

Introduction

While contemporary scholars of Chinese thought give attention to the *Analects* 論語, the *Daodejing* 道德經, and other texts purported to come from the Warring States period (475–221 BC), they give much less attention to the thinkers and texts of the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD).¹ Indeed, a dominant position in the field of China studies is that the Han dynasty was the beginning of a “philosophical dark age” (a position these essays challenge). The reasoning, in short, is that the persecutions of the previous dynasty, in conjunction with the bureaucratization of Confucianism in the Han, led to a conformist orthodoxy in which the primary modes of thought were little more than repetitions of previous thinkers.

Consider the position in a bit more detail. Certain modern scholars assert that the rise of the Han dynasty generated a rush to conformity over essential philosophical issues for the sake of gaining support from the state. The conformity then undermined the diversity and conflict of views necessary to maintain a robust philosophical discourse. As such, all debate was relegated to commentaries on texts deemed authoritative by the Han state; and as a result, “thought” became commentarial rather than creative. Yao Xinzhong, in *An Introduction to Confucianism*, for instance, articulates this view as follows:

Towards the end of the Later Han Dynasty, [Confucian scholars] indulged in minute and detailed study of the classics, and turned the dynamic and realistic Confucian thought into nothing more than pedantic scholasticism. ... Classical learning in the main had

¹ Importantly, some scholars assert that texts such as the *Analects* were actually compiled in the Han. See, e.g., Michael Nylan, “Manuscript Culture in Late Western Han, and the Implications for Authors and Authority,” *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture* 1.1–2 (Nov. 2014), pp. 155–85; John Makeham, “The Formation of *Lunyu* as a Book,” *MS* 44 (1996), pp. 1–24; and Mark Csikzentmihalyi, “Confucius and the *Analects* in the Han,” in Bryan Van Norden, ed., *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* (New York: Oxford U.P., 2002), pp. 134–62. For an extended discussion see Michael Hunter, “Sayings of Confucius, Deselected,” unpub. Ph.D. (Princeton University, 2012).

become so scholastic by the end of the Later Han Dynasty that it no longer reflected reality.²

Chad Hansen is perhaps the biggest proponent of this theory—repeating claims of a philosophical dark age in numerous publications.³ His entry on “Daoism” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provides a summary of his position. It states,

The establishment of an authoritarian empire and the long-lived but philosophically dogmatic (Confucian) Han dynasty temporarily drained the vibrancy from Chinese philosophical thought. Classical Daoist philosophy was successfully extinguished by the imperial suppression of analytic thought. Confucian authoritarians like Xunzi argued that analysis of names leads to confusion and disorder. The substitution of the Qin ruler’s superstitious search for long life through alchemy and his consequent fostering of Huang-Lao [thought] combined with suppression of dialectic thought initiated China’s philosophical “Dark Age.” The later substitution of Confucianism as the official orthodoxy during the Han cemented the intellectual stagnation firmly in place.⁴

Similar theories are advocated by Fung Yu-lan, John Makeham, and Yuet Keung Lo.⁵ Even A.C. Graham summarily states, “In China

² Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2000), pp. 89.

³ See Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), pp. 95, 99, 257, 344, 345, and 378; idem, “Mohism: Later,” in Antonio S. Cua, ed., *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 462.; and idem, “A Tao of Tao in Chuang-Tzu,” in Victor H. Mair, ed., *Experimental Essays On Chuang-Tzu* (Honolulu: Center for Asian and Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii, 1983), p. 26.

⁴ Chad Hansen, “Daoism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/daoism/>), 2003.

