

The idea of order in ancient Chinese political thought: a Wightian exploration¹

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All great thinkers, while historically conditioned, are all philosophically contemporaneous.¹

It is a great privilege to have this extended version of my Martin Wight Memorial Lecture published in *International Affairs*—all the more so in this 90th anniversary issue of the journal. International Relations theory and English School thinking have been well represented in *International Affairs*: since Sir Herbert Butterfield delivered the inaugural Martin Wight Memorial Lecture 38 years ago in 1975, 21 Martin Wight lectures have appeared in these pages. I am delighted, therefore, to be continuing that tradition and very much hope that this trend will endure for many years to come.

Martin Wight is one of the few classical international theorists of his generation to have shown more than a passing interest in ancient China. In his pioneering attempts at outlining a historical sociology of states-systems in '*De systematibus civitatum*', Wight not only cited three clear examples of ancient states-systems, namely, 'the Western, the Hellenic-Hellenistic or Graeco-Roman, and the Chinese between the collapse of the Chou Empire in 771 B.C. and the establishment of the Ts'in Empire in 221 B.C.>'; he also posited that the Chinese suzerain system was similar to the Byzantine *basileus* but different from the ancient Greek *poleis* and the Hellenistic kingdoms in terms of its constitution.² Most enlighteningly, Wight discussed, though only tentatively and in exploratory fashion, 'a triad of philosophical traditions' in ancient China: Confucian as rationalist, Daoist as revolutionist, and the Legalist as realist.³ Wight was keenly aware of the importance of going beyond the West in search of international theory. Grotius, he once critically noted, 'does not have sufficient knowledge of the non-European

* This is a revised and extended version of the 39th Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, delivered at the London School of Economics on 20 November 2013. I would like to express my gratitude to the Martin Wight Memorial Trust for honouring me with the invitation to deliver this lecture, which has afforded me an invaluable opportunity to repay my personal intellectual debt, incurred over many years, to a number of people closely associated with LSE and Oxford, including among others Hedley Bull, John Vincent, Adam Roberts and Barry Buzan, from whom I have learned more than I can ever hope to acknowledge adequately.

¹ Martin Wight, *Four seminal thinkers in international theory*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 1.

² Martin Wight, '*De systematibus civitatum*', in Martin Wight, *Systems of states*, ed. and intr. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), pp. 22–3.

³ Martin Wight, 'Theory of mankind: "barbarians"', in *International theory: the three traditions*, ed. Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter (Leicester and London: Leicester University Press for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1991), pp. 66–9.

world to develop a more complex picture' of international society because of his traditional Christian view of history.⁴

Wight would have been surprised, a little baffled, and perhaps even dismayed that until very recently the ancient Chinese states-system in general and the 'triad of philosophical traditions' of ancient China in particular, which had so fascinated him, have been largely ignored in the ever-expanding enterprise of theorizing IR in the English-language literature. With a few notable exceptions,⁵ there has been little meaningful conversation between ancient Chinese philosophy and the search for international theory. Any international thought there may have been in ancient China is still shrouded in obscurity, despite the renewed interest in the last decade or so in exploring international relations and international thought in antiquity in search of deeper roots of modern international thought and of the institutional foundation of contemporary global international society in deep world history. In the history of ideas, studies of the 'international' in the classical period rarely go beyond ancient Greek philosophers and historians.⁶ It is encouraging to see that more recent investigations of the ancient systems of states have brought the Near East into the studies of international relations.⁷ Nevertheless, it remains largely true that existing historical approaches to international theory have not taken seriously the ancient world of thought, institutions and actions beyond Europe and specifically in ancient China.⁸ This is doubly regrettable because Chinese philosophy and the history of ancient Chinese thought have been, and continue

⁴ Martin Wight, 'The origins of our states-system', in Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 128.

⁵ See esp. Vilho Harle, *Ideas of social order in the ancient world* (London: Greenwood, 1998). The book is, in Harle's words, 'the comparative analysis of ideas concerning social order in classical Chinese political philosophy, the Indian epic and political literature, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, classical Greek and Roman political thought, and early Christianity' (p. xii). Harle noted that even as late as the 1980s some western scholars were sceptical about the relevance of ancient Greece to international relations. See also Victoria Tin-bor Hui, 'Toward a dynamic theory of international politics: insights from comparing ancient China and early modern Europe', *International Organization* 58: 1, 2004, pp. 175–205, and *War and state formation in ancient China and early modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Adam Watson has a short chapter on 'China: hegemony, warring states and empire' in Adam Watson, *The evolution of international society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 85–93. Most recently, Francis Fukuyama's *The origins of political order: from prehuman times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011) devotes four short chapters to discussing Chinese tribalism, war, the rise of the Chinese state and the subsequent fall of the Han system in ancient China. Of the contributions to the existing English literature on ancient Chinese political thought by Chinese scholars resident in China, two are particularly worth mentioning. One is Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese thought, modern Chinese power*, edited by Daniel A. Bell and Sun Zhe, translated by Edmund Ryden (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Zhao Tingyang, 'A political world philosophy in terms of All-under-Heaven (Tianxia)', *Diogenes* 56: 5, 2009, pp. 5–18. See also the special issue on 'Chinese tradition in International Relations' in *The Chinese Journal of Political Science* 17: 2, 2012.

⁶ See David Boucher, *Political theories of international relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Chris Reus-Smit, *The moral purpose of the state: culture, social identity and institutional rationality of international relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Robert Jackson, *The global covenant: human conduct in a world of states* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); David Bederman, *International law in antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Chris Brown, Terry Nardin and Nicholas Rengger, eds, *International relations in political thought: texts from the ancient Greeks to the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Edward Keene, *International political thought: a historical introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

⁷ See e.g. Mario Liverani, *International relations in the ancient Near East, 1600–1100 BC* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Amanda Podany, *Brotherhood of kings: how international relations shaped the ancient Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁸ David Bederman, too, traces the origin of international law to the ancient Near East (Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt) as well as ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Bederman, however, has conveniently brushed aside ancient China and ancient India in his study.

to be, intensively studied in the humanities by a host of western scholars as well as their counterparts in China, Japan and Korea.⁹ There is a rich seam of such literature in English for IR scholars to mine.¹⁰

