is clearly false: the pre-Qin Chinese philosopher Han Fei Zi's philosophy, for example, has little to do with a way of life, as this phrase is usually understood. Moreover, the concern with life can be integrated into my understanding of philosophy: philosophy consists in systematic reflections concerning philosophical problems—that is, problems that can transcend a certain time, space, and people; problems that human beings have to face but can't solve once and for all—and one of the aspirations of these reflections is to lead human beings to a good life. All I am insisting on here is that having systematic reflections is a necessary condition of philosophy.

Zheng's objection to this view is that the elucidation and systematization effort tends to turn Chinese thought into fourth-rate Western philosophy. I, too, think that to force Chinese philosophy into some particular conceptual system of Western philosophy is very problematic. According to my understanding of philosophy, the commensurability between different philosophies comes from their shared problems. Therefore, we should start with these problems and not be lost in the conceptual systems that are meant to address these problems. More directly on the above objection, I think that some elucidation and systematization efforts have indeed failed, and there should be a broader understanding of elucidation and systematization rather than, for example, taking the form of a treatise or a narrow form of argumentation embodied in early analytic philosophy as the sole legitimate form of philosophical expressions. But as long as we don't choose silence or telepathy, we will have to convey our ideas through words, even if what is to be said is "ineffable." After all, the *Lao Zi* doesn't stop right after the first line that reads, "the Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao," and many commentators on this text have tried to elucidate the ineffable Dao.²² Elucidation and systematiza-

22. To be clear, it is not just the contemporary or Western readers who fail to see through this apparent contradictory action. For example, the Tang poet and intellectual Bai Juyi (白居易

tion are inevitable as long as we philosophize. The failure of a particular attempt to do so doesn't mean the failure of such an attempt in general.²³ If we are doomed to fail, then what we are facing is not philosophy.

We also cannot claim that elucidation and systematization are alien to the Chinese traditions, because these are precisely what some commentaries in traditional China are meant to achieve, and thus these attempts are internal to Chinese thought and not a result of reactions to Western philosophy.²⁴ In this sense, the reader is simultaneously the interpreter and the coauthor of the classics.

Early Confucianism as a Modern Political Philosophy

The Progressive View of Philosophy and Its Problems

Some people may still deny the contemporary relevance of early Confucianism even if they acknowledge the fact that it is a philosophy and its texts can be read philosophically.²⁵ They may argue that the early Confucian thinkers belong to the childhood of philosophy, and their ideas are thus outdated, even if we study them with the “continuous” reading or philosophical approach, that is, “asking” their views on this or that political matter of today. But this claim presupposes a progressive view of philosophy, according to which philosophy is progressing over time toward the ultimate truth. This view may have also been influenced by the envy-turned-worship of the stunning achievements of modern natural sciences.

This is not the place to adequately criticize this progressive view, and let me just clarify my own position on this matter. According to my definition of

易) expressed his perplexity in a poem, “Reading the *Lao Zi*” (读老子): “Those who speak don't know, and those who know don't speak; this I have heard from Lao Zi. But if we say that Lao Zi is someone who knows, why did he himself write a book of 5,000 characters?” (言者不知知者默, 此语吾闻于老君。若道老君是知者, 缘何自著五千文?). This poem can be found in *Quan Tang Shi* (全唐诗), vol. 455, no. 1. There are many printings of *Quan Tang Shi*, and the reference in one of the printings is Peng (1960, vol. 14, 5150).

23. Stephen Angle deals with some similar objections to taking Chinese thought as a philosophy, and some of his responses are similar to mine (2012, 7–9).

24. To categorize the subject matters into philosophy, religion, and so on may have come from the West, especially the “modern” (nineteenth century onward) Western university system. Traditional Chinese learning is perhaps not categorized the same way. But this doesn't mean that in the latter we can't carve out a set of studies that correspond to philosophy as we understand it in the (modern) Western categorization.

25. This section only offers an outline of the modern and political nature of early Confucian philosophy. For more detailed discussions, see Bai (2014a and 2014b).

philosophy, philosophical problems belong to a repertoire of problems that we have to deal with in our “lifeworld(s)” over time but cannot solve once and for all. If so, we can no longer dismiss a philosopher just because he or she comes to the world stage early.