⁵ Yu-lan Fung, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1983) 1, p. 403: “During the early part of the Han dynasty, a political unification of China was effected such as had hitherto been unknown, while the social and economic movements that had first begun during the Chunqiu period, gradually crystallized into a new system. With this unification and settlement, it was natural enough that a corresponding unification of thought should occur.” See also *ibid.*, p. xxix (in a comment made by the translator, Derk Bodde) and p. 404. Makeham states, in Xu Gan, *Balanced Discourses*, trans. John Makeham (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2002), pp. xix: “Xu Gan lived at a nodal point in the history of Chinese thought, when Han (206 BC–220 AD) scholasticism had become ossified and the creative and independent thinking that characterized Wei-Jin (220–420) thought was just emerging.” See also Yuet Keung Lo, “Huang K’an’s (488–545) Accommodation of Neo-Taoism and Buddhism,” in Kai-wing Chow, et al., eds., *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrine, Texts and Hermeneutics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 58: “Commentarial traditions during the Han were strict and rigid; a student of one tradition was naturally obligated to carry on his master’s tradition without adulterating it. An insulated tradition, to no one’s surprise, tended to become ossified in time. [...] Thus, the fall of the Han empire and the ossification of Han learning radically undermined the scholar-officials erstwhile faith in Confucian thought as a guiding ideology”; and Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in An-*

rationality develops with the controversies of the schools, and dwindles as they fade after 200 BC.”⁶

For some of these scholars (Hansen and Fung, in particular) the dark-age narrative is rooted in an attempt to compare Chinese thought with Western thought (or “philosophy”). Hansen, in *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Daoism* (co-authored by Brandon Toropov), goes so far as to compare “dark ages,” explaining that the “philosophical ‘dark age’ in China... in timing and effect, eerily mirrors the similar period in the West.”⁷ The narrative, as such, is that an early form of philosophy began to develop in the middle of the first millennium BC (the classical era of Greece, the Warring States Period of China). This eventually gave way to an era of suppression, conformity, and superstition. After several centuries of “ossification” philosophical thought reemerged (the Renaissance in Europe, the Song in China).⁸ Part of this narrative (especially for Fung) is an attempt to put Chinese thought on par with Western thought, and to demonstrate that China had a tradition of “philosophy” and underwent similar processes of development. In this light, China is not inferior to the West. As Fung puts it,

[P]hilosophy in order to be philosophy, must have [at least a] *real* system [i.e., an assumed “orderly sequence” for thinking], and although Chinese philosophy, formally speaking, is less systematic than of the West, in its actual content it has just as much system as does western philosophy.⁹

cient China (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), p. 76: “The first discovery of uninhibited reason is that it leads inevitably to absurd conclusions. So why go farther? The Greeks did get past this initial disorientation, the Chinese never did” (also pp. 313–82). Others on this topic are: Donald Holzman, “Confucius and Ancient Chinese Literary Criticism,” in Adele Austin Rickett, ed., *Chinese Approaches to Literature from Confucius to Liang Ch’i-ch’ao* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1978), p. 40; Joseph Chan, “Confucian Attitudes Toward Ethical Pluralism,” in Daniel A. Bell, ed., *Confucian Political Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2008), pp. 113–14; and Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 231.

⁶ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, p. 75.

⁷ Chad Hansen and Brandon Toropov, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Daoism* (New York: Alpha, 2002), p. 94.

⁸ Alternatively, some scholars of China assert that philosophical thought reemerged after the Han in Neo-Daoism, or in the Eastern Han ideas of Wang Chong; e.g., Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1963), pp. 292–93; and Alfred Forke, *Lun-heng: Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch’ung* (New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1907), p. 2.

⁹ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy* 1, p. 4. For a discussion of what constitutes “philosophy” with regard to Chinese thought, see Carine Defoort, “Is ‘Chinese Philosophy’ a Proper Name? A Response to Rein Raud,” *Philosophy East and West* 56.4 (2006), pp. 625–60; and Carine Defoort, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Thought: Translations and Studies* 37.1–3 (2006).

In this context, Fung goes on to explain that philosophy before the Han was more “numerous and comprehensive” than what followed in the Han.¹⁰ Indeed, in Fung’s view Chinese thought is just as philosophical as Western thought, and if we only look past the dark age initiated in the Han we will find Chinese philosophy. Of course, for figures such as Fung Yu-lan the standard for measuring “good thought” is ultimately Western, and usually analytic, philosophy.¹¹ The result is that any divergence from the analytic project is seen as a divergence from philosophical thought. As such, the dark-age narrative provides several reasons to dismiss, disregard, or at least overlook the Han.

