

The Ambivalence of Creation

*Debates Concerning
Innovation and Artifice
in Early China*

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Introduction

In 221 B.C., the ruler of Qin created the first unified empire in Chinese history. According to the Han historian Sima Qian, the self-proclaimed “first emperor” later erected a stele near Mt. Langya with the following inscription:

It is the twenty-eighth year. The first emperor has created a new
beginning [*zuo shi*].

He has put in order the laws, standards, and principles for the myriad
things. . . .

All under Heaven is unified in heart and yielding in will.

Implements have a single measure, and graphs are written in the same
way. . . .

He has rectified and given order to the different customs . . .

His accomplishments surpass those of the five thearchs [*di*].¹

The inscription celebrates the first emperor as a great unifier, fashioning order for the entire world through laws, standards, and principles. But such a fashioning was not a simple reimplementation of the order of the ancient sages: the text celebrates the first emperor as a great creator, one who had initiated a new beginning and whose accomplishments had surpassed those of the five thearchs, the great sages of antiquity.

Although these claims would be portrayed in the succeeding Han dynasty as examples of hubris and arrogance, the fact that empire was indeed a recent

invention, unprecedented in earlier history, was nonetheless accepted. And if the creator of empire was not in fact a great sage, then how could such a new creation be legitimate? Is there another way of claiming legitimacy for new institutions apart from claiming the sagacity of the creator? Or should his creation be rejected, and should kings return to the institutions authored by the sages of antiquity?

Such questions were of primary importance during the early Han, a period when the legitimacy of imperial institutions was widely disputed. However, these disputes came out of a much older set of debates in early China. As early as the Warring States period, when unprecedented institutions were established in several of the states, a debate developed around such issues as how and under what circumstances new institutions could be legitimately fashioned. But the debate quickly encompassed more than just the question of whether such reforms were legitimate. Immediately, larger issues concerning creation and innovation came to the fore. Can a sage innovate? Under what circumstances? And whence did human culture originally come? Was it created by human sages? Is it therefore an artificial fabrication, or is it based in part on natural patterns? And is it possible for new sages to emerge who could create something better?

This work studies these debates from the Warring States to the early Han dynasty, providing a detailed analysis of the development of the debates and the historical consequences of the positions taken. The discussion involves a nuanced study of the debates concerning innovation, the conflicting narratives written during this time concerning the initial emergence of the state, and the way these ideas and narratives were manipulated for ideological purposes during the formation of the first empires.

My hope is that this study will raise new questions concerning a formative period in Chinese history. At the very least, it should deepen our understanding of early Chinese philosophical and cosmological views, render more complex our reading of early Chinese narratives, and clarify various aspects of early Chinese imperial culture.

But it should also serve as a means of bringing to the forefront other questions concerning early Chinese culture, such as notions concerning artifice, creation, and innovation. This is of some import, for early China is at times described in contemporary scholarship as a civilization that assumed continuity

between nature and culture and hence had no notion of culture as an artificial fabrication, no notion that the sages did anything but imitate the natural world. One conclusion of this study is that such views were not assumptions at all: the idea that human culture is simply a part of the natural world, and that true sages never created anything but simply replicated patterns in the natural world, arose at a certain time in early China and only came to prominence at the end of a lengthy debate. Instead of reading such ideas as widespread assumptions in early China, the goal should be to understand the debate within which such ideas arose and to explain why an emphasis on continuity came to prominence in the early Han.

I begin with an overview of the relevant secondary literature on these issues. A significant portion of this literature is based, either implicitly or explicitly, on the claim of a contrast between a Chinese emphasis on the continuity of nature and culture and a Western emphasis on discontinuity. In tracing the history of this scholarship I try to account for the persistence of such a framework of analysis.

Analyses of Chinese Culture

The history of scholarship on this issue stretches back in Europe to the seventeenth century. The reasons for such an early interest are not difficult to discern. It was during this time that the first translations, or at least paraphrases, of early Chinese texts made their way into European intellectual circles, and many thinkers seemed quite surprised by what they saw. Scholars attempting to work out a vision of the evolution (or de-evolution) of culture through a rereading of ancient Greek and Christian notions of a human separation from nature were surprised to read accounts of orthodox Chinese texts that explicitly claimed their culture was simply a part of the natural process. This discovery led a number of scholars to study China as part of a contrastive framework with Greek and Christian views. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed intellectual history of these early-modern European studies, a brief outline of some of those ideas will be helpful, for, as we shall see, a number of contemporary scholars, including K. C. Chang, see themselves as working out of these traditions.

Early-Modern European Views of Chinese Culture

Starting in the late seventeenth century, some scholars became fascinated with Chinese civilization, and particularly with what they thought were Chinese views of nature, creation, and artifice. This speculation began with the early Jesuit missionaries, much of whose work was oriented toward reading the Chinese classics and determining where that tradition stood in relation to Christian dogma.

The official position of the time was that of degeneration: all societies had, since the dispersion, lost their understanding of God and his laws, and thus required conversion to the revelations given in the Bible. The central problem for the missionaries was thus to determine whether Chinese culture had retained some understanding of the earlier-known truth. Although in the eighteenth century a series of papal bulls, culminating in the *Ex quo singulari* of 1742, condemned Chinese rites completely, the dominant view of many Jesuits in the late sixteenth through early eighteenth century had been that an understanding of God's laws could in fact be found in the Chinese tradition. The task, then, was how to explain the existence of such an understanding. Various theories were propounded, ranging from the claim of survival from the past to later revelation.

