

Chapter 1

Introduction

The deepest satisfaction was in working one's way inside a conceptual scheme so remote from our own, the focus of attention always on distinctions rather than resemblances, distinctions sometimes deep in the structures of the Chinese and Indo-European languages, and in discovering how they undermine one's own presuppositions.

—A. C. Graham, *Reason within Unreason*



Figure 1. Listening to the Sounds of Spring under Bamboo, by Qiu Ying, Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China.

The following passage from D. C. Lau's translation of the Confucian philosopher *Mencius* is likely to convince even the most sympathetic Westerner of the inscrutability of the Chinese:

Xuzi said, "More than once Confucius expressed his admiration for water saying, 'Water! Oh, water!' What was it he saw in water?" "Water from an ample source," said Mencius, "comes tumbling down, day and night without ceasing, going forward only after all the hollows are filled, and then draining into the sea. Anything that has an ample source is like this. What Confucius saw in water is just this and nothing more. If a thing has no source, it is like rain water that collects after a downpour in the seventh and eighth months. It may fill all the gutters, but we can stand and wait for it to dry up. Thus a gentleman is ashamed of an exaggerated reputation." (IVB.18)¹

Although no translation into English of a text originally written in Classical Chinese can fully convey its meaning, the difficulty that the reader confronts in reading this passage is not due to the translation, but to a lack of familiarity with the imagery and to the strangeness of the assertion that Confucius frequently praised water. Indeed, few teachers can have tried to read this passage in a translation class, with Confucius' exclamation, *Shui zai! Shui zai!* 水哉! 水哉! "Oh Water! Oh Water." (Or perhaps, more evocatively, Ah, Water! Ah, Water!²) without producing incredulity or even bemused laughter.

The contrasting imagery in this passage—water that falls in torrents but dries up in the sun as opposed to water that flows from a source, forever replacing itself—derives from a universal natural phenomenon and is readily understood with explanation or even a little thought. Confucius' stated admiration for water and the structure of the narrative, however, are more puzzling. Confucius did not understand reputation and then use water without a source as an analogy to illustrate the shame inherent in possessing an exaggerated reputation. He praised water and then derived a principle (*qu* 取) from it. From this principle—that things which have no source will dry up—he knew

that a gentleman is ashamed when his reputation is greater than he is himself. Confucius' interest in water was not unique to him. Water is as important in the Daoist texts as in the Confucian. Indeed, water imagery is so pervasive in the *Laozi Daodejing* that scholars usually associate water imagery with the Daoist tradition rather than the Confucian.

Many scholars have observed that the Chinese religious tradition, unlike the ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian, did not assume a transcendent being or principle.³ Nor did the Chinese have a sacred narrative, such as the Bible. That there is a close relationship between the root metaphors of the Indo-European religious traditions and the ontology of Western philosophy is well recognized. The root metaphors of Chinese thought, on the other hand, are much less obvious. In the following work, I will argue that early Chinese thinkers, whatever their philosophical school, assumed that common principles informed the natural and human worlds. By studying nature, one could understand humankind. Thus, the natural world rather than religious mythology provided the root metaphors for the formulation of many of the earliest Chinese philosophical concepts.

Water, which provides life, gurgles up unbidden from the earth and moves of its own accord, becomes perfectly level and clears itself of sediment when still, takes the shape of any container, penetrates the tiniest opening, yields to pressure but wears down the hardest stone, becomes hard as ice and disperses as steam, was the model for philosophical ideas about the nature of the cosmos. Plants, which germinate, grow until they blossom, and wither once they have produced seed, which thrive in the summer and die down in the winter, provided imagery for understanding the nature of man. This natural world was the source of the root metaphors used in the formulation of abstract concepts and its imagery is embedded in the language and structure of Chinese philosophy.

Water, with its multiplicity of forms and extraordinary capacity for generating imagery, provided the primary model for conceptualizing general cosmic principles, principles which applied to the behavior of people, as well as to the forces of nature. Plants—which water nourishes—served as a root metaphor for

understanding the nature of specific living things, including human nature. The Indo-European tradition makes a radical distinction between plants and animals. In English, for example, there is no common word that encompasses both plants and animals. In Chinese, however, people were included among the “myriad living things” (*wan wu* 萬物)—a category that encompassed both plants and animals. Such categories are fundamental to the way we think.

By exposing the metaphoric structures that are implicit in the language of Chinese philosophical discourse, we reveal the organization and internal relationships of its terms and categories. Thus, we begin to acquire a means of structuring our own thought in a manner that more closely resembles that of the ancient Chinese. This effort can never be entirely successful, especially when we are using the medium of another language, but it should allow our imaginations to glimpse the possibility of seeing the world in another way. And although the revelation may still be limited, it should nevertheless allow us to gain some insight into the relationship between language and thought as well as a certain perspective on the cultural basis of our own thought and the limitations of our own preconceptions.

The Sources

The texts that I take as my sources in this work were compiled in the period from the fifth to late third centuries B.C. I will include both Confucian and Daoist texts, with occasional reference to texts of other philosophical schools. This period was the golden age of Chinese philosophy, equivalent to the Axial age of Greek civilization. Politically, however, it was a period of increasingly vicious civil war in which numerous small states were defeated and taken over by their more powerful neighbors as “one hundred schools of thought” contended for intellectual dominance. The Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100–222 B.C.) had been founded by an alliance of tribes. The Zhou empire may never have been quite as vast as that of the previous dynasty, the Shang (ca. 1700–1100 B.C.), but it covered much of the territory now designated

as China, and the Zhou rulers created a type of feudal system in which their relatives and allies had control of various states.