This intellectual bias in the existing literature is not rooted in simple unconsciousness of the rich experience of human organization in international systems outside Europe. It is associated in the first place with the historical rise of the West in the nineteenth century. More than 50 years ago, Adda Bozeman was scathingly critical of the insensitivity of western minds to other sectors of humanity whose direct relevance to the West is not easy to establish. In her words: 'Western minds, by the nineteenth century, were disinclined to find affinities in the histories of India, China, Persia, or Africa; the more so, since the contemporary societies of those regions seemed to diverge completely from the life patterns to which the West had become accustomed.'¹¹

It also reflects, of course, a deliberate choice. Chris Brown and his colleagues provide an explicit reasoning for their decision to start exclusively with ancient Greece in tracing ancient roots of International Relations in political thought. Two judgements that underlie their choice are familiar to many. The first, in their words, is that 'Greek thought is the first to address with real sophistication and at length the themes we have identified as central'. The second is that the modern global international order has its origin in the Westphalian system of states, which emerged out of a medieval order constructed on the ruins of the Roman empire,

⁹ There is a proliferation of studies of the 'international' in ancient Chinese political thought published in Chinese. See for example, Zhang Quanmin, 'Shilun chunqiu huimeng de lishi zuoyong' [A study of the historical role of alliances meetings during the Spring and Autumn period], *Jilin Daxue Shehui Kexue Xuebao* [Jilin University Journal (Social Science edition)], 1994: 6, pp. 4–51; Ye Zicheng, *Chunqiu zhangguo shiqi de zhongguo waijiao sixiang* [Chinese diplomatic thought in the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods] (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Social Science Press, 2003); Xu Jieli, *Chunqiu bangjiao yanjiu* [A study of interstate relations in the Spring and Autumn Period] (Beijing: China Social Science Press, 2004). *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue* [International Political Science Quarterly], published by Tsinghua University's Institute for International Studies since 2008, has carried a number of articles on the study of ancient Chinese international thought. Among these are Yan Xuetong, 'Xunzi de guoji zhengzhi sixiang ji qishi' [Xunzi's interstate political philosophy and its message today], *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue*, 1, 2007, pp. 115–44; Li Bin, 'Mozi de guojiajian guanxi sixiang' [Mozi's interstate political philosophy], *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue*, 2, 2009, pp. 61–87; and Bao Tianmin, 'Mengzi yu shijie zhixu lilun' [Mencius and a world order theory], *Guoji Zhengzhi Kexue*, 3, 2010, pp. 32–50.

¹⁰ Notable among these works are Arthur Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese thought* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1953); Fung Yu-lan, *A history of Chinese philosophy*, vol. 1: *The period of the philosophers*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952); Arthur Waley, *Three ways of thought in ancient China* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963); Hsiao Kung-chuan, *A history of Chinese political thought*, vol. 1: *From the beginnings to the sixth century AD*, trans. F. W. Mote (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 1985); Derk Bodde, *Chinese thought, society and science: the intellectual and social background of science and technology in pre-modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991); Chad Hansen, *A Daoist theory of Chinese thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Tu Weiming, *Way, learning and politics: essays on the Confucian intellectual* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993); Masayuki Sato, *The Confucian quest for order: the origin and formation of the political thought of Xun Zi* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003); A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003). For the most recent, see Daniel Bell, ed., *Confucian political ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), esp. 'Just war and Confucianism: implications for the contemporary world', pp. 226–56.

¹¹ Adda Bozeman, *Politics and culture in international history: from the ancient Near East to the opening of the modern age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962), p. 61. Almost 30 years earlier, Will Durant warned in 1935 that 'the provincialism of our traditional histories, which began with Greece and summed up Asia in a line, has become no merely academic error, but a possibly fatal failure of perspective and intelligence': Will Durant, *The story of civilization: our Oriental heritage* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1935), p. ix.

‘the inheritor of the thought of classical Greece’.¹² For this very reason, they argue explicitly that: ‘The way the Greeks addressed these themes [of international political theory] can be connected to a sequence of thought which came down to modern thinking about international relations in a way that possible alternative starting points—the thought of the period of the Warring States in China, for example—does not.’¹³

The first judgement is highly contestable, particularly when it is made before thorough investigation has been done on international thought in other civilizations. The second is highly problematic as a justification for inclusion/exclusion of certain traditions of international thought in a project that is purported to be on International Relations in political thought (not International Relations in *western* political thought). If humanity has an indivisible heritage, ancient thought, institutions and statecraft in the world beyond the West surely must become part of the research agenda in our pursuit of international theory.¹⁴

Ancient China, as Wight noted, boasts one of the earliest systems of states in world history. Like ancient Greece, but on a much larger scale and certainly in a much longer historical period, ancient China was in a state of prolonged war during the Spring and Autumn period (771–481 BC) and the Warring States period (481–221 BC).¹⁵ Well before Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian War, Confucius preached on world peace and universal moral order. Confucius’ disciples are contemporaries of Plato and Aristotle. Like Plato and Aristotle, they deliberated extensively on the ethical foundations of society, and on the idea of socio-political order and how to achieve it. These two Axial Age civilizations, though worlds apart in terms of their cultural orientations, were clearly confronted with shared problematiques and were going through a similar transformation, a breakthrough to ‘the theoretical stage of human thinking or reflexivity’.¹⁶ More importantly for the purpose of studies of history of international thought, both

¹² Similar sentiment has been expressed by others. The ancient Greek system of states, for example, is recognized by Robert Jackson as one of the two ‘forerunners of the idea and institution of international society’ and by Chris Reus-Smit as ‘one of the great analogues of the modern state system, a familiar world of independent states in which the eternal verities of international politics are thought to have appeared in their most rudimentary and essential form’. See Robert Jackson, ‘The evolution of international society’, in John Baylis and Steve Smith, eds, *The globalization of world politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 36, and Reus-Smit, *The moral purpose of the state*, p. 40.

¹³ Brown et al., eds, *International relations in political thought*, pp. 13–14.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that almost exactly 50 years before the publication of Brown et al.’s *International relations in political thought*, George Sarton, perhaps the most prominent historian of science of his time, justified his exclusion of Hindu and Chinese science on similar grounds in his seminal work *A history of science*. In his words: ‘Early Hindu and Chinese science are generally left out not because they lack importance, but simply because they lack significance for us Western readers. Our thinking has been deeply influenced by Hebrew and Greek thoughts, hardly any by Hindu or Chinese ones, and whatever influences came from southern and eastern Asia reached in a roundabout way’. See George Sarton, *A history of science: ancient science through the golden age of Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. x. Joseph Needham and his associates at Cambridge University have largely corrected such prejudice today, particularly through the monumental work of *Science and civilisation of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954–2004).