It is worth noting that the term “dark ages” as a descriptor for intellectual culture has been highly criticized in European historiography for over a century, and virtually no contemporary scholar of European history uses the term in this sense.¹² Part of what this special issue sets out to do is to subvert not only the myth of a dark age in China, but the discourses that privilege certain forms of thought at the expense of others that may be equally worthy of study. While not all scholars of Chinese thought accept the dark-age narrative, we are all largely inheritors of it; and as inheritors it becomes our prerogative to reexamine and rewrite it. The contributors to this issue are an interdisciplinary group of scholars who write from disciplines such as philosophy, history, and religious studies. They each see something vibrant happening in the Han—a continued rethinking of tradition, a retooling of the methods involved in political, ethical, and other kinds of scholarship. We believe that a new and focused study on the Han dynasty will spark greater interest in Han thought and reshape the study of Chinese thought as a whole.

Charles Sanft’s essay looks at the neglected but very influential early-Han philosopher Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BC). Sanft argues for a new and more sophisticated understanding of his views on the role of the people (*min* 民) in government and the proper relationship between the ruler and the people. Sanft shows that Jia Yi, in short, developed a concept of power relations that balanced the ideology of empire with the necessities of rule. Jia believed that the population possessed tremendous power; and that while they could be directed and administered they could neither be compelled nor abused. He saw the fall of

¹⁰ Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy* 1, p. 4.

¹¹ In the sense of the analytic tradition (or school of philosophy) practiced mainly in philosophy departments in the U.S. and the U.K.

¹² See Theodore E. Mommsen’s 1942 critique: idem, “Petrarch’s Conception of the ‘Dark Ages,’” *Speculum* 17.2 (1942), pp. 226–42.

the Qin dynasty as a lesson that showed imperial power as contingent; and in light of this he offered practical proposals for government that acknowledged the power of the people while retaining the conceptual focus on the emperor as ruler.

Judson Murray's essay explains how different Han thinkers theorized a conception of human nature that focused neither on the highest nor lowest types of people but on average people, in an effort to advance the pre-Han debate concerning human nature's inherent goodness or badness. Several scholars relied on cosmological thinking to substantiate a prevailing view that human nature is not innately moral or immoral but consists of good and bad traits, both of which influence most people's motivations and conduct. Since the average person's inner moral substance was untrained and therefore undeveloped, and because human nature's unseemly qualities often contend with it, this category of people requires a program of moral cultivation analogous to crafting polished jade articles. Murray reveals how this model differs from another metaphor for morality that was employed earlier—the water mirror. He does this by explicating various Han authors' analogies between polished jade and the political, economic, legal, and educational means that are best suited to develop a basic moral constitution. The figures and sources that Murray's study analyzes include Western Han texts such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and *Yantielun* 鹽鐵論, and Eastern Han thinkers such as Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100 AD), Wang Fu 王符 (ca. 82–167 AD), and Xun Yue 荀悅 (148–209 AD).

Sarah Queen's essay looks at various representations of Song Boji 宋伯姬, a noblewoman from the state of Lu 魯 who first appears in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), in order to consider the ways in which early Chinese public memory might be reexamined through the lens of gender. By analyzing commentaries on the *Chunqiu* and several other Han sources, Queen reveals a multitude of representations that document an important debate concerning the meaning, limit, and application of female propriety, as well as how women should be remembered in the public record. In short, Queen demonstrates how gender informs the historical record of women in early China and how many understandings of Song Boji actually depended on late-Han representations of her.

Esther and Colin Klein's essay argues that Wang Chong's *Lunheng* 論衡 develops a particular conception of philosophical method in the context of a robust tradition of discourse and debate. Employing the insights and terminology of modern epistemology, the authors demon-

strate that Wang seeks to 1) develop a positive method for evaluating the truth of testimonial claims; and 2) construct arguments designed to force his opponents to adopt his method as well. In the *Lunheng*, Wang is not only offering a philosophy, but reflecting on how to go about the project of philosophy and philosophical argument.

Taken together, these four essays present the diversity, sophistication, and vibrancy of Han thought. They also represent the continuation of conversations about the contours of early Chinese thought. Indeed, the interdisciplinary approaches of the scholars contributing to this issue bring fresh, and much needed, perspectives to the study of early China more generally.