One of the most important positions was also one of the earliest: that of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who held that the source of these conceptions was natural reason: just as the Greeks had, through the use of reason, relearned some of what had been lost since the dispersion, so, by the same means, had the Chinese achieved a profound understanding of natural law: “To begin at the beginning, in ancient times, they [the Chinese] followed a natural law as faithfully as in our own countries. . . . When we examine the texts closely, we discover in them very few things which are contrary to the light of reason and many which are in conformity with it, and their natural philosophies are second to none.”² While lacking in revealed religious teachings, the Chinese had nonetheless developed advanced natural philosophies.

In contrast, the Jesuit Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730) believed in the existence of an original lawgiver in all of the ancient societies. Although called by different names (Fuxi in China, Hermes Trismegistus in Egypt and Greece, Enoch among the Hebrews, Zoroaster in Persia), he was in fact a single figure, and in-

deed, the laws handed down by this figure were those of God. All of the ancient civilizations, then, had received revelation from the Creator.³

Nonetheless, it was Ricci's ideas that would ultimately be the more influential. Important in this regard are the writings of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716). Because of their lengthy correspondence concerning the *Yijing* hexagrams, Leibniz is frequently associated with the ideas of Bouvet, but his ideas were closer to those of the much earlier Ricci. Unlike Bouvet but very much like Ricci, Leibniz saw early Chinese culture as having arisen not from revelation but through natural reason. Here, however, Leibniz went much further than Ricci: Leibniz saw the Chinese as having overcome the Fall, as well as the subsequent separation from nature, by attempting to return to nature. Indeed, for Leibniz it was this profound relationship with nature that was both the virtue and the limitation of their thought:

In profundity of knowledge and in the theoretical disciplines we are their superiors. For besides logic and metaphysics, and the knowledge of things incorporeal, which we justly claim as peculiarly our province, we excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material, i.e., in things mathematical, as in truth demonstrated when Chinese astronomy comes into competition with our own. . . . And so if we are their equals in the industrial arts, and ahead of them in contemplative sciences, certainly they surpass us (though it is almost shameful to confess this) in practical philosophy.⁴

The reason for this higher possibility of abstraction in Western thought is that the two cultures had different starting points: whereas the Chinese derived their knowledge from nature and thus made brilliant achievements in the realm of practical philosophy, Europe began from revelation, and was thus furnished with the abstracted, conceptual base necessary to grasp the incorporeal world. "Although they may be convinced that we are one-eyed, we have still another eye, not yet well enough understood by them, namely, First Philosophy. Through it we are admitted to an understanding even of things incorporeal."⁵ The conclusion that Leibniz drew from this is that while the Chinese must be converted to the Christian religion, so the Europeans must learn about nature from the Chinese:

Certainly the condition of our affairs, slipping as we are into ever greater corruption, seems to me such that we need missionaries from the Chinese who might teach us the use and practice of natural religion, just as we have sent them teachers of revealed theology. And so I believe that if someone expert, not in the beauty of goddesses but in the excellence of peoples, were selected as judge, the golden apple would be awarded to the Chinese, unless we should win by virtue of one great superhuman thing, namely, the divine gift of the Christian religion.⁶

Such ideas were to have profound influence in the eighteenth century. In order to situate them, however, it will be helpful to give a brief overview of some of the larger intellectual trends of the time. An excellent tool for this is Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Human Mind*, a work that almost seems to have been written as a summary of earlier Enlightenment thought. Like many of his contemporaries, Condorcet saw the development of artificial culture as allowing for the progress of science: "[Men] have acquired that taste for the superfluities of luxury which is the spur of industry, and have become infected with that spirit of curiosity which eagerly penetrates the veil nature has drawn across her secrets."⁷ This artifice, however, while allowing for the progression of the sciences, has also led to a degeneration in morals:

We must also take into account the greed, cruelty, corruption and prejudice of civilized nations. For these may well seem to primitive races to be richer, more powerful, more educated and more active than they, but also more depraved, and, above all, unhappier; and so savages, instead of being impressed by the superiority of civilized nations, must often have been terrified by the extent and multiplicity of their needs, by the torments they suffer through avarice, and by the eternal agitation of their always active and never satisfied desires.⁸

Nonetheless, "the rough and stormy passage from a crude state of society to that degree of civilization enjoyed by enlightened and free nations is in no way a degeneration of the human race but is rather a necessary crisis in its gradual progress towards absolute perfection."⁹ At the end of this progress stands the ultimate return to a correspondence with nature, to be found most noticeably

in the creation of a “universal language . . . which expresses by signs either real objects themselves, or well-defined collections composed of simple and general ideas.”¹⁰

As many students of intellectual history have noted, this vision of history is in many ways a rereading of mythical and historical narratives from the ancient Greek and Christian traditions. Eighteenth-century thinkers emphasized that Europe was a civilization that had fallen from the world of nature: the creation of Western culture was the introduction of arbitrariness, the beginning of what Diderot called the “artificial man.”¹¹ It was this arbitrariness, this distancing from nature, that was believed to have made possible the progress seen to characterize European culture: only by breaking from nature could one gain the possibility of, as Condorcet put it, “penetrating her veils.” Yet this break, while granting one the potential for progress, also led to a possible degeneration—manifested in, for example, the introduction of arbitrary despotism. The solution to such a degeneration, of course, was to return to the laws of nature, yet to do so without losing the knowledge that had been gained by the original break.