¹⁵ Throughout this article I have adopted, where appropriate, the chronological dates from *The Cambridge history of ancient China* to avoid any complications. See Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy, eds, *The Cambridge history of ancient China: from the origins of civilization to 221 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ‘The Axial conundrum. Between transcendental visions and vicissitudes of their institutionalizations: constructive and destructive possibilities’, *Análise Social* 64: 199, 2011, p. 202. See also Robert N. Bellah, ‘What is Axial about the Axial Age?’, *European Journal of Sociology* 46: 1, 2005, pp. 69–89.

ancient Greece and ancient China have left behind detailed written records of those political and philosophical deliberations. Ancient China arguably also provides an unrivalled case for theoretical speculation simply because it presents us with an exceptional story of periodic expansion and contraction of a society of states in antiquity, which was ultimately replaced by a universal empire.

In the rest of this article, I will dwell upon international thought in ancient China. I am aware of the scope of the topic and of the challenges posed by embarking on such a huge undertaking in this short space. I make the attempt in the spirit of Martin Wright and following his lead on a voyage of discovery. My chosen analytical focus is on a pivotal idea in ancient as well as contemporary international relations, namely the idea of order: how it is deliberated in ancient Chinese political thought—in particular, why and how alternative visions of order are imagined and offered in antiquity—and how the pursuit of order becomes a moral and political quest in ancient China with the attendant successes and failures. Three interconnected investigations are conducted below for this purpose: of order as the central problematique in ancient China, of order as a constructed social ideal, and of order as a moral and political pursuit. Through this analysis, I seek to establish a broad claim that ancient Chinese political and philosophical deliberations are rich in international thought and to demonstrate why they are contemporaneous with us in the search for a true international theory.

This proposed engagement with ancient Chinese international thought has to avoid two potential pitfalls. One is the risk of transmutation in reading past philosophical ideas.¹⁷ While attempting to engage ancient Chinese thought in a dialogue with current intellectual, moral and political concerns of global politics, we may transmute it, perhaps unwittingly, to such an extent that it becomes part of contemporary discourse, 'reading our favorite theories into the innocent texts'.¹⁸ The other is the real risk of meaning becoming 'lost in translation'. This refers not so much to the literary translation of Chinese classics into English, which in itself poses a formidable challenge, as to the translatability of moral and political visions across civilizational and cultural barriers and divides. Benjamin Schwartz put this challenge eloquently when he stated: 'The very effort to translate this vision [of the *Analects*] into modern Western discourse may inevitably involve the kind of distortion that would result from filling empty spaces of a sparse Chinese landscape painting with the details of a Dutch painter.'¹⁹

¹⁷ Alasdair Macintyre warned about the risk of such transmutation: 'We read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy'. See Alasdair Macintyre, 'The relationship of philosophy to its past', in Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, eds, *Philosophy in history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 31.

¹⁸ Achilles Fang, 'Some reflections on the difficulty of translation', in Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese thought*, p. 285.

¹⁹ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 62.

Order as the central problematic in ancient China

Any student of ancient China in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period, the Axial Age of China, is struck by two seemingly contradictory and certainly paradoxical phenomena. On the one hand, it was the most violent, divided and chaotic period in ancient Chinese history, a period that saw the inexorable dynastic decline of the Zhou (1046–256 BC) and the rise and the eventual fall of a system of contending states that had emerged within and along the Zhou borders after the eighth century BC during the early Eastern Zhou (771–256 BC). On the other, this half-millennium between the collapse of the traditional Chinese ecumene and the establishment of a universal empire is also intellectually the most creative and philosophically the most innovative in the world of thought in ancient China.

The five and a half centuries between 771 BC and 221 BC were years of brutal power politics and interstate wars in ancient China. One account, the *Annals of Spring and Autumn*, attributed to Confucius, noted 36 instances of regicide and 52 instances of elimination of states in the period it covers. It also recorded 483 wars between 722 BC and 481 BC.²⁰ The period witnessed the progressive decline of the central power and universal authority of the Zhou. About 170 states were said to have existed at some time during this period. But by the beginning of the Warring States period (481–221 BC), only seven major states remained in competition. The rise and fall of states was the order of the day.²¹ By the late Spring and Autumn period, ‘the “feudal” ritual system had been so fundamentally undermined that political crises precipitated a profound sense of moral decline: the centre of symbolic control could no longer hold the kingdom from total disintegration.’²²

These states in ancient China did not, however, simply interact in a system where anarchy reigned supreme and *realpolitik* in its ancient incarnation prevailed. They also formed a true anarchical society of states;²³ perhaps the earliest in human history that kept detailed written records. They certainly shared a common culture dominated by the Chinese civilization. They created and maintained functioning institutions of collective security, balance of power, diplomacy and (in a rather rudimentary form) international law to serve their common interests. Treaties, summit meetings, diplomatic conventions, court intermarriages and even hostage-taking were legitimate and indispensable institutions.²⁴ It is perhaps for

²⁰ Xu, *Chunqiu bangjiao yanjiu*, p. 2; John King Fairbank, *China: a new history* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap / Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 49.

²¹ See Richard L. Walker, *The multi-state system in ancient China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954); Yang Kuan, *Zhanguo Shi* [A history of the Warring States period] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1989); Cho-yun Hsu, ‘The Spring and Autumn period’, in Loewe and Shaughnessy, eds, *The Cambridge history of ancient China*, pp. 545–86; Mark E. Lewis, ‘Warring States: political history’, in Loewe and Shaughnessy, eds, *The Cambridge history of ancient China*, pp. 587–650.

²² Weiming Tu, ‘Confucius and Confucianism’, in Walter Slote and George A. De Vos, eds, *Confucianism and the family* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 8.

²³ It is important to note that a general recognition and acceptance of the nominal and universal moral authority of the Zhou Son of Heaven persisted among these states. The total collapse of the Zhou dynasty is conventionally dated at 256 BC.