In 771 B.C., rebellions and tribal incursions from the West forced the Zhou rulers to move their capital eastward. From this time on, their power began to decline and that of the individual states to increase. The period from 722–481 B.C. is known as the Spring and Autumn Period, after the title of a history of the state of Lu, attributed to Confucius (551–479 B.C.). In the following period, Zhou suzerainty ceased to even be acknowledged. Finally, in 221 B.C., the empire was unified under the rule of the First Emperor of Qin. Our texts were mainly compiled during this transitional period of intellectual as well a military ferment, known as the Warring States Period.

The Confucianists and the Daoists were only two of the many “schools of thought” that contended for influence during the fifth to third centuries B.C., but they were the two most enduring. Conceptually opposed to one another (and not entirely unitary as schools), they came to be regarded as two complementary aspects of human life in the later Chinese tradition: the public versus the private; or the conformist and intellectual as opposed to the natural and spontaneous. The Confucianists, whose major works were the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, provided the political and ethical foundations for the Chinese state and society until modern times; the Daoists, whose major works were the *Laozi Daodejing* [*Lao-tzu Tao-te-ching*] and the *Zhuangzi* [*Chuang-tzu*], its creative and aesthetic impetus.

These are the primary texts that we shall consider herein. If my hypothesis that water and plant growth are a root metaphor of the Chinese conceptual scheme is correct, then the imagery discussed herein should be reflected in a vast range of philosophical, literary, and aesthetic expression, any of which could have been used to make the same point. Rather than attempting a broad survey, however, I will focus narrowly on those seminal Daoist and Confucian texts that formulated the language and served to set the terms of philosophical debate thereafter. I will also refer to other philosophical texts and schools, for example the *Mozi* (fourth century B.C.), and to texts and inscriptions of other periods, but only where they have a particular relevance.

The earliest text under consideration is the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) of Confucius (551–479 B.C.). Confucius was the first philosopher in ancient China; that is, he was the first thinker to form a school of followers who recorded his thoughts and transmitted them to posterity in the form of a text. This text—known in English as the *Analects*—contains mainly short statements, often only one or two sentences long. These are not actually “sayings,” but particular remarks of Confucius recorded by his disciples or their followers. They depend on extensive commentaries and the later tradition for their full import, but the importance of this text cannot be exaggerated. The *Analects* were the touchstone for all later philosophical writing. They provided much of the terminology and established the major concerns of philosophical discussion. That the Daoist Zhuangzi chose to put many of his own philosophical meditations into the mouth of Confucius, claiming Confucius’ authority for his own opinions, is one indicator of Confucius’ paramount importance even in ancient times. Ironic as this device may have been—Confucius is consistently made to recognize the superiority of Daoist positions—it does demonstrate Confucius’ primacy. Similarly, the followers of Laozi felt that claiming Laozi was a teacher of Confucius was in their interest.

Mencius—or Mengzi 孟子 as he is known in Chinese—was a follower of Confucius who lived in the fourth century B.C. The text, which bears his name and contains mainly records of his conversations, was compiled soon after his death. We may surmise that the terse statements in the *Analects* served as the basis for an oral commentary when the teachings were passed down from teacher to student. Although the *Mencius* would also have been taught with an oral commentary, the text is fuller and it contains a more coherently expressed philosophical system. Thus, the *Mencius* was at least as influential historically as the *Analects* and Confucianism is known as much through this text as through that of its founder. Indeed, the *Mencius* and the *Laozi Daodejing* are probably the two most influential of all Chinese texts throughout history.

Traditionally—and apocryphally—Laozi was said to be an older contemporary of Confucius who advised him about ritual

matters. The authorship and date of the *Laozi* are open to debate, but I take the text as roughly contemporaneous with the *Mencius*. On the one hand, as D. C. Lau has pointed out, Mencius takes care to oppose rival philosophical schools, but does not mention the *Laozi*. This suggests that the text was not known to him—or at least that he did not consider it significant as a contender in the battle for political influence. On the other, as Lau has also observed, many of the ideas in the *Laozi* are associated with a number of thinkers of the late fourth to early third century B.C. The contents of the *Laozi* are probably not entirely coherent in their origin or date, but the text in its present form, by and large, makes sense as a product of this golden age in the development of early Chinese philosophical thought.⁴ Some scholars date this text even later but the recent discovery of a fragmentary (and as yet unpublished) *Laozi* written on bamboo slips in a middle Warring States tomb are conclusive evidence that some form of the text was in existence before the Han.

In 1973, archaeologists unearthed two copies of this text written on silk from a Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220) tomb, at Mawangdui, near Changsha, in Hunan Province. An inventory slip (to record the grave goods buried with the deceased) tells us that the burial took place on the equivalent of 4 April, 168 B.C. People were forbidden to write the characters in the names of deceased emperors and these tabooed characters are one means of dating a text. Of the two manuscripts from Mawangdui, Copy A observed no Han Dynasty taboos at all and so we may surmise that it was copied down before the death of the first Han emperor in 195 B.C. Copy B observed the taboos on the founder's name, but not those of his successor and so it must have been copied between 195 and 180 B.C. The two manuscripts are not identical, but they are very close and most scholars regard them as representatives of a single textual tradition. Reference to the *Laozi* in the following work will generally refer to a collation of these two manuscripts, although I will also refer to the transmitted versions of the text.⁵ Since this is not a study of the development of ideas but an attempt to demonstrate an underlying conceptual scheme in early philosophical thought, I will “lump” rather than “split” when it comes to the dating of texts.