But one can object to this nonprogressive, comparative approach with regard to the depth of philosophical thinking by arguing that how philosophical problems are expressed, given the change of time, locale, and presenter, may have changed and been changing. My response to this objection is that in spite of the changes, at least some philosophical problems nevertheless retain “family resemblance” or commensurability to each other in spite of the differences of time, space, and person. The family resemblance may have been rooted in the family resemblance of our lifeworld(s).

Although the problems may have different contextual features, and their solutions are thus also different, we can decontextualize the reasoning from one context and recontextualize it in another, doing an “abstract translation” of reasoning, making the reasoning from the first context internal to the philosophical reflections in the new context. The possibility of abstract translation presupposes some form of commensurability. An analogy to the abstract translation in the world of physics is the adoption of the conceptual system of theoretical mechanics by electromagnetism and even quantum mechanics. In theoretical mechanics, formulas and theorems in mechanics are written in an abstract manner, and the conceptual system is later used in electromagnetic theories and even quantum mechanics when the symbols in the system are given new meanings. Of course, the abstract translation in philosophy is less rigorous than in physics, and whether it works (or not) depends upon, well, whether it works.

In short, what matters to the philosophical significance of a philosopher doesn’t have to have anything to do with whether he or she comes to the world stage earlier or later, but with how deep and profound he or she is, especially with regard to the aspects of our world that are not fundamentally different from those of Plato’s or Confucius’s times.

What aspects of our world haven’t changed much since the times of Plato or Confucius? For example, our human nature, or, using a less metaphysics-sounding term, the dominant tendencies among human beings, including our cognitive capacities, our rationality or the lack of it, and so on, haven’t changed much, perhaps since the time when human beings were merely hunter-gatherers. Early thinkers’ observations based on this kind of human nature, then, may still remain very much relevant today. But in spite of my above criticism of the progressive view, I acknowledge the fact that some other aspects of human beings’ lifeworlds may have changed greatly. For example, the power and ubiquity of modern finance may be unique to our world, and early thinkers’ treatments of economy without taking modern finance into account may

be obsolete, or at least need to be significantly updated.²⁶ Generally, it may be argued that Plato and Confucius lived in the age of antiquity, while we live in the age of modernity, or even postmodernity. But first we have to specify what aspects in modernity are fundamentally or at least significantly different from antiquity. In the aspects in which there are no great differences between antiquity and modernity, ideas of ancient thinkers would remain relevant, or their relevance would depend on their depth and not on when these ideas were first introduced. Finally, although few would challenge the idea that Plato belonged to antiquity, I argue in the following that “ancient” Confucian thinkers were actually already faced with a modern or modernizing world, or at least their world bore more resemblance to the world of modernity than to Plato’s world or the medieval European world. In this sense, early Confucian (and Chinese) philosophy is more comparable to the modern Western philosophy that came into being almost two thousand years later than to its Western contemporary, classical Western philosophy.²⁷

To be clear, earlier in this chapter I defended the contemporary relevance of early Confucianism by arguing that there are certain human problems that transcend time, and in the previous paragraph I argue that there may have been problems that belong to modernity only. That is, there are human problems that are eternal or shared between the world of antiquity and that of modernity. But there are also problems particular to one of the two worlds, problems that are expressed differently in these worlds, or problems that demand different solutions due to differences between ancient and modern conditions. These problems and their solutions still transcend space, a people, and time; it is only that they are not eternal but conditioned on, for example, modernity. This is like the division between classical mechanics and quantum mechanics: there are fundamental gaps between them, but they also have shared commonalities.

The Zhou-Qin Transition as an Early Modernization

Now, let us take a look at the world early Confucians lived in. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, early Confucians lived in the pre-Qin period or the

26. I thank Qian Jiang for pointing this out to me.

27. Many twentieth-century Chinese thinkers have argued that traditional Chinese philosophy is comparable to classical or medieval Western philosophy, and depending on whether one has a progressive or regressive view of the development of philosophy, one can try to “modernize” Chinese philosophy or try to use this “premodern” philosophy to criticize modernity (for an example of the former, see Feng 2001, 1:307; for an example of the latter, see M. Liu 1996, 898–956). In addition to the problems with the progressive and regressive views, I think that their shared premise—that traditional Chinese philosophy is premodern—is wrong.