²⁴ Liu Boji, *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi* [Politics of diplomatic conventions and alliances in the Spring and Autumn period] (Taipei: Zhonghua Congshu, 1962); Yang Kuan, *Zhanguo shi* [A history of the Warring States period];

these reasons that Wight remarked that ‘ancient China seems to have resembled modern Europe rather than [ancient] Greece’.²⁵

This most chaotic and violent period is also often referred to as ‘the period of philosophers’, ‘the golden age of Chinese philosophy’ and ‘the period of [intellectual] creativity’.²⁶ All the competing Chinese philosophical traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism and Moism, among others—trace their origins back to this period, which is closely identified with the wellspring of Chinese philosophical, political and social thought. The battle of ideas among the fabled ‘numerous masters and hundred schools of thought’ (*zhuzi baijia*), which lasted more than three centuries, was fought, therefore, at the same time as the moral, political and social order presided over by the Zhou was collapsing and when old institutions and tradition were degenerating and disintegrating.²⁷ For all classical Chinese thinkers, what Collingwood calls ‘the special problem of thought’ of their day,²⁸ that is, the central problematique of the era, is unsurprisingly the question of order. Confucius used the phrase *libeng yuehuai* (literally, the collapse of rites and the degeneration of music) to sum up this period of total collapse of order, when, he lamented, ‘the Way does not prevail’, and when ‘The Way makes no progress’.²⁹ In Mencius’ words, ‘When the world had declined and the *tao* had faded away, heresies and violence became prevalent. There were even instances of regicides and parricides. Confucius was filled with apprehension and composed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.’³⁰

In this era of disorder, classical Chinese thinkers, as living men confronting specific problems, had to wrestle with a number of crucial questions in response to the breakdown of the moral and political order that had claimed the authority of Heaven: How and why had the world order decreed by Heaven collapsed? Why did the human order deviate so much from Heaven’s will? What was to be done about it? How was the moral and normative order to be restored? And where was the Way?

The search for a new moral and normative order took the form of great debates among classical thinkers concerning new ideas and new institutions that would re-establish and sustain such an order. They were contending vigorously among

Sun Yurong, *Zhongguo gudai guojifa yanjiu* [A study of international law in ancient China] (Beijing: China Politics and Law University Press, 1999); Xu, *Chunqiu bangjiao yanjiu*.

²⁵ Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 40. Victoria Hui also sees some similarities between the ancient Chinese states-system and the early modern European system: ‘Similar to the early modern European system, the ancient Chinese system experienced prevalence of war, disintegration of feudalism, formation of international anarchy, emergence of territorial sovereignty, and configuration of the balance of power.’ See Hui, ‘Toward a dynamic theory of international politics’, p. 176.

²⁶ Fung Yu-lan, *A history of Chinese philosophy*, vol. 1: *The period of the philosophers*, p. 7; Liang Qichao, *History of Chinese political thought during the early Tsin [sic] period*, trans. L. T. Chen (London, Routledge, 2001), p. 28; Hsiao Kung-chuan, *A history of Chinese political thought*, vol. 1, p. 28.

²⁷ Hsiao also noted, however, that such a phenomenon was historically contingent. In his words, there is an ‘opportune appearance on that scene of some great thinkers’ [during the Spring and Autumn period], and that ‘political thought, we must conclude, arose in the late Chou period as a result of circumstances that might occur but once in a thousand years’: Hsiao Kung-chuan, *A history of Chinese political thought*, vol. 1, pp. 4–7.

²⁸ R. G. Collingwood, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 4.

²⁹ Confucius, *Lunyu* [The Analects], 16: 2, 5: 6; Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945), pp. 204, 108.

³⁰ D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 114.

themselves ‘in proposing solutions of the pressing problems of bringing order out of chaos and in giving meaning to human life under the constant threat of brutal warfare’.³¹ These contentions produced substantially different propositions for the solution of the problems of order, which doxographers of the early Han (206 BC–AD 220) would retrospectively categorize as *Rujia* (Confucianism), *Daojia* (Daoism), *Fajia* (Legalism), *Mojia* (Moism) and *Zajia* (Eclecticism). They also led, importantly, to a common philosophical and political discourse for all contending schools of thought, not just in terms of a shared vocabulary that is directly related to order, with terms such as *zhi* (governance), *luan* (disorder), *he* (harmony), *ping* (peace, or pacification), *an* (peace and tranquillity), *zheng* (rectification) and *dao* (the Way),³² but also, and more significantly, in terms of a common purpose, namely the search for a longed-for but lost order that would provide China once more, as the Zhou Dynasty was believed to have done, with political order, social stability, economic well-being and cultural elegance.

Classical Chinese thinkers were not just men of ideas but also men of action—even the Daoists, for whom ‘inaction’ is action. More precisely, they were men of both moral/philosophical vision and political mission, particularly those who were close to, or sought to get close to, power. The appreciation of the social role of these thinkers as at once social critics, moral philosophers and political missionaries is particularly pertinent to understanding the importance of philosophical discourse and its relevance to the practice of statecraft in ancient China. In Arthur Wright’s words: ‘Chinese philosophers were generally members of the official class concerned with the management of social, economic, and political affairs. They were always near enough to authority to promote the embodiment of their ideas in programs of action. And many of their abstract formulations are intelligible only in terms of programs of action for specific social and political ends.’³³

There was a ‘special relationship’, as it were, between princes and philosophers in this period. Even Confucius, famed as China’s first private thinker, is no exception. It is Confucius who ‘sets a precedent which will be followed by philosophers for the next three centuries by travelling with his disciples from state to state seeking a ruler who will listen to him’.³⁴ The Warring States period witnessed a notable rise in prominence of the *Shi* or ‘wandering intellectuals’, a group of thinkers who were committed to government service as their vocation and who travelled from one state to another to seek opportunities to offer their ideas for practical statecraft in the service of a prince. Confucius’s ‘professed “ideal” ambition’, according to Benjamin Schwartz, ‘like that of many wandering intellectuals of the Warring States period which followed, was to advise princes how to establish order within their own states as well as within the entire civilized

³¹ Tu, ‘Confucius and Confucianism’, p. 4.

³² Zhang Dainian, *Key concepts in Chinese philosophy*, trans. and ed. Edmund Ryden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

³³ Arthur Wright, ‘Introduction’, in Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese thought*, p. 5.