The *Analects* of Confucius and the *Laozi*, for example, might be split into chronological layers, but for the purpose of this study, I regard them both as cohesive texts.

Traditionally, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi* have been grouped together as the two major texts of Daoist thought. The *Zhuangzi* is traditionally divided into three sections, the Inner Chapters, the Outer Chapters, and Mixed Chapters. I will primarily be concerned with the Inner Chapters, that is, those which most scholarly opinion attributes to Zhuangzi or Zhuang Zhou, who lived from middle of the fourth century into the early third century B.C. The scholarly debate about the relative dating of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* is not easily resolved. On the one hand, we will find that the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* present another vision based on the same metaphoric roots as the *Laozi* and share some of the same terminology. On the other hand, few—if any—of these passages appear to have a direct derivation from the *Laozi*, in contrast to passages from the later sections.

The Outer and Mixed Chapters include much heterogeneous material, some of which may be as late as the very end of the third century. Although my primary concern is with the Inner Chapters, the later sections of the *Zhuangzi* are sometimes useful as examples which extend the range of imagery. In the later sections, particularly those that A. C. Graham has labeled “syncretic,” we also find examples of more complex and sophisticated use of the terminology under consideration. Although I will make some reference to this, detailed analysis is beyond the purview of the present study.

Xunzi (310–219 B.C.) represents another branch of the Confucian school and he is not only later than Mencius—with whom he disputes certain issues—the text is also influenced by certain Daoist ideas.⁶ This is the latest text that will be included in our corpus. In this text, we find more conscious and abstract systems have begun to develop. Technical terminology is used in a much more self-conscious and deliberate manner, as it is in the later sections of the *Zhuangzi*. For example, in the *Xunzi*, the reason that a gentleman gazes at a great river is given an elaborate and systematic explanation. Since my primary interest is in the initial conceptualization based on root metaphor rather than

the development of the concepts, I will use the *Xunzi* in a limited manner only.

Root Metaphors and Conceptual Schemes

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argued that we think in metaphor, that our perception of reality in our everyday thinking is based on the concrete imagery of metaphoric structures. By using metaphor and mental imagery we are able to think imaginatively as well as abstractly. These structures are reflected in our literal language. On the abstract level, “so-called intellectual concepts, for example, the concepts in a scientific theory, are often—perhaps always—based on metaphors that have a physical and/or cultural basis. . . . The intuitive appeal of a scientific theory has to do with how well its metaphors fit one’s experience.” Thus, “the most fundamental values in a culture will be coherent with the metaphoric structure of the most fundamental concepts in the culture.”⁷

Let us take as an example, time. I do so in part because time seems to be Lakoff and Johnson’s most frequent example in their effort to demonstrate the way we think metaphorically on an everyday basis. Moreover, I will discuss time again in the course of this work with relation both to the metaphor of the stream of water and that of plant life. The manner in which the ancient Chinese conceived of time radically differentiates their conceptual scheme from our own. A full treatment of ancient Chinese ideas of time would require at least another book, so the following comments are only a brief illustration of what I mean by metaphoric thinking.

Time is an intellectual concept that requires a metaphoric model; that is, since time has no concrete reality, we need some sort of imagery or model in order to conceptualize it. Thus, the manner in which we think about time is a consequence of the metaphor on which we base our thinking. On an everyday basis in the modern world, as Lakoff and Johnson point out, we tend to think of time as a limited resource or commodity. Even those of us who would only use the saying *Time Is Money* in a jocular

manner speak—and conceive—of time as something that we can save or spend; invest, budget, borrow, share or spare; win or lose. We even act accordingly. The root metaphors used to conceptualize time are of fundamental importance in the distinction between the Chinese and European systems of thought. Historically, in the West, various metaphoric models have been used to describe time scientifically as an intellectual concept. Newton, for example, used the analogy of a geometrical straight line. In this model, moments of absolute time were understood as analogous to the continuous sequence of points on the line.⁸ Such a model is also associated with a progressive idea of history in which time moves forward without repeating itself.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the mortal world was created by God at a particular time and it will come to an end one day. In this scheme, two types of time are contrasted: there is the unending, eternal time of God as opposed to the bounded time of the mortal world. Following the Christian tradition, we count time from a single date, the birth of Christ (mythically, a new beginning of the world and thus a reenactment of the creation story) and, potentially at least, there is a final date, that of the apocalypse. We also conceive of the lives of individuals as discrete units, with a beginning (birth) and an end (death), during which each person is morally responsible for their own acts before the God who made them and to whom they must answer at the end of this time span.

There is no Classical Chinese word equivalent in meaning to the English word *time*. In the *Analects* (IX.17), we are told that Confucius, standing by a river, said, “What passes is perhaps like this: day and night it never lets up.” In this passage, the imagery of the river suggests time passing, just as it did for his contemporary Heraclitus when he said that you cannot step into the same river twice. However, a specific term for “what passes” or “passes by”—what we call *time*—is noticeably absent.⁹ Nevertheless, a Chinese word, sometimes translated as “time,” *shi* 時, is a key term in early Chinese philosophy. The original meaning of *shi* is “season.” By extension, it also means seasonality or timeliness and refers to doing something at the appropriate time, the time or season at which an action can succeed. *Shi* is mean-

ingful in the context of a natural order to which people, as other living things including plants, must correspond in their actions if they are to flourish and achieve success in life. However, it is not equivalent to our idea of “time” and it cannot be used to discuss the phenomenon of time passing for which Confucius used the metaphor of a river.