SAWS. This is a transitional period also known as the Zhou-Qin transition (周秦之变). The political structure before this transition, the regime of Western Zhou, is “feudalistic.” Whether “feudalism” (and the terms associated with it) is applicable to the regimes of Western Zhou China and even medieval Europe is a controversial issue.²⁸ But for the lack of a better and more convenient term, I will use “feudalism” to label these regimes. Acknowledging the differences between the regimes in medieval Europe and in Western Zhou China, I use the term “feudalism” to refer to a regime with the features that will be discussed below and that I believe are shared by these regimes.

First, let us look at the feudal regime of Western Zhou China. The original intention of the founding fathers of Western Zhou was to control a vast and hostile land and the political entities on this land, many of which still pled allegiance to Shang or didn't plead allegiance to Zhou after the surprising defeat of the powerful Shang empire by the small state of Zhou, and the policy is described as “enfeoffing the [king's] relatives, and using them to protect the Zhou [king]” (*Zuo Commentaries* [左传·僖公二十四年]). Thus, these feudal states were strategically established by the Zhou founding fathers in the regions that were not well controlled by the Zhou state, and often in a group of three or so feudal states that could come to one another's defense. This is a colonial and expansionist policy.²⁹ After these feudal states expanded by encroaching upon the areas of the “barbarians” (“barbarians” are defined as those who refused to submit to the Zhou political order), their rulers did the same as the kings did, enfeoffing their own relatives and ministers. In the entire empire, the king ruled over feudal lords one level lower than him, greater lords over lesser lords, and so on. On each level, it was one master ruling over a limited number of subjects (while one's subject's subject was not one's subject), making it possible for the master to rule through personal influence, blood relations, contracts between rulers and their subjects, and noble codes of conduct. Thus, a large empire was divided into small and close-knit communities through this pyramid-like structure (with the king at the very top), and rulers of each level had much autonomy from their lords one level higher. Only the nobility by pedigree were qualified as rulers of various ranks.

But this feudalistic structure collapsed during the SAWS.³⁰ The allegiance of lower lords to higher ones was broken down, and it was a world of war of all against all. The Zhou king was eventually eliminated, and the “fittest” few

28. See Brown (1974), Reynolds (1994), and F. Li (2005 and 2008) for more detailed discussions. I thank Keith Knapp for bringing up this issue with me.

29. See Qian Mu (1996), 57; and F. Li (2005).

30. F. Li (2005) has a detailed analysis of the fall of the Western Zhou empire, especially the flaws internal to its regime.

survived. During the Warring States period (475 BCE to 221 BCE), there were seven strong states (and some minor ones, most of which were on their way to elimination), and each of the seven strong states was on a similar scale as the Western Zhou empire in terms of the size and the population.³¹ But the political pyramid that was crucial to the Zhou rulers for running a large empire was not available to the kings of these strong and de facto sovereign states anymore, because, in the war of all against all, most of the lower lords (and the Zhou king) and the feudal political structure were eliminated. Therefore, crucial political issues needed to be answered again.

In politics, there are three crucial issues (maybe more) that always need to be answered. First, every political entity needs to find a bond, a banner, or an identity with which it can form a unity. Second, if the entity has to be run through a political order, who should be in charge of maintaining the order? If it is through a group of people, how can members of this group be selected and what is the legitimacy of the selection procedure? Third, what is the mechanism to deal with entity–entity relations?

Under the Western Zhou regime, all these questions were well addressed through surprisingly simple ways. It is claimed in the *Zuo Commentaries*, which should represent how the feudal order was commonly perceived at that time, that “the important affairs of the state lie in sacrificial ceremonies and wars” (左传·成公十三年). In these and other feudal ceremonies, a community of a limited number of nobles gathered to sacrifice, hunt, and eat together. The leader of the ceremonies, a nobleman of higher rank, would sometimes show off his military and economic force. All these practices would reinforce the bond among the nobles. In these ceremonies, homage was paid to the founding ancestors and Heaven, reinforcing the noble pedigree and the legitimacy of the feudal order that was built on it. The implicit line in these ceremonies is the following: “My great-grandfather founded the whole empire because he had the mandate of Heaven, and you were a feudal lord because your great-grandfather was a delegate who derived his legitimacy from my great-grandfather’s. Therefore, you need to obey me. If you don’t, look at my armies and weaponry on display here.” When there were quarrels (and even wars) among feudal states, the lord of a higher rank would be the arbiter (and the Zhou king was the ultimate arbiter). The term for “war” (戎) has a special connotation, for it originally meant a branch of barbarians. To them, the Zhou feudal order didn’t apply, and only naked force was applicable.