³⁴ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 10.

world.³⁵ It is this close relationship between knowledge and power that informs the prescriptive nature of ancient Chinese political thought. For all these political and philosophical reasons, classical Chinese thinkers, Confucius among others, would have agreed readily with Wight that any international thought 'is necessarily about moral or prescriptive questions'.³⁶

The anarchic conditions prevailing in this period of ancient China, in addition to the disintegration of the glorious Zhou tradition, not only stimulated philosophical and political debates but also informed and shaped those debates. For those philosophers participating, intellectual conflicts, philosophical contentions and political differences must have been exciting but also dismaying. What we regard today as pluralism, with a hundred schools of thought contending, is likely to have been seen as no more than a reflection of the chaos and confusion in the prevailing social, ethical and political (dis)order,³⁷ an undisputable indication that the Way had been lost and not yet found. Mencius, the staunch defender of the Confucian vision of an ideal order, once said: 'I am not fond of argument. I simply have no alternative.'³⁸ Philosophical debates, in other words, constitute an indispensable part of the search for an ideal order and a good society. Philosophers simply cannot shirk their responsibilities.

Order as a constructed social ideal

From the Spring and Autumn period onwards, the increasingly wide gap between the existing ethical and socio-political order of the day and the ideal order as embodied in Heaven's will was troubling to many classical thinkers. The huge gap between the real (what is) and the ideal (what ought to be) of the human order was a central problem in their philosophical speculation. The primacy of order in classical philosophical deliberations and political discourse was established through the debates among these thinkers on how to restore and create a new normative and socio-political order in a period of chaos, conflict and war, informed by shared memories, myth and legends, and inspired by a serious moral and political pursuit for a new framework.

Among the Axial Age civilizations, ancient China is said to be the only one that 'has the sense of looking back from present disruption towards an empire and culture which flourished in the immediate past' in search of the solution for its contemporary problems.³⁹ A keen historical consciousness compelled ancient Chinese philosophers to look back on their lost 'golden age', particularly that of the Zhou, in constructing an ideal statehood in China's deep history. For Confucius,

³⁵ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 60. Confucius' own efforts in getting the prince to listen to him were, however, marked more by failure than by success. Schwartz describes Confucius' frustrations as follows: 'Thus Confucius found within his own state all the violations of the normative order which so agitated his soul. He spent much time in the neighbouring ancient states of Cheng, Ch'en, Ts'ai and Ch'i, seeking opportunities for public service and was everywhere frustrated': pp. 59–60.

³⁶ Hedley Bull, 'Martin Wight and the theory of international relations', in Wight, *International theory: the three traditions*, p. xxi.

³⁷ Hu Shi, *Zhongguo gudai zhhexue shi* [A history of ancient Chinese philosophy] (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1965).

³⁸ Lau, *Mencius*, p. 113.

³⁹ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 4.

the *dao* as the all-embracing normative human order was already discernible in two pre-Confucian classics: in particular, the *Book of Documents* (Shu Jing) and the *Book of Poetry* (Shi Jing), which embodied, and was informed by, the earlier cultural orientations of Shang civilization. Through following the *dao*, an imagined universal and all-embracing ethical and political order had already been achieved in the historical past.⁴⁰

The quest for order means first and foremost, therefore, constructing order as a social ideal. For the Confucians in particular, the idealization of order led to the idealization of the past.⁴¹ It can be seen clearly throughout the *Analects* that Confucius firmly believed that the ‘golden age’ of harmony, peace and tranquility had been brought about by the sage-kings, and that their moral authority as ritualized power was sufficient to maintain political order and social stability. The Way had prevailed not just in the early Zhou, but also in the preceding two dynasties, the Xia (c.2070–c.1600 BC) and the Shang (1570–1045 BC), after which it had been lost. In other words, a mix of history, legends and myth led Confucius to believe that the ideal order had been realized in antiquity under the rule of certain sage-kings, who had not only created ideal social and political institutions that were in accord with the will of Heaven, but had also provided exemplary moral example and leadership. In so doing, they had already shown posterity what the Way of Heaven (*Tian Dao*) was.

To put the point differently, Confucius articulated the idea that ‘the highest possibilities of human experience had already been achieved within the known human past and that the hope of the future was to recapture this lost splendour’.⁴² This idea envisaged no order that was radically different from the past; indeed, it made antiquity the ultimate source of legitimacy for any new normative order. Many Confucians, therefore, saw it as their mission ‘to reformulate and revitalize those institutions [of the historical past] that were believed to have for centuries maintained social solidarity and enabled people to live in harmony and prosperity’.⁴³ It follows that the ideal ethical and political order can be restored or re-established with the emergence of a ‘true king’ to provide moral leadership and by returning to Zhou *li* as the corpus of the Zhou social institutions. ‘We follow upon Chou!’ declared Confucius in the *Analects*.⁴⁴

The Confucian nostalgia for antiquity is, however, not entirely based on myth and fiction. Confucius was not constructing a pure utopia. Herrlee Creel’s classical study of early Zhou suggests that the Zhou Dynasty did achieve a high degree of pacification and a relative peace and stability for an appreciably long period within its territory and along its peripheries. There existed a *Pax Zhou-ica*, so to speak.⁴⁵ New archaeological findings so far have confirmed, rather than contradicted, the

⁴⁰ The *dao*, however, should also emphatically embrace the ‘inner’ moral life of the living individual.

⁴¹ Such idealization of order and of the past, now often attributed mainly to the Confucians, was in fact shared by many thinkers of other schools at the time.

⁴² Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 63.

⁴³ Tu, ‘Confucius and Confucianism’, p. 8.

⁴⁴ Confucius, *Lunyu* [The Analects] 3: 14; Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ Herrlee G. Creel, *The origin of statecraft in China*, vol. 1: *The western Chou empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

legendary picture in the classical literature.⁴⁶ The Confucian idealization of sage-kings and statehood in antiquity is more likely to be reflective thinking than pure speculation. If many of Confucius' ideas are indeed generated by his thinking about the brutal social reality and disorder of his time, they must also reflect his knowledge about ancient China's historical experience, which was lost in later generations.⁴⁷ Confucius repeatedly claimed himself that he was simply a transmitter of past traditions, not an innovator.