Just as there is no Classical Chinese word equivalent to the English *time*, there is no English word that may be readily used to translate the Chinese *shi*. In early Chinese texts, there is no story of *ab nihilo* creation, no story of an event like the creation story in Genesis which describes the creation of the world out of nothing and marks the beginning of time.¹⁰ In Chinese chronologies, time is not counted from a single date, like the birth of Christ, but again and again from repeated historical beginnings—from the foundation of a dynasty, or the assumption of a royal reign within that dynasty. On the personal level, individual lives are, of course, bounded by birth and death, but the life of each person is also regarded as a link within the continuum of the ancestral lineage.

This distinction may be attributed to contrasting metaphoric structures: the biblical creation story takes the dramatic event of animal birth as its metaphor; the Chinese ancestral lineage, the continuum of plant reproduction. On the one hand, in our conceptual scheme, humans are readily classified together with animals, but a radical distinction is made between animals and plants. In Chinese, on the other hand, humans, animals, and plants are habitually classified together (as *wu* 物, “living things”), so that the pattern of reproduction which is shared by both plants and animals, including humans, is more readily apparent.

Sinologists are in the habit of describing Chinese ideas of time as cyclical, that is, Chinese time goes in circles rather than straight lines. But the idea of a “cycle” derives from a play on our own geometrical metaphor for time, as does the alternative, sometimes suggested, of a spiral. The use of the term *cycle* emphasizes repeating patterns as opposed to linear ideas of progress. Thus, it is helpful as a means of differentiating the Chinese concept from the Western metaphor of a straight line. It is not, however, a Chinese metaphor for describing time. As we shall see in

the following, both water and plants provide metaphoric roots of early Chinese ideas about time. Water, in the form of the stream with a natural spring as its source, provides a model for ideas of both transience and continuity. Plants, with their annual patterns of change, for the concept of *shi* 時, and, in their reproductive continuum, for the concept of lineage.

Philosophy requires the formulation of terminology, an abstract language in which to theorize. This language is inevitably based on concrete imagery. What Lakoff and Johnson call the “metaphoric structure of the most fundamental concepts in a culture” is what I call “root metaphor.” The use of the word *metaphor* in this context may be somewhat confusing. I am not concerned here with metaphor in the usual sense of figural language or with the use of concrete imagery to restructure abstract ideas, but with the concrete roots of the earliest abstractions. In other words, the ‘root metaphor’ is a concrete model that is inherent in the conceptualization of the “abstract” idea. The abstract idea derives from the process of analogy, rather than the analogy illustrating the idea.

The distinction that I wish to make here can be seen with reference to an important antecedent to this work in which Donald Munro observed that the most important metaphors used by the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960–1279) neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi were water, plants and the family network. Munro states, for example, with regard to his use of plant metaphor, “[Zhu Xi’s] theory is that principle/humaneness/human nature is the immaterial structure . . . from which all behavioral forms of love actualize. Thus, humaneness is the root, and brotherly love the sprouts, or principle is the root and love is the sprout, not vice versa. To structure the mind by means of the plant analogy is to say that the mind’s major active traits are vitality and affection. . . .”¹¹

Although Munro recognized that this metaphor can be traced back to the *Analects*, in his discussion of Zhu Xi’s philosophy he nevertheless assumed that the plant was a literary metaphor by means of which Zhu Xi structured preexisting abstract concepts. My argument is that Chinese concepts of the mind and human nature were structured from the very beginning by an analogy

with the growth of plants. By Zhu Xi's time, the concepts had undergone many centuries of independent development as abstract ideas, and Zhu Xi undoubtedly thought of them as abstractions. In making his metaphors, he probably thought he was rediscovering the core of Confucianism and, indeed, when he rediscovered their metaphoric roots, he was.

My concern is thus with the models which underlay early Chinese conceptual thinking. My argument is not that water and plant life were literary metaphors, metaphors in the conventional sense of concrete images used to illustrate and structure philosophical concepts, but that they provided the *root metaphors* of many of the primary philosophical concepts. Such root metaphors are one aspect of what philosophers often call *conceptual schemes*. Many philosophers have understood these as logical propositions. A. C. Graham, however, argued that they should be defined in terms of patterns of names and categories that are prior to the formulation of any propositions.¹²

As Graham has stated, "at the root of the systems of propositions called 'conceptual schemes' by philosophers, there are patterns of perception which are pre-logical. . . . That all thinking is grounded in analogization shows up especially clearly when we try to come to grips with the thought of another civilisation."¹³ These names and categories are spontaneously correlated to express meaning in patterns that reflect their metaphoric structures and are particular to their conceptual scheme. The significance of different patterns of names and categories becomes evident as soon as we try to translate one language into another, especially when those languages have no genetic relationship to one another.

Anyone who has attempted to translate Classical Chinese texts into a Western language will be aware that the terms used in the Chinese texts represent different categories of meaning than those of the language into which they are translated. Translation inevitably sets up networks of relationships and resonances that are quite different from those of the original language. For example, two terms that I will discuss at length in the course of this work, *xing* 性 and *ziran* 自然, are both commonly translated into English as "nature," but the two terms have no semantic

relationship to one another in Chinese and the Chinese terms are quite different in meaning.