31. It is understandable that each of the states could have a population comparable with that of the Zhou empire if we consider the natural population growth. But even with regard to the territory, because many barbarian “pockets” were now annihilated and under control of one or another of these states, many of the states had a size comparable to the Zhou empire as well.

But the collapse of nobility-based feudalism means that the solutions to the three fundamental political problems stopped working. It is obvious that the legitimacy of the ruling class became a problem, for the legitimacy of the feudal order ultimately derives from the king and Heaven. With the king gone, many nobles eliminated, and many usurpers seizing power, one couldn't claim legitimacy by referring to one's pedigree or to Heaven. On the issue of social and political bonds, as mentioned earlier, what emerged, especially during the Warring States period, were a few large and populous states in which the kings had to deal with thousands of strangers without the nobility-based delegatory system available to them anymore. In politics, size matters. What was effective at bonding a small community (kinship, codes of conduct among nobles, personal contract through rituals, a shared sense of the Good, etc.) couldn't bond a large society of strangers together, unless oppressive force was used constantly. That is, without oppression, plurality of values is inevitable, which is recognized by some modern European political thinkers and pre-Qin thinkers such as Han Fei Zi.³² Finally, without an overlord and without lesser lords beneath them, within each state, the centralization of power emerged, and each state became independent from other states. The relations among these *de facto* sovereign states were similar to international relations as we understand this term today.

Now it should become obvious that the transition these Chinese states experienced during the SAWS has some similarities to the European transition from the Middle Ages to Western modernity, and early modern European thinkers and politicians were also faced with political issues similar to those faced by Chinese thinkers and politicians during the SAWS, which was about two thousand years before European modernity. I am not saying that the transition China experienced during the SAWS is exactly the same as the European transition to early modernity. There were ancient Greek and Roman civilizations before the Middle Ages, and these heritages were not available to the Chinese during the SAWS and throughout much of traditional China.³³

While the Western Zhou version of feudalism was based on a design from the top and was constructed from top to bottom, the European one was a result of the struggles and compromises among various elements from the bot-

32. For how some Western liberal thinkers understood the relations between pluralism and the size of the community, see Zhou (2007 and 2008a). For Han Fei Zi's view of the plurality of values, see Bai (2011). To be clear, I am not saying that Han Fei Zi was a liberal thinker, but that he understood the above inevitability of plurality of values in a large society, as a liberal thinker would.

33. By "traditional China," I mean China before its violent encounter with the modern West in the late nineteenth century.

tom up, and not a result of a conscious design from the top.³⁴ Through a *zong fa* (宗法) system, different nobility lines were clearly delineated, even if they ultimately came from the same ancestry, in the Western Zhou system. For example, the ruler of the feudal state of Lu would never, through inheritance or bequest, become a lord under the ruler of the state of Qi; his successors were always chosen from his children and, at worst, from his siblings or his siblings' children within the state of Lu, but never from a noble family outside of the state. In contrast, such phenomena were not rare in the European feudal system. In short, the European feudal system was much "messier" than the one in Western Zhou. Moreover, although it is not the case that Western Zhou China was organized through kinship, and medieval Europe was organized by contracts, as it is often stated, contracts and agreements in Western Zhou China were often between a nobleman of a superior rank and that of an inferior rank, while those in Europe, due to the disorganization of the feudal structure, were often between two equals or two noblemen, one of whom didn't clearly outrank the other. All this could make Europeans more resistant to a centralizing tendency during the transition to modernity than the Chinese.³⁵

There was no secular throne in medieval Europe that enjoyed the status of overlordship as high, long-standing, and stable as was the office of the Western Zhou king, and there was also the papacy, which prevented the secular ruler from having unified political power. Besides, the Age of Discovery that accompanied the European transition to early modernity also offered the Europeans territorial expansions, colonialism, and emigrations that dwarfed those during the SAWS. There were more "warring states" with a total size of land significantly larger in Europe than in China during the SAWS, which made the unification and dominance by one state and one kind of regime more difficult in Europe than in China.³⁶ Different from the Chinese experience, the European "warring states" did not manage to achieve the kind of unity that the Chinese states achieved, although they did manage to wage two world wars, among many other smaller-scale wars.