The idealization of order also grows from another source. Starting from a belief in the existence of an innate relationship between the natural order and the social order, the assumption that the universe is harmonious and consists of well-ordered relationships presupposes a natural harmony between heavenly and earthly forces. Humans are but one element in this all-encompassing cosmos; whatever social order is in existence is no more than part of a 'greater natural world'. For the Confucians, therefore, 'between each smaller and larger entity, notably the family and the state, the human and the natural worlds, there exists a paired relationship: the family is a microcosm, the state a macrocosm; the human world is a microcosm, the natural world a macrocosm'.⁴⁸ Xun Zi articulated more explicitly this innate relationship between Heaven, earth and human society when he stated, resorting to his analogical imagination, that 'Heaven has its seasons, Earth has its wealth, and Man has his government'.⁴⁹

Tying natural order and social order together in this way not only justified and legitimized the social order in existence; it also made it possible for the Confucians to present and articulate their ideal of a social order and how such an order is constructed hierarchically. Since Heaven is obviously superior to Earth, and *Yang* to *Yin*, the ideal social order in human communities should reflect such superior-inferior relationships. Four out of the five social relationships formulated by Mencius, which came to embody the ideal social order in ancient Chinese society as well as the Chinese state, are hierarchical. These are father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, and old and young.⁵⁰ Fulfilling the social obligations defined by relative position in the social hierarchy is an indispensable part of this social order.

The most forceful but also most concise articulation of how a good and ideal familial and political order can be realized is made by Confucius in the *Analects*. In answering the question raised by the Duke Jing of Qi about government, Confucius simply stated: *junjun chenchen fufu zizi* (which literally means: when the prince behaves like a prince and the minister behaves like a minister; when the father

⁴⁶ Writing in 1983, K. C. Chang observed: 'In recent years, as the result of archaeological—particularly textual—discoveries, we have become increasingly confident of the essential authenticity of the ancient texts and of the historicity of the many legends': K. C. Chang, *Arts, myth, and ritual: the path to political authority in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 120. See also K. C. Chang, *Shang civilization* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1980).

⁴⁷ As Schwartz notes: 'The *Analects* are full of references to historic facts (or alleged facts) as well as to historic personalities. It is only by plunging into the reservoir of historic experience that one knows how mankind abides in the *tao* or falls away from it': Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 86.

⁴⁸ Bodde, *Chinese thought, society and science*, p. 194.

⁴⁹ Donald J. Munro, *The concept of man in early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969), p. 39.

⁵⁰ The fifth is between friend and friend.

behaves like a father and the son behaves like a son).⁵¹ By extension, an ideal social order can be realized either within a family or within a state as long as everyone in their socially defined hierarchy fulfils his social obligations and functions.

The conception of the family as the microcosm of the society and the state puts man at the centre of the Confucian ethical system.⁵² This has profound implications for our discussion. First, morality is the foundation of any social and political order. No socio-political order is possible without a moral order. Second, it follows that harmonious and stable social and political order is realizable through human efforts. Disorder is a human failure. And third, moral example and leadership are most important in bringing about human order in accord with the Way (*dao*) within the family as well as within the world.⁵³

Such Confucian concepts as *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness) and *shu* (tolerance) not only suggest the ideal moral quality of man. They also emphasize the existence of man as a social being, as these qualities can only be demonstrated in human relations. Such social relationships function within a series of concentric and increasingly larger social units. The foundational unit is without any doubt the family, beyond which in the concentric expansion are the state/empire and ultimately *Tian Xia*, All Under Heaven, the whole known civilized world. Such distinctive conceptions of human community at different levels make no clear demarcation between what we understand today as the domestic and the international. For ancient Chinese philosophers, whether Confucian or not, the basic moral principles for establishing and maintaining socio-political order should be the same, regardless of whether they apply to a basic social entity such as the family or All Under Heaven, or indeed any other social community in between.

Order as a moral and political pursuit

Constructing order as a social ideal in ancient China is important, as such ideals can turn ideas and beliefs from objects of contemplation and affirmation into values of hope, desire, endeavour, admiration and resolve, which become commonly recognized, accepted and acted upon. In evoking a community of emotion and will, order as a constructed social ideal played an important role in the pursuit of re-establishing moral and political order in ancient China. The Confucian idealization of good order under the sage-kings in antiquity reinforces the central position of man in the Confucian ethical system. While the sage-kings brought about pacification, established order and maintained stability by following the will

⁵¹ Xun Zi later extends this formulation to include *xiongxiong*, *didi*, *nongnong*, *shishi*, *gonggong* and *shangshang* (when the elder brother behaves like an elder brother, and the younger brother like a younger brother; when the farmer behaves like a farmer, and the wandering intellectual like an intellectual; and when the worker behaves like a worker, and the merchant like a merchant).

⁵² The ancient Chinese philosophers debated human nature extensively. See Munro, *The concept of man in early China*; Herbert Plutschow, 'Xunzi and the ancient Chinese philosophical debate on human nature', *Anthropoetics* 8: 1, 2002. <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/apo801/xunzi.htm>, accessed 18 September 2013.

⁵³ The centrality of *dao* in the Confucian ethics is reflected in its frequent use in the Confucian classics. On one account, *dao* appears about 90 times in the *Analects*. See Leo K. C. Cheung, 'The unification of *dao* and *ren* in the *Analects*', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31: 3, 2004, pp. 313–27.

of Heaven, evil rulers and their immoral deeds perpetuated injustice and caused destruction, thus losing the Mandate of Heaven. They were therefore the sources of disorder. Mencius lamented the world in disarray of his time in the following words: 'Tyrants arose one after another. They pulled down houses in order to make ponds and the people had nowhere to rest. They turned fields into hunting parks depriving the people of their livelihood. Heresies and violence arose.'⁵⁴

Embedded in this idealization is a conception of Heaven as interacting with man, who in response reacts to Heaven and in so doing reconstitutes the Way. Confucius said: 'A man can enlarge his Way; but there is no Way that can enlarge a man.'⁵⁵ Such a conception of cosmic and social order, therefore, affords man 'the capacity to order life without appeal to the transcendent, whether as pre-existing and universally applicable moral principle, legal enactment or law of nature'.⁵⁶ In so idealizing order, the Confucians also humanized the concept of order and moralized the pursuit of order.