It is with this as a backdrop that we can begin to understand the initial impulses for drawing comparisons (or, more often, contrasts) with China: China seemed to represent an entirely different orientation toward nature. In many ways, Leibniz occupies a transitional position in the history of ideas on this subject. Like those of some later eighteenth-century thinkers, Leibniz’s formulations were made on the basis of the respective positions of each society toward nature, but unlike these later thinkers, Leibniz argued that the Fall had in fact occurred (and thus was as true for China as it was for the West). The question then was how various civilizations had brought themselves back up from barbarism: through a reasoned study of nature or through revelations from God. For a number of eighteenth-century thinkers, however, it was the fall from nature, and thus the introduction of arbitrariness and the creation of unsatisfied desires, that defined the West. In contrast, China was seen as never having gained such an abstraction. Moreover, many of the views of the early Jesuits, such as degeneration from an original knowledge, were by this time discarded, and in their place arose the notion that one of the main characteristics of the history of China was its stasis: since China had never broken from nature, the tensions of progress and degeneration due to the introduction of artifice were believed

to be unknown in the Middle Kingdom. Without progress and without arbitrariness, China was an unchanging and static society, trapped in the nature with which it accorded.

Yet the manner of China's accordance with nature was seen as unique in the world. If China was unlike the West for its lack of abstraction, it was equally unlike the primitives who also lived with the laws of nature. For China had progressed to a true understanding of the natural laws and yet had somehow done so without falling from nature. Following along the lines of Leibniz, then, China came to be seen by some scholars as lacking in the technical mastery over nature that had been achieved in the West, but at the same time, and for exactly the same reason, as morally superior.

The most extreme expression of these views can be found in the work of Voltaire. His interest in the issue dates from relatively early in his career. His early "Poème sur la loi naturelle," for example, is based upon the distinction between natural and revealed religion, and unlike Leibniz, he tips the balance decidedly in favor of the former. In a note he attached to the poem, Voltaire praises Confucius's teachings as a paradigm of natural religion.¹² He amplified on the point in 1776 in *La Bible enfin expliquée*, in which he states, "the Chinese appear to be alone in having received the world as it is. . . . Having no revelation like us, they turned away from creation."¹³ The Middle Kingdom, according to Voltaire, was ruled according to the laws of nature, with a government based upon paternal authority rather than arbitrary commands. As he states in the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (1756):

What they know best, have cultivated the most, and have brought to the greatest perfection, is morality and laws. The respect of the children for their fathers is the foundation of the Chinese government. Paternal authority is never weakened. . . . The learned mandarins are considered as the fathers of the cities and provinces, and the king as the father of the empire. This idea, rooted in their hearts, has formed a family of this immense state.¹⁴

Like Leibniz, however, Voltaire sees China's relationship to nature as ambivalent, for such a relationship has also inhibited its progressive growth. Instead of seeing this failure as due to a lack of revelation, however, Voltaire attributes the problem to China's being too close to nature. The result of this

closeness is that China had a very early advancement, followed by pure stasis; in contrast, Europe, because of its distance from nature, suffered from a slow beginning but then progressed rapidly. In the *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* he states:

One wonders why the Chinese, having achieved so much in times so distant, always stopped at this limit. . . . It seems that nature bestowed on this species of man, so different from our own, organs sufficient to discover all at once what was necessary for them, but incapable of proceeding further. We, on the contrary, were tardy in our gaining of knowledge, but have perfected ourselves rapidly.¹⁵

Unlike the Europeans, driven by their insatiable needs, the Chinese had all of their needs satisfied from nature. But as a consequence, the Chinese, “the favorite of nature,”¹⁶ had none of the need-based drive of the West: “Possessors of a land that furnishes all, they had no need to go, like us, to the ends of the earth.”¹⁷

Overall, then, if the culture of the Enlightenment can be characterized by an interest in understanding the mechanisms that led to both the progress of science in Europe and the degeneration of morality into arbitrary despotism, to both a penetration of the veils of nature and an estrangement from the laws of nature, then it is clear why China came to occupy such a crucial position in this framework. It became the perfect tool both for criticizing European arbitrary rule and for praising the powers of Western progress. As a culture that had, it was claimed, always abided by nature but had for the same reason never been able to penetrate its veils, China became the perfect Other for eighteenth-century European thinkers.

Many of these same arguments can be found in nineteenth-century texts as well, although in them Western progress tends to be more commonly posed as fully superior to Chinese stasis. For our purposes, one of the most intriguing formulations is that given by Hegel. In *Philosophy of Right*, he presents China, and indeed the entire “Oriental” realm, as being the first stage in the growth of the self-consciousness of the spirit (the other stages being, respectively, the Greek, Roman, and Germanic realms). The emphasis here, as in the earlier views, is on the lack of abstraction from nature, a lack that Hegel sees as connected to a conflation of the religious and cultural spheres:

The world-view of this first realm is substantial, without inward division, and it arises in natural communities patriarchally governed. According to this view, the mundane form of government is theocratic, the ruler is also a high priest of God himself; constitution and legislation are at the same time religion, while religious and moral commands, or usages rather, are at the same time natural and positive law.¹⁸

In China there is no division between natural law and positive law, no distinction between the divine and the human.