All these distinctions may have contributed to the different paths the Chinese and Europeans took while facing similar issues. In particular, consti-

34. Qian Mu pointed out this profound distinction in Qian (2005b, 1–3).

35. The fact that a system is disorganized is not necessarily always a bad thing. The messiness of the European system may have been a contributing factor for the emergence of competing political regimes in modern Europe, which in turn was crucial for the emergence of constitutionalism in the United Kingdom and a few other states (such as Denmark), a great contribution of Europe to human civilization.

36. This may also have contributed to the accidental emergence and development of constitutionalism in some corners of Europe.

tutional monarchy first emerged in England, which paved the way for the dominant political regime today, constitutional democracy or liberal democracy. Industrial revolutions also appeared first in England, which pushed modernity to its next level, a “modernity 2.0” that eluded traditional China. The distinctive features of modernity 2.0 and their significance to political issues will be further discussed in later chapters of this book (e.g., in chapter 5). But let me be clear on one issue here: the term “early modernity” can be misleading, because to enter early modernity doesn’t necessarily guarantee the transition to late, industrialized modernity.

There are other ideas that are commonly believed to be unique to European modernity, such as equality, freedom, market economy, and secularization. But they may have also occurred, perhaps in slightly different forms, in China during the SAWS, and they can be explained by the deeper structural changes (from nobility-based close-knit feudal societies to centralized, plebeianized, and large states) that are common to Chinese and European early modernity. For example, when nobility vanished, all people would naturally be born equal and have more freedom to choose what they wished to do, including moving to a different location. Land would be freely sold in the market, which would lead to the emergence of a land-based market economy. As for secularization, it could be a side effect of what was peculiar to Europe: the separation and the struggle between the throne and the papacy.

Whether these differences are real or not, all I need here is for readers to acknowledge that there were profoundly similar problems in the Chinese and European transitions to “modernity,” especially the three fundamental political issues that were brought about anew by the dawn of modernity, under the “modern” conditions of large, populous, well-connected, mobile, and plebeianized states of strangers.

These similarities may also lead us to reflect upon the nature of modernity, but that is not the focus of this book. In this chapter, I am attempting to show that liberal democracy, nation-states, and other models that have been developed in the West may have been answers to the issues that arose in the transition to “modernity,” and that these issues, whatever they were called (modern or not), were also faced by pre-Qin thinkers, early Confucians included. If so, we should investigate early Confucians’ answers to these issues and their merits relative to those offered by the West, and then and only then can we come to a conclusion about where the history regarding politics should end.

To argue for the similarities between the Zhou-Qin transition and the European transition to early modernity is controversial, to say the least. But there is a growing minority who shares this view with me, or explicitly or implicitly supports my view. To give a few examples, the American scholar and diplomat Richard Walker noted quite early the clear parallels between China during the

SAWS and modern Europe (1953, xi). The American sinologist and scholar of Chinese thought Herrlee Creel also pointed out the similarities between modern (Western) centralized bureaucratic administrations and Chinese ones in the early Han dynasty (Creel 1970a, 3; and Creel 1970b, 124), the latter of which was a result of the Zhou-Qin transition. Kenneth Waltz (1979, 329–30), Bin Wong (1997, 101), and Charles Tilly (1998, 7) all noticed the similarities between early modern European and traditional Chinese regimes. In recent literature, Tin-bor Hui argues for the similarities between the international environment in early modern Europe and that in Warring States China, and she also explains why China was eventually unified while Europe was not (2005). Francis Fukuyama also clearly states that the state of Qin, which unified China at the end of the SAWS, was politically modern (2011, 125–26).