The translation “nature” for these two Chinese words not only sets up relationships between them that are not a part of the original conceptual scheme; it also has implications from our own conceptual scheme of a transcendent reality that was nonexistent in ancient China. These implications are present, for example, in such English terms as *laws of nature*, *mother nature*, and so on. In ancient China, there was a concept of an order which we may call natural. Furthermore, the earth is spoken of as a mother in a dual relationship with the sky or heaven (*tian* 天), which played the role of “father.” In some contexts, the sky/heaven which governed the seasons may also appropriately be translated as nature. However, there was no concept of “nature” as a distinct entity that might prescribe—or act in accordance with—“law” or that might be called “mother.”

Logical propositions depend on patterns of names and categories for their meaning and these are different in different languages. One can convey the central thrust of words and sentences—their *focal meaning* as it is sometimes called—in translation. However, the meaning of translated words and sentences merely overlaps with the meaning in the original language. Because some of the implications of the original are always left out in translation and new possibilities are inevitably suggested, translation cannot duplicate meaning precisely. When languages—and the conceptual schemes within which they operate—have no common historical origins, the distance between the meaning of the original and the translation is inevitably greater.

Since two sentences in two different languages are never exactly the same in meaning, one cannot, as Graham observed, logically negate a proposition made in one language in any other language. For example, we may translate “Grass is green” into Classical Chinese as “*Cao qing ye* 草青也.” However, *cao* has a broader sense than grass, including straw, wild plants, and herbs. *Qing* is the color of grass and other living plants, but it includes gray and shades of blue and black. Indeed, its range of color is precisely that which cognitive anthropologists have distinguished as the “dark-cool-wet” color as opposed to “light-warm-dry”—

red, yellow, and white—in color systems that distinguish only two categories, even though the Chinese already had a more complex system when *qing* first appeared as a color in the Zhou Dynasty. Green, however, is one of the eleven basic color categories based on intensity, all of which are used in English.¹⁴

The grammar of the Chinese sentence also implies a different type of logical relationship.¹⁵ The verb “to be” in English, as in many related languages, has both an existential sense and a grammatical usage as a copula. This conjunction of usages has had important implications in the history of Western philosophy. Classical Chinese, however, has no verb that is equivalent to either English usage. Where English uses the copula *is* (A is B), Classical Chinese uses the final particle *ye* (A B *ye*), but the logical relationship between A and B is not quite the same as in the Chinese. A B *ye* means that A belongs to the category B. If we were to translate *cao qing ye* back into English, a more literal translation would be: “As for grass, it belongs to the category of green.”

The negative in Chinese is made by the addition of another grammatical particle, *fei* 非: *cao fei qing ye* (*ye* may be omitted in negative statements). Graham’s point was that the acceptance of the idea of a conceptual scheme is not an acceptance of the idea of the relativity of truth because the truth of any statement can only be affirmed or denied in the language in which it is made. That the English proposition “Grass is green” is true, does not necessarily mean that the Chinese translation *cao qing ye* is so. Furthermore, although the logical proposition “grass is green” is negated in English as “grass is not green,” grass not being green would not preclude *cao* from being *qing*, nor would the Chinese negative *Cao fei qing* 草非青 preclude the possibility that the grass is green. In other words, different conceptual schemes yield different insights and their truth can logically only be affirmed or denied in their own terms.

Moreover, no language is an isolated system; each has its own particular history, which is cultural as well as linguistic. Thus, the pattern of names and categories which characterize any particular language and conceptual scheme is not arbitrary, but historically and culturally derived. Because conceptual terms are grounded in analogization, they are interrelated in a complex

manner that reflects their metaphoric structure. These interrelationships include not only patterns of correlation and opposition, such as those with which Graham was concerned, but a more complex set of dynamic relationships. For example, concepts that are modeled on water in its various forms have inherent structural relationships which remain even at the level of abstraction, but cannot be conveyed in translation.

We need not accept all of Lakoff and Johnson's ideas about thinking in metaphor to recognize that the formulation of the earliest intellectual concepts in the formative period of a philosophical discourse, be it East or West, will draw on the root metaphors of that civilization. Root metaphors often derive from the mythical narratives of a religious tradition. For example, the importance of a creation myth to the ontology of Western philosophy has often been noted. Roger Ames, for example, has argued that "the notion of initial beginning, whether it pertains to the cosmos as a whole or to the creatures that populate it, must surely have a significant, if not determinative influence over the way a culture comes to conceive of the nature and order of things."¹⁶ In contrast to this idea of an initial beginning, Tu Weiming and others have stressed the idea of continuity of being as a basic motif of Chinese ontology with far-reaching implications.¹⁷

In recent years, comparative philosophers and sinologists have become increasingly aware of the importance of divesting our interpretations of Chinese philosophy of our own preconceptions. As Frederick Mote has stated, "History, culture, and people's conceptions of their ideal roles all must be explained in terms of Chinese cosmology, and not—if we really want to understand Chinese civilization—by implicit analogy to ours. . . . Hence, the records of Chinese culture must be interpreted, and the texts translated and retranslated until our inadvertent uses of historical and cultural analogy are detected, weighed, and, if necessary, corrected."¹⁸ We cannot, however, divest our interpretations of Chinese culture of our own cultural analogies simply by translating and retranslating the texts. Nor can we do so by "comparative philosophy," which uses the more abstract—but no less culturally biased—specialist language of the professional philosopher.