The idea that the normative socio-political order in antiquity was dependent on the inner virtues of kings and rulers who enjoyed the Mandate of Heaven and possessed the spiritual and ethical power to maintain that order can already be found in the pre-Confucian written literature. Confucius introduced two innovations. One is that a commoner like Confucius himself may teach another commoner how to become a virtuous man (*jun zi*), thus denying any political authority the monopoly of teaching of virtue. By implication, teaching of virtue is a potent force for maintaining order and transforming society. The *Analects* and early Confucian doctrine clearly show an overriding concern with virtuous human behaviour. Second, striving to be a man of virtue is an existential goal that can be achieved through learning, knowing, emulation of role models and, most importantly, self-cultivation, a goal that Confucius himself set out to achieve in order to be the ultimate model. Learning and knowing become important, therefore, not primarily for epistemological reasons but for their behavioural implications and as part of a process of character-building. Donald Munro put it tellingly in a comparative perspective, when he observed that 'the difference between the early Platonists and Confucians can be stated as follows: The Platonists were more concerned with knowing in order to understand, while Confucians were more concerned with knowing in order to behave properly toward other men'.⁵⁷ Such special concern with the behavioural implications of 'knowledge' is not restricted to the Confucian tradition.⁵⁸

For the Confucians, then, the moral pursuit of a world order starts from the innate process of learning to be human in a social environment. It starts at home. Self-cultivation is the key to becoming a man of virtue. This requires a process of

⁵⁴ Lau, *Mencius*, p. 113.

⁵⁵ Confucius, *Lunyu* [The Analects] 15: 28; Waley, *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 199.

⁵⁶ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 30.

⁵⁷ Munro, *The concept of man in early China*, p. 54.

⁵⁸ As is well acknowledged, 'the Chinese word for "education" (*jiaoyu*) is composed of two words, teaching (*jiao*) and nurturing (*yu*), and this education is not merely for the purpose of conveying knowledge, but also for shaping correct behaviour patterns and internalising them as part of one's character': Yu Jiyuan, 'Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle', *Philosophy East and West* 48: 2, 1998, p. 337.

ethical learning and training—a lifelong process of internalizing virtues as second nature. Learning is central to the cultivation of individuals and to the ordering of society. It is first and foremost in the proper practice of family commitments that one learns to appreciate and manifest virtue, as ‘*ideally speaking*, it is in the bosom of the family that the individual learns to act in terms of virtuous motives as ends in themselves rather than as means to ulterior ends’.⁵⁹ This is so because ‘the notion of “family” is thought to be the natural basis and strongest evidence of human love, harmony, mutual concern and obligations, a concentrated model of “the very essence of humanity”’.⁶⁰ It is also within the sacred institution of the family that one learns how to handle power and authority correctly. Hence the Confucian emphasis on four core family values—*zhong* (loyalty), *xiao* (filial piety), *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness)—as among the foundational values for society. The unremitting pursuit of moral attainments and perfection by individuals seeking to become virtuous is enhanced, not hindered, by their particularistic familial commitments.

The inner and intricate relationship between learning as the foundation for self-cultivation, ordering the state and pacifying the world is made more explicit in *The great learning* (Da Xue), a Confucian classic. A two-way process is stipulated thus:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom [All Under Heaven] was made tranquil and happy.⁶¹

This is, in short, the idea of *neisheng waiwang* (inner sage, outer king): that is, full realization of complete self-cultivation would not only lead to sagehood, but also confer on the person who achieved it moral authority as ritualized power to rule and reign over the state and the world. Self-cultivation is a lifelong pursuit, even for the Son of Heaven.⁶²

This appeal to virtuous rulers and to ritual observance, social norms and cultural values internalized as personal virtues as the basis for re-establishing and maintaining order at the interstate level was clearly not shared by the Moists. Mozi

⁵⁹ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 261 (italics in original).

⁶⁰ Zhao, ‘A political world philosophy in terms of All-under-Heaven (Tian-xia)’, p. 13.

⁶¹ Wing-Tsit Chan, *A sourcebook in Chinese philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 84–94.

⁶² *The great learning* explicitly stipulates that ‘from the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides’.

was wholly oriented towards a more practical goal of the prevention of war, even though ‘his rejection of the “inner” sources of morality do not preclude a space for the role of moral sentiments’.⁶³ The appeal was explicitly rejected by the Legalists, though they were prepared to concede that some historical ideas in China’s cultural heritage had once been meaningful and relevant. The Legalists, from Lord Shang to Shen Buhai and Han Feizi, argued strongly that the establishment of peace and order had little to do with the subjective intentionality of any sage-king or virtuous man; on the contrary, they asserted, it was a combination of *fa* (penal laws and other such social institutions), *shu* (methods/statecraft) and *shi* (coercive power/authority) that made a state such as Qin sufficiently wealthy and powerful to achieve undisputable hegemony in order to pacify the Chinese world.

In the non-ideal world of the Warring States period, with its cruel social and political realities, and in parallel to the Confucian advocacy of a moral pursuit of order, runs a relentless pursuit of political order. The earlier emergence of an institution called the *Ba* (hegemonic) system in the Spring and Autumn period is a primary example. The *Ba* system refers to a league of Great Powers established through treaties and agreements and led by a hegemonic lord nominally blessed by the Zhou Son of Heaven whose leadership was consensually recognized by other Great Powers. It takes upon itself the responsibility for preventing the complete collapse of *Pax Zhou-ica* as a nominal order, preserving the semblance of the Zhou’s universal moral authority, and maintaining an interstate order through recognizing the legitimacy of differentiated levels of authority of the contending states.⁶⁴ From the seventh century BC to the fifth century BC, four different regional powers, namely, Zheng, Qi, Jin and Chu, emerged successively as the *Ba* (hegemon/leader) of this system, which operated with varying degrees of success. Alliances were formed and numerous wars were fought in the name of maintaining the moral and political order. Summit meetings, peace conferences, shifting alignments of Great Powers and changing leadership of the *Ba* are common features of this nascent society of states. It is possible to discern here the operation of diplomacy, war, balance of power and Great Power management in antiquity as institutional practices to sustain the *Ba* system.⁶⁵ The transformation of the *Ba* system and its gradual fall led the fragmented Chinese world into the so-called Warring States period in 481 BC.

The practice of balance of power as both an idea and an institution culminated in the so-called century of alliances (350–250 BC) during the Warring States period. Seven contending states engaged perpetually in forming shifting ‘horizontal’ (pro-Qin) and ‘vertical’ (anti-Qin) alliances of various configurations. While the most powerful rival state to the Qin took the lead in forming hostile coalitions against the Qin’s expansion eastwards, the ambitious Qin forced the alignment of

⁶³ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 329.