Again, whether the Zhou-Qin transition is an early modernization or not is a controversial issue. But what I think is not controversial but a historical fact is that during this transition, the feudal order and many political and social features associated with it disappeared; a large, well-connected, plebeianized, and mobile society of strangers emerged. These changes led to the demand for new political orders. The changes and the demands are common to the Zhou-Qin transition and the European transition to early modernity. These claims are not or should not be controversial. What is controversial is whether these changes are modernization or not. Fortunately, as we will see in the following chapters, my discussions of the contemporary relevance of Confucian political philosophy only depend on what I consider the noncontroversial part.

In Contrast to the New Confucian and Moral Metaphysical Readings

The above understanding of early Confucianism is in sharp contrast to the mainstream understanding today—a representative of the latter is the twentieth-century “overseas New Confucians” (海外新儒家). Most scholars today believe that traditional Confucianism is an “ancient” thought system or tradition that is primarily concerned with moral metaphysical issues. Even if we put the issue of antiquity versus modernity aside, my claim that early Confucianism was primarily a political philosophy is still quite different from the mainstream understanding. But early imperial historians also primarily understood pre-Qin philosophy as a political philosophy (Sima 1981, 358). According to the contemporary historian Yu Ying-shih (余英时), even Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, which is more commonly considered primarily a moral metaphysics, had a political dimension that has been ignored by contemporary scholars (Yu 2004).

Then why is there such a widespread misunderstanding of the nature of early Confucianism? Perhaps the common belief in the total failure of

traditional Chinese politics and the notion that liberal democracy is the end of history in terms of political models (Fukuyama 1992) explains why scholars ignore the political aspect of traditional Chinese philosophy, early Confucianism included. If there is nothing good about traditional Chinese politics (often dubbed as “authoritarian” and even “feudalistic,” which is often simply interpreted as “outdated”), and we have already discovered the best political model, then why should we bother to look at the political dimension of traditional Chinese philosophy, other than as a curious item in a museum?

Moreover, this understanding of Confucianism is not only historically incorrect, but it is far less promising than reading Confucianism primarily as a political philosophy. On the one hand, this understanding ignores the rich resources of traditional Chinese political thoughts and practices that may critically and constructively contribute to our reflections on the issue of the best political regime. On the other hand, taking Confucianism as a moral metaphysics severely limits the scope of its applicability in the age of pluralism, in which a comprehensive doctrine, moral metaphysics included, can never be shared by the majority of people without oppression, while a political conception can.³⁷

Due to the dominant moral metaphysical reading of Confucianism, one may prefer Neo-Confucianism, which, under the influence of the introduction of Buddhism to China, appears to be more metaphysical than pre-Qin Confucianism, and twentieth-century New Confucianism to an early, less metaphysical form of Confucianism. As a result, attempts have been made to read moral metaphysics into early Confucianism, thus “refining” the latter. It is true that in contrast to the metaphysicalization of later Confucianism, early Confucianism is less metaphysical—or can be more easily read “ametaphysically,” as a political conception—than later Confucianism, which is why I prefer early Confucianism to the later versions of Confucianism.³⁸ This less meta-

37. For a detailed criticism of the moral metaphysical reading of Confucianism, see Bai (2010b).

38. To say this means that we have to define “metaphysics,” which is beyond the scope of this chapter. In my defense of the legitimate status of Confucianism as a philosophy, I argue that early Confucians did offer justifications for their claims, and in order to avoid infinite justification ascent, a final grounding has to be given somewhere. If justification-offering and the existence of some ultimate grounding are considered a metaphysical activity—in many usages, “metaphysics” is meant to be something much thicker than this—then early Confucians are metaphysical. However, even so, their “metaphysics” is a very thin one in that its justifications are conducted with a kind of “ordinary language metaphysics”—it sticks to some widely shared ordinary reasoning, language, and lifeworld, and thus can be endorsed by many who hold different thick metaphysical doctrines. I thank Huang Xiang (黄翔) and Lin Mingzhao (林明照) for pushing me to clarify this. The criticism of (thick) metaphysics and the appreciation of or-

physical, “thin” version of Confucianism can be endorsed by Confucians of competing schools, and even by people of different comprehensive doctrines. Thus, for example, not only is the dialogical format of the *Analects* not a problem when we approach it philosophically, it also has its merits, because this format can more easily take context (such as who the interlocutors are) into consideration and deal with the dialectical tensions of reality, and is thus less subjected to being taken as a set of comprehensive doctrines and even dogmas than the treatises.