We must begin by exposing the metaphors that underlie the Chinese terminology and imbue it with meaning. Indeed, we *cannot* divest our interpretations of Chinese thought of implicit analogies from our own conceptual scheme *until* we recognize the root metaphors of Chinese thought. We can, of course, never entirely comprehend another conceptual scheme, and our ability to divest ourselves of preconceptions is further diminished when we use the medium of our own language to translate and interpret another system of thought. Nevertheless, by recognizing the root metaphors of Chinese thought, we can at least begin to understand the Chinese terminology more accurately and this should enable us to interpret the texts and the philosophy that they express more clearly.

The structure of early Chinese religion is fundamentally different from the Greek, Judeo-Christian, and other Indo-European religions. Thus, a few comments about the nature of early Chinese religion may be useful to orient the reader before turning to the subject at hand.

Early Chinese Religion

I have already referred to the close relationship of the Western religious traditions and the ontology of Western philosophy. There is no religious narrative, such as the Bible, in the Chinese tradition and what we know about early Chinese religion is primarily from records of ritual practices. These include divination inscriptions on shell and bone, the so-called oracle bone inscriptions, made by the last kings of the Shang Dynasty (ca. 1700–1100 B.C.), and inscriptions on bronze vessels from the Western Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1100–772 B.C.). A full review of the relationship of the early Chinese religious tradition and the ontology of Chinese philosophy is beyond the scope of this work. However, certain aspects of early Chinese religion are particularly relevant to our understanding of why Chinese philosophers assumed that common principles govern the human and natural worlds. I will review these aspects very briefly below. They include: (1) the ritual structure of Chinese ancestor worship in which the individual

was part of a lineage that included both the living and the dead; (2) the worship of nature spirits together with the ancestors; and (3) the role of *tian* 天, "sky/heaven," as a supreme force with power over the natural and human worlds.

From the point of view of the individual, the central rites of Chinese religion from at least Neolithic times onward were food offerings given to the ancestors in exchange for benevolence or at least to prevent their malevolence. Our earliest written evidence for Chinese ritual practice is from the divinations inscribed on bone and shell made by the kings of the Shang Dynasty. From these inscriptions, which are primarily concerned with making offerings to the spirits and thus avoiding their curses, we can deduce an outline of Shang religious structure.

The most common topic for divination by the Shang kings was the appropriate food offerings to be made to an ancestor. An assumption underlying the offerings to the ancestors and the divinations made about them was that people continued to need food after death. The spirits of the dead also continued to exercise power over their descendants who had the duty of providing them with nurture. Thus, another common topic for divination by the Shang kings was the possibility that the royal ancestors would visit some calamity on them or their people. The most common calamities were natural disasters, such as drought and crop failure, but human illness and defeat in warfare were other possibilities.

Within this ritual system, the role of the individual was as a member of his ancestral lineage. The ritual of food offerings to the ancestors served to connect the living with the dead. As I have already discussed at some length elsewhere, a consequence of this structure is that there is no "other world" of supernatural beings which is comparable to but radically different than the mundane one.¹⁹ The ancestral spirits related directly to the living through the ritual of food offerings. They did not have a life after death in which they fraternized with one another. They were not gods like those of ancient Greece who lived on Mount Olympus, eating ambrosia and drinking nectar, occasionally dallying with humans but mainly concerned with one another. Nor were they souls who stood before an almighty god who created them and to whom they were answerable.

The Chinese spirits were simply human beings, dead ones, who continued to require nurture and to exercise power over their descendants, but they made no moral demands and did not exercise any moral sanctions according to some higher, transcendental law. The ritual structure of Chinese ancestor worship is, however, one key to understanding the ontology of morality in the Chinese conceptual scheme. Such concepts as *xiao* 孝, “filial piety” and *li* 禮, “rites” or “ceremony,” for example, which are the central tenets for behavior in Confucianism derived directly from this religious background. Although I will not analyze this relationship herein, we shall see in the following that the individual within the ancestral lineage was conceptualized in terms of plant imagery in which the individual was part of a continuous pattern of generation, reproduction, decline, and death.

At the top of this structure was *Shang Di* 上帝, the “lord on high.” The term *di* was also used for the Shang ancestors in the main line of descent. This suggests that he too was the spirit of a dead person or at least that he had certain human characteristics. However, *Shang Di* was such a shadowy figure that some scholars have even suggested that the term was a collective one for a group of ancestral spirits.²⁰ Since *Shang Di* in the later Chinese tradition was always correlated with a single king who ruled “all under the sky/heaven,” I think it more likely that the “lord on high” of the Shang was also singular. Nevertheless, he was simply a power, not a personality. Most important, he controlled the weather, “ordering” the rain and clouds and “sending down” drought.

Within this structure, there is no clear differentiation between the human and natural worlds. *Shang Di* exercised power over both. Furthermore, the power of the most distant ancestors—and the sacrifices that they received—are similar to those of the nature spirits. These were the spirits of certain natural phenomenon, primarily rivers, mountains, and earth. We know very little about how the Shang conceived of the nature spirits, but the names of the rituals that they performed to them and the offerings made in the course of these rituals were the same ones that were given to the high ancestors. Furthermore, the powers

of the high ancestors and nature spirits were similar; the primary powers of both types of spirits were to curse the weather and affect the harvest by causing drought or rain.