Hegel himself comments on this passage by emphasizing the rootedness of the Oriental mentality in nature, a rootedness that Hegel sees as standing at the beginning of the history of the state: "A still substantial, natural mentality is a moment in the development of the state, and the point at which any state takes this form is the absolute beginning of its history."¹⁹ The same point is echoed in his lectures on the philosophy of history:

Since Spirit has not yet attained subjectivity, it wears the appearance of spirituality still involved in the conditions of Nature. Since the external and the internal, Law and Moral Sense, are not yet distinguished—still form an undivided unity—so also do Religion and the State. The Constitution generally is a Theocracy, and the Kingdom of God is to the same extent also a secular Kingdom as the secular Kingdom is also divine.²⁰

China is characterized by a lack of a distinction between externality and internality, law and morality, religion and the state.

Hegel thus continues to define China being rooted in nature and lacking a distinction between humanity and the divine. However, he has placed these characteristics in a distinct context. Here, China, or, more broadly, the Orient, is being used not as an Other for a framework of evolution/degeneration but rather as a stage in the evolution of the state; instead of seeing China as a comparable civilization superior in some respects but inferior in others, it is here placed firmly at the beginning of the history of the state, before the evolutionary rise of Europe.

These ideas are further developed in Hegel's "Introduction" to his lectures on the philosophy of history, where he discusses the Orient as the "first form which the spirit assumes."²¹ His emphasis is on the stasis of the Oriental state,

and he thus describes it as being based on a family religion “devoid of opposition and ideality. But it is also an enduring state, for it cannot change itself by its own efforts. Such is the character of the Far East, and of the Chinese empire in particular.”²² He continues:

Struggle and conflict require self-collectedness and self-comprehension. But this dawning awareness is still relatively weak, unconscious, and rooted in nature. . . . Whatever innovation replaces what has been destroyed must sink and be destroyed in turn; no progress is made: and all this restless movement results in an unhistorical history.²³

The cause of this stasis is the lack of a break from immediate existence: “Its spiritual mode is not yet that of representation; on the contrary, it still exists in a condition of immediacy, and its mode is that of immediate existence.”²⁴ In different terms, the problem is the lack of a contestive principle, the antithesis, within its unity: “It has not assimilated and overcome its antithesis. The antithesis has not yet developed within it and consequently falls outside it.”²⁵

Overall, then, Hegel has characterized the Orient as lacking a break from nature, lacking a distinction between divine and the human realms, lacking internal conflict and opposition, and as being in a state of historical stasis. For Hegel, the crucial turning point from such a stage was the introduction of discontinuity by the Greeks, an introduction that also made possible the beginnings of history and a true understanding of nature. As in the eighteenth-century versions, the philosophical problem for Hegel was then to return to the natural world without losing what was gained through the introduction of arbitrariness.

Many of these themes were to be repeated again and again throughout the century. Nonetheless, many of the later thinkers of the nineteenth century focused as well on other sets of issues, such as Oriental despotism and the Asiatic mode of production. Since these views have a less direct bearing on the concerns of this study, and since they are already common knowledge, I will spare the reader a recapitulation of them here.

The crucial point is that these early thinkers compare China with other civilizations according to the supposed lack in China of a sense of a break from the natural world. Although the ways and even reasons for making such comparative claims were based in large part on the culture of early-modern Europe,

the basic vision of China as a land without a notion of artifice was at least in part taken from the Chinese texts themselves. Moreover, the comparison that was then drawn with Europe had much to do with the European thinkers' reliance on Greek and Christian texts in analyzing their own culture. Twentieth-century scholars, trying to compare ancient China with early Greece and Christianity, grappled with some of these same problems. Of course, most modern scholars (though by no means all) tend to think that the differences between the West and China have more to do with different assumptions about their relationship with nature than with different relationships to nature itself, but the issues being dealt with are nonetheless quite comparable.

Twentieth-Century Scholarship

Two distinct groups represent modern attempts to place China in a comparative perspective. The first one includes Sinologists knowledgeable to greater or lesser degrees about the early civilizations of Greece and the Near East who have attempted to compare the views of nature and the creation of culture found there with those found in early China. The second consists of those who have attempted to deal with similar concerns in a more directly anthropological mode.

Scholars in the first group have attempted to compare Judaic notions of a creative god with early Chinese views, which are seen as emphasizing a spontaneous cosmos with no notion of creation. For example, Fredrick Mote has claimed, "the Chinese . . . have regarded the world and humans as uncreated, as constituting the essential features of a spontaneously self-generating cosmos having no creator, god, ultimate cause, or will external to itself."²⁶ Emphasis has also been given to the idea that in China the human world was seen as an inherent part of the natural process, never having experienced, in other words, a Fall. As Tu Wei-Ming has stated: "Humanity is the respectful son or daughter of the cosmic. . . . Human beings are thus organically connected with rocks, trees, and animals."²⁷