⁶⁴ As mentioned earlier, the *Annals of Spring and Autumn* record more than 470 wars. According to Hui, between 656 and 357 BC a total of 161 wars involving great powers were fought. See Hui, ‘Toward a dynamic theory of international politics’, p. 189.

⁶⁵ Hsu, ‘The Spring and Autumn period’, pp. 551–69. See also Walker, *The multi-state system in ancient China*; Liu, *Chunqiu huimeng zhengzhi*.

subservient states into alliances to counter the hostile coalitions. This stratagem, the so-called *hezong lianheng* (literally, vertical coalitions vs horizontal alliances), has since been deeply embedded in the Chinese strategic culture.⁶⁶

It is a bitter historical irony that the Chinese world was eventually pacified not through moral and humane authority but through brute power in 221 BC. It is not those philosophically more enduring ideas dominant in traditional Chinese thought in subsequent generations that eventually proved pivotally instrumental in bringing order to the anarchic world of the Warring States. It is rather the antithesis of the Confucian ideas advocated by the Legalist School—laws (*fa*), methods/statecraft (*shu*) and coercive power/authority (*shi*), among others—that helped the Qin to develop ‘the highest administrative-extractive capacity—even the high “modern” capacity for direct rule and total mobilization’, thus making Qin the ultimate victor of all Warring States.⁶⁷ Li Si, a leading figure in the Legalist School, who helped China’s first emperor to unify the Chinese world and served as his prime minister, did not mince his words: ‘The Ch’in have been victorious for four generations. Their army is powerful. Within the four seas, their power over-awes the princes. They do not accomplish this by humanity and righteousness. They do it by conducting their affairs according to what is most useful and expedient.’⁶⁸

It was the ruler of the Qin who unified the fragmented Chinese world and who appropriated to himself the title of the First Emperor, not by returning to the ideal of the Zhou in China’s deep history, but by constructing a new polity—Imperial China as a universal empire, which was to last for more than two millennia. History went on. Confucians as China’s Axial Age cultural and philosophical innovators had failed. Or had they?

Conclusion

The above discussion, I hope, has not only demonstrated ‘the exotic charm of another system of thought’, but also exposed ‘the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*’.⁶⁹ They have demonstrated, I also hope, that Confucius and Lao Zi, as well as other classical Chinese thinkers, are alive to us and as contemporaneous with us philosophically as Plato, Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers. Ancient Chinese thinkers, no less than their Greek counterparts, were confronted with, as Wight would say, ‘intractable difficulties of international order’.⁷⁰ It is clear that the idea of order, its conception and its pursuit in ancient China, are foundational to the emergence of Chinese (political)

⁶⁶ With Qin located in the far west of China, the pro-Qin alliances usually formed along an east–west axis, whereas the anti-Qin alliances aimed at checking Qin’s expansion normally linked states from north to south: hence the so-called ‘vertical’ *vis-à-vis* ‘horizontal’ formations. For more detailed discussions of the practice of shifting alliances in the Warring States period, see Lewis, ‘Warring States: political history’, pp. 616–40; Hui, ‘Towards a dynamic theory of international politics’, pp. 188–94.

⁶⁷ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, ‘History and thought in China’s traditions’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 17: 2, 2012, p. 130.

⁶⁸ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 320.

⁶⁹ See Michel Foucault, *The order of things: archaeology of the human sciences* (London: Tavistock, 1970), p. x (italics in original).

⁷⁰ Wight, quoted in David S. Yost, ‘Martin Wight and the philosophers of war and peace’, in Wight, *Four seminal thinkers in international theory*, p. xlv.

philosophy. In China's Axial Age, as much as in the Greek one, different visions of order were imagined, offered and critiqued; and different approaches to pursuing order in international life were debated and practised. How, then, can rediscovering and retrieving ancient Chinese political thought as an Axial Age civilizational heritage enrich our search for international theory?

Three propositions can be made as preliminary responses to this question. First, we should acknowledge, following Schwartz, that: 'The thought of ancient China does not provide single responses to the problems of ancient civilization any more than does the thought of ancient Greece. What emerge from the common cultural orientations of these civilizations in the Axial Age are not univocal responses but rather shared problematiques.'⁷¹ It follows that we should also recognize the possibility of a universal human discourse at the level of shared problematiques, such as the problem of order, despite the unquestionable distance between the divergent cultural orientations of the Axial Age civilizations.

Second, it highlights the way in which a historical approach to studying a body of thought seemingly incommensurable with the western tradition can provide 'an historical explanation of why certain of the key experiences of its adherents in wrestling with their own problems were what they were', as Alasdair Macintyre maintains.⁷²

Third, and more specifically, the Confucian conception of politics as moral persuasion and the Confucian proposition of learning to be human as one of the foundational questions of human (and by implication international) relations can help humanize the exercise of authority and the approaches to dealing with inequality of social power in international relations. Confucian 'aesthetic order', sustained by ritual, music and performative naming, and composed of harmonious interrelations in which both Heaven and humanity are involved, can be taken up by the aesthetic turn in IR theorization. Its anthropocosmic vision as a critique of the anthropocentrism embedded in the Enlightenment mentality can help reconstitute a new discourse of global ethics.

Making the above assertions about the insight that the exploration of traditional Chinese political thought in the Axial Age can offer for theorizing IR today is, however, not the most important purpose of this article. These particular claims will invariably be subject to contention and contestation, as will many others I have tried to establish in the article. After all, 'intellectual life is first of all conflict and disagreement.'⁷³ What I seek to do through these discussions, as Confucius did in the *Analects*, and as Wight has done in *International theory: the three traditions*, is, most importantly, to open up, and to issue an invitation to, a conversation between the world of thought in ancient China and the theorization of IR today as an intellectual ritual. Given the neglect of ancient China in the search for a truly international theory so far, failing to take up this invitation to participate in this intellectual ritual would make us all doubly culpable.

⁷¹ Schwartz, *The world of thought in ancient China*, p. 14.

⁷² Macintyre, 'The relationship of philosophy to its past', p. 43.

⁷³ Randall Collins, *The sociology of philosophies: a global theory of intellectual change* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 1.