When the Zhou overthrew the Shang, they identified *tian* 天, the sky/heaven, with Shang Di. *Tian* means “sky” but in its role as the supreme force, it is conventionally translated as “heaven,” giving it religious overtones from our own tradition in which heaven is either a place in the sky where the souls of the good go after death or a euphemism for God. This sounds more natural in English—the translation of “sky” for the supreme power is unsettlingly graphic to the English reader. To say that the ruler of China, especially in the sophisticated imperial court of later times, was the “son of the sky” sounds very strange to us. However, the role of “heaven” in English as a euphemism for God gives *tian* a specifically anthropomorphic character and suggests a supreme creator in a manner which obscures the meaning of the Chinese term. This equation is compounded when Shang Di is translated as *God*.

Although *tian* was identified with Shang Di, the “high lord” of the Shang people, at the beginning of the Zhou Dynasty, it was also, quite literally, the sky. In nature, *tian* governed the seasons. And with regard to people, it also determined the appropriate “times” at which a dynasty might be changed, that is, when one lineage might be exchanged for another in its dominance over the world “below the sky” or, as convention has it, “under heaven.” The two roles are never distinguished and this may provide the key to the assumption in the philosophical tradition that people could determine principles which are applicable to the human world by studying plants, water, and other natural phenomena.

If *tian* was originally a nature spirit rather than a high god, like those of the mountains and rivers in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions, its supremacy would then derive from the importance of the sky in a natural hierarchy. The physical import of *tian* as the “sky” is readily evident when it is paired with *di* 地, “earth.” This pairing is common to both the Confucian and the Daoist texts. Furthermore, in the Daoist texts, in which the *dao*

or “way” supplants *tian* as a first principle, *tian* and *di* are sometimes described as a male/female pair responsible for the generation of all living things: humans, plants and animals.²¹ This suggests that the literal identification of *tian* as “sky” was always an essential aspect of its identity.

I have referred already to the concept of *shi* 時 in ancient China. It had a basic meaning of season which was extended to mean the appropriate time at which something can succeed, that is, seasonality or timeliness. *Tian* 天 controlled the *shi* of the natural world—presumably because seasonal changes were measured by observing the movements of the heavenly bodies—the suns, moons, stars, and constellations—in the sky. *Tian* also served to determine the appropriate times at which something could succeed in the human world, as in the world of nature. Thus, *tian*, the “sky/heaven,” was responsible for the rise and fall of the dynasties on the assumption that the moral order of human society, like that of the natural world, has a definite temporal pattern. As we shall see in the following, *tian* remained the supreme principle in the Confucian texts, but it was replaced in this role by *dao* in the Daoist tradition.

The role of sky/heaven as both a natural force and power over the human world provides a key to understanding the assumption made by the Chinese philosophers that one could derive principles applicable to the human world from the study of natural phenomenon such as water and plants. Although both the Indo-European religious traditions and Western philosophy depend on the assumption of transcendence, an idea of an unchanging reality, be it a deity or natural laws, in contrast to the changing world of man, the structure of Chinese religion was such that the ancestral lineage tied the world of the spirits directly to that of the living. There was thus a continuum between this world and that of the spirits, rather than a sphere of transcendent reality that stands in radical contrast to the mundane one. Furthermore, at least in early times, there was no particular ritual distinction between the ancestral spirits and those of natural phenomenon. Thus the Chinese worldview was a holistic one.

Water and Plant Life

If one assumes that common principles govern the natural world and the human mind, then ethical values can be discussed by reference to natural principles. The fondness of Chinese philosophers for analogy as a means of argumentation is well known. The use of analogy is often dismissed as a rhetorical device. However, once we recognize this assumption that common principles governed the natural and human worlds, then we can see that argument by analogy—the primary method of argumentation in ancient China—had a more serious purpose. It was used and achieved its validity because of the assumption of a real parallel.

The passage with which we began, in which Confucius praised water, is not an isolated one. Confucius' interest in water as a means of understanding the principles of human behavior is well-attested. According to the *Analecets*, Confucius, "standing by a river, said, 'What passes is perhaps like this. Day and night it never lets up'" (IX.17).²² Another passage from the *Analecets* tells us that Confucius said, "the intelligent find joy in water"; whereas "the humane find joy in mountains. The intelligent are lively; the humane, still. The intelligent are happy; the humane, long-lived" (VI.22). Moreover, according to a further passage from the *Mencius*, Confucius urged his disciples to take notice of the wisdom inherent in the nursery rhyme, "The water of the Cang Lang River is clear, so we may wash our capstrings; the water of the Cang Lang River is dirty, so we may wash our feet," observing that water "takes the principle upon itself (*zi qu zhi* 自取之), just as men invite insult upon themselves" (IVA.8). According to Mencius, "There is an art to looking at water (*guan shui you shu* 觀水有術)" (VIIA.24).

The tradition that water was a source of knowledge for Confucius is continued in the *Xunzi* where we are told that Zi Gong inquired of Confucius who was watching a river flowing east, "Why is it that when a gentleman sees a great river, he always gazes at it?" And Confucius replied:

Water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting (*wuwei* 無爲) is like virtue (*de* 德). Its stream, which descends downward, twisting and turning but always following the same principle, is like rightness (*yi* 義). Its bubbling up, never running dry, is like the way (*dao* 道). Where there is a channel to direct it, its noise is like an echoing cry and its fearless advance into a hundred meter valley, like valor (*yong* 勇). Used as a level, it is always even, like law (*fa* 法). Full, it does not require a ladle, like correctness (*zheng* 正). Compliant and exploratory, it reaches to the tiniest point, like perceptiveness (*cha* 察). That which goes to it and enters into it, is cleansed and purified, like the transformation of goodness (*shanhua* 善化). In twisting around ten thousand times but always going eastward, it is like will (*zhi* 志). That is the reason that when a gentleman sees a great river, he will always look upon it. (28 *You Zuo*, pp. 390–1)²³

In sum, a gentleman studies water because all of the principles to which he aspires are embodied in its many manifestations.