Other figures, explicitly comparing early Chinese culture with that of ancient Greece, have argued that such a lack of a distinction between the human and natural realms means that the early Chinese cosmology displays none of the tragic tensions that so pervaded Greek thought. David Keightley, for example, refers to the emphasis on "harmonious collaboration," which resulted in

there being “no tension between the counterclaims of god and man, between a Zeus and a Prometheus.”²⁸ He goes on to claim that the ambivalent heroes who so dominated ancient Greek literature seem to be lacking in ancient China:

In early China . . . heroes were heroes precisely because they were models worthy of emulation; the universe of moral action, at least as it was represented in the accounts of myth and history, was untrammelled by ambiguities. It was the basic, optimistic assumption of the *Zuo-zhuan* . . . that the virtuous man would be rewarded here and now—by promotions, honors, and status. Cause-and-effect in the universe were rigorously fair; the moral prospered, the wicked did not.²⁹

Thus, claims Keightley, in contrast to the tragic conceptions so powerful in the Greek world, the Chinese cosmology was instead “uncomplicated.”³⁰

Other scholars have argued, on similar grounds, that epic and tragedy are absent from early Chinese narratives, whereas both of these genres predominate in cultures, such as early Greece, that see culture and human creation as standing in potential opposition to the divine world.³¹ In another essay comparing Greek and Chinese culture, Jacques Gernet raises a similar issue concerning Chinese political thought:

Order can never result from the external intervention of a power of command nor from an arbitrary authoritarian division of functions and powers nor from a balance dependent upon an agreement reached between antagonistic forces. In short, it cannot proceed from anything that is arbitrary. The activity of the sovereign is similar to that of the farmer who does no more than encourage the growth of his plants and in no way intervenes in the process of germination and growth. He acts in accordance with the orders of Heaven and identifies himself with it. The principle of order is to be found only in the things that are. It cannot be but immanent in the world.³²

The basic idea here is that early Chinese political thought had no notion of arbitrariness: since, according to this line of argument, the Chinese cosmology did not see culture as separate from nature, the dominant orientation was entirely naturalistic.

Victor Mair has brought these ideas to bear on the idea of narratives. Mair

argues that, unlike the West, which saw the world as based in creation, and unlike India, which saw the world as based in illusion, the indigenous Chinese worldview was based in the “real and concrete.”³³ Because there was no indigenous notion of conscious creation, the early Chinese were entirely empiricistic and naturalistic in orientation: for the Chinese, “it is a matter of discerning and disclosing a pre-existent shape in the natural world.”³⁴ “In the elite Chinese view, everything is real and substantial. Things are not products of mind—they are empirically and historically verifiable configurations of material forces.”³⁵ It is not until the impact of Buddhism, Mair claims, that one finds in China a strong notion of creation, and, therefore, the first fictional writings.

All of these arguments develop from a general view that, unlike Near Eastern and Greek cultures, early Chinese thought posited no break from the world of nature, did not define humanity and the divine in conflictual terms, and indeed had no strong notion of arbitrariness. China, in other words, simply did not pose the emergence of culture in terms of creation and discontinuity.

The second strand of thought that I will mention here developed from Europe in the 1920s and 1930s, and involved the attempt to compare early China to “primitive” societies, with a particular emphasis on “anthropological” issues such as shamanism and totemism. This movement’s primary figures included Henri Maspero, Marcel Granet, and Carl Hentze, and their tradition has been continued, through sometimes direct but more often indirect influence, by scholars in Japan, Taiwan, and mainland China. Most notable is the work of Akatsuka Kiyoshi and Sun Zuoyun.

These two strands of scholarship have been fused by K. C. Chang in what is perhaps the most extensive attempt in recent years to place early Chinese society into a comparative framework with other ancient civilizations. He attempts to isolate certain patterns basic to each civilization, and then goes on to define “the Chinese pattern as one of *continuity* and the Western [the Near Eastern, and, later, European] pattern as one of *rupture*.”³⁶ By “rupture,” Chang refers to the idea that Western civilization arose from a break between culture and nature: “Man passes from a world of nature he shared with his animal friends to a world of his own making, in which he surrounds himself with artifacts that insulate him from, and elevate him above, his animal friends.”³⁷ By “continuity” he means the lack of such a break: “continuity between man and animal, between earth and heaven, and between culture and nature.”³⁸ This

latter pattern is based primarily on an organismic (from Mote) cosmology, as well as shamanistic links between man and the natural world.³⁹

This radical difference between the two civilizations is, from Chang's perspective, not simply one of two contrastive bodies of assumptions. Instead, it is one of differing relations to an earlier Paleolithic background: Chang takes the continuum pattern as being inherent to all "primitive" societies and argues that the West, unlike China, broke from such a pattern. "What is uniquely significant about its presence in ancient China is the fact that a veritable civilization was built on top of and within its confines. Ancient Chinese civilization was a civilization of continuity."⁴⁰ Thus, the rise of civilization in the West involved "a new stage in human history in which an artificial civilization emerged to elevate the humans to a higher plane than that of our nature-bound barbarous ancestors, . . . [whereas] the first civilized society of China carried on many essential features of its savage and barbarous antecedents."⁴¹ This continuity with earlier stages of humanity is a characteristic that China shares with Mayan civilization, whereas the West broke completely from such a continuum: "From the confines of this vast cultural continuum (which I will call the Maya-China continuum, realizing that the continuum goes back to long before Maya or China), European civilization and its Oriental precedents achieved a significant breakout."⁴²