To understand early Confucianism primarily as a political philosophy, then, entails the perspectives I take. It means, for example, that when I deal with the famous Mencian position of the original goodness of human nature, I won’t resort to some moral metaphysics, as scholars today tend to do, but I will use its political root or function as the ultimate explanation. In fact, Confucius was silent on whether human beings are by nature good or bad. Mencius’s and Xun Zi’s followers have been arguing about this issue for ages, and it seems to be another metaphysical debate that can only be determined by who can thump the table harder. But all of them would probably agree that human beings need to be good and can be good, and this thin understanding of human “nature” can enjoy greater universality among people with different comprehensive doctrines. In this sense, Confucius’s evasion of this issue seems to be so much wiser, and I will follow his lead on this matter.

Conservative versus Progressive Readings of Confucianism

To take the three political issues brought about anew by modernity as the central issues to early Confucians, we can still argue whether their position is fundamentally conservative, reformist, or even revolutionary. Facing these problems, early Confucians could argue for solving them by “returning” to “small states with few people” (小国寡民), as the *Lao Zi* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggested (Bai 2009b), or to the Western Zhou feudal system. Some pre-Qin Confucian texts seem to suggest a return to the “old regime.” Early critics, such as Han Fei Zi, also suggested that this conservative proposal was the Confucian position. The debate on whether Confucians are conservative or not has been going on in the following centuries, embodied, for example, in the debates between *gu wen jing xue* (古文经学) and *jin wen jing xue* (今文经学) in the Han dynasties. Even today, philosophers who are sympathetic to Confucianism, such as Zhang Xianglong (张祥龙), still propose the construction of a

dinary language metaphysics are inspired by my two great teachers, the late Burton Dreben and Stanley Rosen, to whom I am forever grateful.

“Confucian reservation” (儒家保护区), in which a small group of people can practice what Confucianism dictates.

This reading of Confucianism as a conservative doctrine is not totally baseless, but this is not the place for me to criticize this reading adequately. Rather, what I can do is to be explicit about the reading that I propose. In my view, early Confucians were revolutionaries with a conservative facade. According to this “progressive” reading, they tried to solve issues of modernity not by rejecting modernity but by embracing it, although some of their locutions seem to resonate with those widely used in the “good old days,” and they were not as resolute as thinkers from some other schools.³⁹ Moreover, not accepting early Confucianism as a moral metaphysics, I also reject the reading that early Confucians tried to solve political issues by improving on people’s morals alone. Rather, the premise of my reading is that they apprehended the political concerns as primary and the ethical ones as secondary, a byproduct of their political concerns. They were concerned with reconstructing a political order and were thus open to the idea of institutional design, even though they themselves didn’t discuss it in detail. To take a continuous reading of early Confucianism by asking about which political institutions they would have in mind, especially in today’s political reality, as I try to do in this book, wouldn’t be alien to Confucianism.

In other words, this kind of Confucianism can answer challenges from thinkers such as Han Fei Zi. Han Fei Zi, a brilliant political philosopher who was allegedly educated by Xun Zi (a very important early Confucian thinker), waged a powerful attack on Confucianism. In his reading, Confucians were trying to restore the old regime, in which the world was ruled by virtue (virtuous subjects and rulers) and by rituals, but they failed to realize that the world in which this kind of governance was applicable was gone for good. In “modern times,” institutions and the rule of law are what are effective.⁴⁰ In my view, by not answering Han Fei Zi’s challenges in a positive and constructive manner, Confucianism could not even remain relevant during the Han dynasties,

39. For example, Yuri Pines argues that it is the Mohists and later the Legalists who were the first to embrace the idea of meritocracy fully and openly (2013). But in the following chapters, especially in chapter 2, I see meritocracy as a key idea to Mencius. To say so depends on how seriously or unseriously the reader interprets certain passages of a text. Although how to read a text is not totally arbitrary, there is a certain flexibility involved. What I can do is to be explicit about my general approach (the progressive reading) and about which claims I take seriously or not.

40. To be clear, Han Fei Zi’s understanding of the rule of law is both different from the kind of rule of law we have in today’s liberal democracies and from the so-called rule by law that is often used to describe an authoritarian way of governing. For a general discussion of Han Fei Zi’s insights on his times, see Bai (2011).

(continued...)

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