This equation between water and the principles of human conduct depends on an assumption that the same principles govern the natural and human worlds for its legitimacy. Thus, Confucius meditated upon water; and the Confucian Xunzi later attempted to systematize the relationship between water's various forms and people's moral qualities. This assumption of a correspondence between the principles which inform both water and human conduct was not limited to the Confucians; it was generally assumed in all early philosophical texts. Nor was the imagery the provenance of any particular school. For example, water which moves forward without force, giving life to everything, is described in the *Xunzi* as *wuwei* 無爲, "without action" or "doing nothing," a term that is particularly associated with Daoism.²⁴

The same image of water extending everywhere and giving everything life without taking deliberate action, is apparent in the *Laozi* (Dao 8) which states, "The highest good is like water. Water's goodness is that it benefits the myriad living things, yet does not contend and dwells in places which the multitude de-

test. Thus, it approximates the Way.”²⁵ Water, which is here equated with the *dao* and proclaimed the highest good, is also important in the *Zhuangzi* and furthermore in the *Mozi*, *Hanfeizi*, and all early Chinese philosophical writing. Although this study is confined to philosophical thought from the fifth to third centuries B.C., the imagery pervades later Chinese philosophy and aesthetic creation.

In reading early Chinese philosophical texts, we should, I believe, take them at their word: Confucius did study water and Laozi used it as a model for his concept of the Way. Because the philosophers assumed that the same cosmological principles underlie human behavior, they sought to derive principles about the natural world by studying water and natural phenomena which would enable them to understand man and his place in the natural order. This assumption was implied when they came to formulate abstract philosophical concepts about the nature of the cosmos and it is inherent in their terminology. The imagery is thus intrinsic in the philosophical concepts and inseparable from them. This is evident not only in an analysis of particular concepts; it is also reflected in the dynamic relationships between the concepts.

Once formulated, the concepts developed as abstract ideas with other layers of meaning and connotations. Thus, there is no simple one to one relationship between concept and image. I will discuss the manner in which both water and plants provided models for particular philosophical ideas in the following chapters, but many concepts refer to more than a single metaphor, depending on the context and the precise meaning that is being expressed. For example, we will find a close association between the concept of *xin* 心, the “mind/heart” and water imagery when thinking and emotional states are in question, but an association with plant imagery when the issue is goodness. Furthermore, new metaphors and other imagery may be used to express ideas about preestablished concepts. In other words, the concepts were abstract ideas grounded in metaphor. The meaning and interrelationships of the concepts can be better understood with reference to that imagery, but once formulated they are abstract ideas, not a sort of picture language. Since they are

ideas, they have a conceptual life of their own that is distinct from their origins. However, because the natural phenomena served as models in the formulation of the abstract philosophical principles, the imagery associated with these phenomena is still implicit in the vocabulary of philosophical discourse. Moreover, because the imagery is inherent in the vocabulary and concepts, the root metaphor continues to provide an implicit structure to the relationships between words and ideas.

Procedure

In order to avoid projecting an alien structure on the philosophical ideas, I will proceed from the concrete to the abstract, from imagery to philosophy—from language to idea. My intention in beginning with the concrete imagery is to reveal the inherent structure of the metaphoric system. I will first discuss water and then plants. In the following chapter, I will begin my exploration by asking “How did early Chinese philosophers think about water?” This is a literal question and it will be answered by analyzing the language with which the philosophers described water and what they had to say about it. In this chapter, I will use all of the texts mentioned above, including the later sections of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Xunzi*. Occasional reference will be made to other texts as well in order to establish the full range of water’s cognitive potential in the early textual tradition.

Having analyzed the manner in which water was described in the texts, I will turn to key philosophical concepts which share the language and characteristics associated with water in Chapter 3. I will argue that water imagery is inherent in these concepts and that their meaning and interrelationships can be elucidated by reference to this imagery. The concepts under consideration will include *dao* 道, the “way,” *wuwei* 無爲, “doing nothing,” *xin* 心, the “mind/heart,” and *qi* 氣 “breath” or “vital energy.” My primary texts here and in the following chapter will be the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Mencius*, the *Xunzi*, the *Laozi*, and the *Zhuangzi*.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss the imagery associated with plants

and those concepts that can be elucidated with reference to the root metaphor of plant life. I will argue that a key difference between the Chinese and European conceptual schemes is the inclusion of plants, animals, and people within a single category of living things in China which served as a basis for theorization about the natural order. The concepts under discussion in this chapter will include *wu* 物, *xing* 性, *ren* 仁, *cai* 才, *duan* 端, *ziran* 自然, and *de* 德.

In Chapter 5, I will conclude by reviewing the manner in which the individual texts make use of the root metaphors of water and plant growth. I will pay particular attention to the *Mencius* and the *Laozi*, which I take as roughly contemporary, and which have especially coherent cosmologies. These cosmologies, as we shall see, in spite of their radically different philosophies, are based on an assumption that the same principles are found in the human and natural worlds and are grounded in the same root metaphor.

Although I have confined this study to a few core texts of the early Chinese philosophical tradition—those that were most influential in the development of all later Chinese thought—and will not attempt any broader analysis of the manner in which the concepts discussed herein developed in later times, readers acquainted with later Chinese philosophical and other literature will undoubtedly find the same themes recurring.