Overall, then, Chang's basic strategy is to take the "Sinological" claims made by Mote, Tu, and others concerning the supposed lack of distinction between nature and culture in Chinese thought and connect these with the "anthropological" claims made by others concerning the comparability of early China to primitive societies.⁴³ His claim is that such an "organismic" cosmology derives from primitive forms of shamanism. This then provides him with the ammunition he needs to make the claim, directly related to the much earlier ideas discussed above, that China has had a different "pattern" of development, never having made the break from nature that characterizes the West. Chang reads this tradition in the following terms: "To the social scientist seasoned in the theories of Marx, Engels, Weber, Childe, and others with regard to social evolution and the rise of urbanism and state society, however, the Chinese road to civilization appears to be an aberration—often called the 'Asiatic' aberration. It is an aberration precisely because it continued forward so much from its antecedents."⁴⁴

Method of Approach

It is understandable why so many scholars have emphasized the lack of a distinction between nature and culture and the lack of a notion of creation in Chinese thought. Many of the texts from the Warring States and early Han dynasty make statements along these lines. For example, they contain explicit opposition to notions of human innovation. The most often-quoted of such statements include those of Confucius, "I transmit, but do not create,"⁴⁵ and Sima Qian, who claimed that his work involved "transmitting ancient affairs and arranging and ordering the traditions passed down through the generations. It is not what can be called creating."⁴⁶

One also finds, quite early, the idea that human action ought, normatively, to be in accord with Heaven. These ideas were taken to even greater degrees by writers who, beginning from roughly the mid-third century B.C., tried to articulate a view of the cosmos as a generative process in which culture fulfilled the processes of nature. Related theories, advanced in roughly the same time period, correlated the rise and fall of dynasties with the natural movement of the five phases; the unfolding of human history was thus posed as an inherent part of the cyclical movement of nature.

A final strand in this argument is the moral reading of history, evident in part as early as the *Shangshu*, in which Heaven was seen as rewarding the virtuous and punishing the evil. By the mid-third century B.C., this was developed in several texts alongside the above-mentioned cosmological speculations to show the interrelation of human history, natural cyclicity, and morality.

Taken together, these texts do indeed present a vision of a spontaneous and moralized cosmos in which nature and culture are continuous, a vision that would appear to be free from the tragic ambivalence played upon in so many texts from ancient Greece. It was these ideas that generated much of the scholarship discussed above.

Nonetheless, a more contextualized analysis of these texts may reveal that there was in fact a great deal of debate in early China concerning such issues as the relationship between nature and culture. In saying this, I am not simply arguing that one can point out exceptions to the generalizations quoted above. It is obvious that such exceptions exist, and I am sure that all of the scholars mentioned above would freely admit such; they simply claimed that the

dominant assumptions in early China differed from those in early Greece. My argument, however, is that these ideas should not be construed as dominant assumptions at all: they were, on the contrary, consciously formulated claims made within a larger debate. By focusing on the debates themselves from this period, it should be possible to shift the focus away from using explicitly formulated claims to find the assumptions of the culture in question and toward attempting to understand the historical tensions with which the thinkers were grappling that led them to develop such claims.

At issue here is the methodological problem of how we should read statements such as those that I have just mentioned: when the analyst is confronted with a specific argument to the effect that human culture is a part of nature, there are many ways to contextualize this. One of the poorest means, in my opinion, is to read such an idea as an assumption about the period. The very fact that an argument is polemic strongly suggests that it is not an assumption at all, but a claim. Our goal should therefore be to ask why such a claim was made and what its implications were at the time.

Such a project is often less easy than it seems, for an argument concerning an issue does not necessarily mean that that explicitly stated issue is the main problem motivating the argument. For example, when one is confronted with twelfth-century European scholastic proofs for the existence of God, it would be wrong, in my opinion, to conclude that the question of whether God existed was the central problem: among the small group of scholars writing such proofs, I doubt that the existence of God was seriously questioned. Instead, the main problem seems to have been the issue of faith and reason, or more specifically, the issue of whether God is rationally necessary or a topic of faith alone. Thus, when an analyst is confronted with a statement made within a larger debate, the concern must be to ask why, within the context of the time, such a claim was made and what its relevance was.

The ultimate consequence of this is that models comparing Western and Chinese modes of thought based on only a few statements made within those cultures may prove less helpful than frameworks that first attempt to elucidate the complexity of the surrounding intellectual and political debates. My argument is not simply that we ought to be analyzing the material at hand in more detail and not performing comparisons, for in fact I agree that comparing early China with other early civilizations can be helpful. However, by moving the

focus away from the assumptions of the cultures in question and turning instead to the tensions motivating the debates within those cultures, I think that we will reach a more complex understanding that will enrich our ability to offer comparative discussions.

In making such an argument, it may be helpful to refer to a figure mentioned only in passing above: Marcel Granet. At first glance, Granet would seem to stand firmly in the scholarly tradition of using anthropological models to relate early China to “primitive” cultures. Like the other scholars mentioned, Granet attempts to find traces of phenomena such as totemism and the potlatch in early China.⁴⁷ However, far from trying to claim that these phenomena existed in, for example, Bronze Age China, his argument is based upon an evolutionary claim concerning the stages of China’s historical development. Thus such phenomena as totemism are relegated to an early period before the rise of kingship, and his view of Bronze Age China is one of a heroic era quite at odds with any of the views discussed above. Early Chinese cosmological speculations about nature and culture are in turn treated as belonging to the late Warring States and early Han.

The methodology through which Granet developed these ideas has often been criticized—and quite legitimately so. Since the archaeology of prehistoric periods had only just begun when he was writing, and since he was not working with any of the inscriptions that provide contemporary evidence of Bronze Age China, Granet attempted to read these earlier phenomena out of Warring States and Han texts. A brief example of this will serve to introduce this aspect of his methodology. But it will also raise a point that I discuss in more detail below, namely how radically different Granet’s vision of earlier Chinese history is from that of the other scholars mentioned here.

A number of classical Chinese texts present narratives about kings shooting arrows at Heaven. For example, the *Zhanguo* relates a story of King Kang of Song, a prototypically wicked king, shooting at Heaven. Soon after, he died and his state was destroyed.⁴⁸ Similarly, the *Shiji* states that the Shang king Wu Yi, an earlier paradigmatic bad king, shot arrows at a leather bag that he called “Heaven” and also died soon after.⁴⁹ In both of these narratives, the act of shooting at Heaven is treated as exemplifying the utter moral depravity of the king under discussion, and the later destruction of the kings is thus presented as showing that they received their due punishment.⁵⁰ Granet, however,

reads the stories as an attempt to moralize an ancient ritual practice in which all kings would have to shoot at a symbol of Heaven, for only by showing that they could conquer the sky-god could they be considered true kings.⁵¹ The methodological problem with this reading, of course, is that there is no independent evidence that such a practice ever existed: the story is only presented in the context of describing the acts of evil men.

What is intriguing in Granet's argument, however, is how radically it departs from the discussions of early China mentioned earlier in the introduction. Some scholars regarded statements in certain texts concerning the unity of culture and nature as exemplifying the thought in general of the classical period, and argued that this was the dominant cultural orientation of earlier times in China as well: China had simply never made a break from nature. Granet's argument is diametrically different. In his sketch of the rise of Chinese society in *La civilisation chinoise*, for example, he begins with a recreation of an early pastoral society worshipping sacred areas of the land.⁵² When he discusses the rise of kings, he presents them as usurping this power from nature; it is in this context that he presents his discussion of the ritual of shooting Heaven. Thus, unlike the argument that Chinese society developed without breaking from nature, Granet presents the rise of kingship as being just that: the introduction of acts of transgression against nature as a means of symbolically appropriating its power.

This view has, perhaps not surprisingly, aroused quite a bit of controversy. D. C. Twitchett, for example, claimed that "the world pictured in Granet's writings . . . has more in common with the *Golden Bough* than with traditional Chinese writings."⁵³

Nonetheless, I believe Granet has discovered tensions that are in fact in the texts. Even if his specific reconstruction of a ritual of shooting at Heaven is unpersuasive, as is his attempt to place such a reconstructed ritual into the context of the evolution of Chinese civilization, Granet's basic point, that Chinese narratives presented the rise of kingship as highly problematic, is, as I argue in Chapter 3, quite accurate. When discussing the emergence of the state in the past (a discussion motivated, I believe, by concerns over the emergence of centralized state institutions) a number of early Chinese authors presented such an emergence as involving the introduction of discontinuity. Indeed, many of the conflicts that Granet has analyzed in his works, involving perceived ten-

sions between culture and nature, the king and the minister, and others, are pervasive in the early texts, and many of Granet's specific proposals for reading early Chinese narratives are (when taken out of his evolutionary framework) tremendously helpful in analyzing the nature of these tensions.

The value of Granet's work, then, is that it points toward an approach focused less on contrasting the assumptions of different cultures and more on discovering the conflicts underlying those cultures. The method of analysis should be to isolate the tensions that generated the debates, analyze the history of those debates, and, when comparing, to do so only when one has isolated in other cultures similar tensions concerning similar problems. Working within such a framework will, I believe, reveal that early China, far from being a unique civilization, faced the same sorts of problems faced by other early civilizations, and that the consequent intellectual and political disputes that arose in China have analogues elsewhere. Our goal should be to analyze these debates, see why they arose, and study the implications of the ways the debates developed.

Organization of the Study

In Chapter 1, I briefly discuss how the issue of innovation is presented in some of the writings from the late Shang and Western Zhou. My goal is not to present a comprehensive discussion of these materials (which would be a full-length study in itself) but to introduce how these works deal with the topics that were of such interest in the Warring States and Han periods. The reason for doing so is that some Warring States and Han authors defined their arguments concerning innovation using surviving Bronze Age documents (particularly the *Shi*), so a discussion of these materials should provide some of the crucial background for understanding the later debates.

The next four chapters constitute the heart of the work. Chapter 2 focuses on the debate in the Warring States over such questions as who created culture, what such a creation entailed, whether the culture thus created was still linked to the natural world, and whether a superior culture can be created. I trace the development of the arguments in detail, showing why these topics became so important during this period and why the debate developed as it did.

In the Chapter 3, I relate how these issues concerning innovation play out

in the different narrative versions of the emergence of the state. I analyze these versions and try to account for their role in the larger debates of the period. This in turn entails a rethinking of some of the ways in which the study of early Chinese mythology has been approached. In this regard, I discuss some of Granet's arguments in more depth.

Chapter 4 traces how these ideas and narratives concerning innovation were appropriated during the formation of the Chinese empire. I analyze the first emperor's attempts to proclaim himself a great creator, personally instituting a new era in Chinese history, as well as the debates at the beginning of the succeeding Han dynasty over how to present the innovations of the first emperor. It is only during this period, I argue, that the claims read by so many scholars as assumptions in early China gradually came to prominence.

Chapter 5 is an analysis of how the Han historian Sima Qian presented the rise of empire in early China. Since Sima Qian witnessed the successful consolidation of imperial rule, his reconstruction sheds considerable light on how the debates that developed over the previous few centuries were reframed during this formative period. And since he takes a critical yet highly complex stance toward the issue of innovation, his presentation reveals many of the tensions that are discussed in the previous chapters.

Notes

Introduction

1. *Shiji*, “Qin Shihuang benji,” Zhonghua shuju edition, 6.245. The five thearchs (*di*) were the ancient sages, the most important of whom was Huangdi. Who exactly the other four were was a topic of debate in the late Warring States and early Han, although the expression “five *di*” was nonetheless used widely to refer to the early sages in general.

2. Quoted in Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, p. 25.

3. See Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism*, pp. 46–48.

4. Leibniz, *The Preface to Leibniz’ Novissima Sinica*, pp. 68–69.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

7. de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture*, p. 32.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 197.

11. Diderot, “Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage,” p. 187.

12. Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, M.ix.444.

13. *Ibid.*, M.xxx.6.

14. *Ibid.*, M.xi.333.

15. *Ibid.*, M.xi.332–333.

16. *Ibid.*, M.xi.329.

17. *Ibid.*, M.xi.331.

18. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, p. 220.

19. Ibid., p. 220.
20. Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 112.
21. Ibid., p. 198.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 199.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 201.
26. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China*, p. 13.
27. Tu, *Confucian Thought*, p. 43.
28. Keightley, “Early Civilization in China,” p. 32. See also the discussion in Keightley’s “Clean Hands and Shining Helmets,” pp. 41–42.
29. Keightley, “Early Civilization in China,” p. 20.
30. Ibid.
31. See, for example, Liu, *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, p. 152: “Epic and tragedy are practically absent in Chinese.” On the question of epic, see also Prusek, “History and Epics,” pp. 17–34; and C. H. Wang, “Towards Defining a Chinese Heroism.”
32. Gernet with Vernant, “Social History,” p. 77.
33. Mair, “The Narrative Revolution,” p. 6.
34. Ibid., p. 20.
35. Ibid., p. 26.
36. Kwang-Chih Chang, “Ancient China,” p. 161.
37. Ibid., p. 165.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., pp. 161–64. Chang develops his argument concerning shamanism at length in *Art, Myth, and Ritual*.
40. Ibid., p. 162.
41. Kwang-chih Chang, *The Archaeology of Ancient China*, pp. 418–19.
42. Ibid., p. 421.
43. Kwang-chih Chang, “Ancient China,” pp. 161–62.
44. Ibid., p. 165.
45. *Lunyu*, 7/1.
46. *Shiji*, 130.3299–3300.
47. Granet, *Danses et légendes*, pp. 602–6 and 611–15.
48. *Zhanguo*, 32.3b.
49. *Shiji*, 3.104.
50. A further aspect of these stories is that both of these figures were of Shang lineage (the state of Song being made up of the descendants of the Shang). The

Shang worshipped Shangdi as their deity; the Zhou worshipped Heaven. It is possible that the authors here were playing on this cultural difference as well in the stories.

51. Granet, *La civilisation chinoise*, pp. 223–27.

52. This is a vision taken largely from the “Guofeng” section of the *Shijing*. A fuller discussion of his argument can be found in his earlier *Fêtes et chansons anciennes de la Chine*.

53. D. C. Twitchett, introduction to Maspero, *China in Antiquity*, p. xix.

Chapter 1

1. *Shuo wen jie zi zhenben*, Sibu beiyao ed., 15a.1a.

2. *Ibid.*, 15a.1b.

3. *Ibid.*, 15a.2a.

4. The classic discussion of the importance of such a notion in the Chinese literary tradition is in Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry*.

5. In order to avoid possible confusion, let me state at the outset that when I use the term “creation” in this study, I am referring to the act of fabricating, constructing, and fashioning; I am in no way referring to a notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation out of nothing.” *Creatio ex nihilo* is simply a certain type of creation, specifically defined as occurring without pre-existing matter. In itself, however, the term “creation” implies nothing about whether there exists raw material for use in the act.

6. That Di is some kind of high god is clear from, for example, the *bin*, a ritual in which the king would entertain a near ancestor, who would in turn entertain the next ancestor in the hierarchy. The chain would continue until the highest ancestor would entertain Di. For an interesting discussion of the *bin* ritual, especially of how it relates to the hierarchy of Shang ancestors, see Keightley, “The Religious Commitment.” For an attempt to argue that “Di” represents not a high god but simply the Shang ancestors in their collectivity, see Eno’s provocative “Was There a High God *Ti* in Shang Religion?”

7. *Heji* 11423.

8. *Heji* 14178.

9. *Heji* 13683.

10. *Heji* 31981.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Heji* 14182.

13. *Heji* 2725.

14. *Heji* 2194.