

Introduction

“Those who wish to achieve great things in the world must first cultivate themselves in private.”

—*Xinyu* ch. 6

夫建大功於天下者，必先修於閨門之內。《新語·慎微》

Aim, Scope, Method

The aim of this book is to introduce a general, interested audience to the practice of self-cultivation (修身) in early China. Self-cultivation is a broad term that denotes a multi-faceted pursuit of three distinct but related goals: individual health, social harmony, and environmental concord. (Each of these can be further analyzed into more precise concerns; for example, individual health can be divided into physical and mental health; social harmony, into political stability and ethical pluralism, and so on.) “Self-cultivation” may be readily understood in English, but it is nevertheless an enigmatic term; while it is a central and rather well-understood term in the intellectual history of China, if not all of East Asia, it has no specific cultural traction in the West. The closest example in the West may be the ancient Greek idea of *eudaimonia* (well-being), but this remains a relatively unknown term outside of Classics or early Philosophy specialties. Thus, a better point of comparison for the Westerner may be soteriology, the study of how to be “saved.” This comparison founders on the fact that early China had no “heaven” and “hell” with the religious sense that they commonly hold today, nor was there the idea of an eternal soul which would go to one of these places after death. But the comparison works well teleologically because

self-cultivation and soteriology both occupy similar central places in the intellectual histories of the East and West. Early China has had an extensive and lasting influence on Chinese culture that extends to the present day. Meanwhile, modern China once again has an extensive and still-growing influence on the rest of the world. For anyone who is curious about global approaches to the meaning of life, then, an inquiry into the early Chinese approaches of self-cultivation should be of interest.

My general argument is that early Chinese self-cultivation is analyzable into the ten constituent parts that make up the ten chapters of this book. All ten of these topics are important and well-known in Chinese history. Thus, the broader theme of self-cultivation and the subsequent ten subjects are presented in terms that would immediately be recognizable to a literate ancient Chinese person. Likewise, these ten topics may be subsumed under four broad categories that are also traditional categories in the Chinese context: the person (人), the environment in general (地), particular objects (物), and the larger context of the cosmos (天). Self-cultivation that focuses on the “person” includes the body, human nature, and the mind. The “environment” includes virtuosity and timeliness. (I classify virtuosity under “environment” because virtuosity is primarily a social concern, and therefore most relevant to the social environment.) “Objects” pertain to those useful to a relevant task, like books that are necessary for learning, and instruments that are needed for music. Finally, relations with the “cosmos” may be considered via fate, destiny, and spiritousness.

In the chapters that follow, there are many primary-source quotations because these quotes constitute the evidence for my claims. It is important, for several reasons, to include the original Chinese in a discussion of these topics, along with the translations, even though my audience will probably be primarily Western and English-speaking. The most important reason is that the state of the field of Western sinology is not yet to a point where we all, or even most of us, have agreed upon standardized translations, even for central concepts. The field is simply still too young. So it is very helpful for those who can read Chinese, and even for those who cannot but are reading other monographs on early China, to know how I am translating. It also encourages those who are interested to learn a few key words, just as one might learn a few important words of Greek or Sanskrit to help in understanding those cultures; for example, *logos* (logic; word) or *dubkha* (dissatisfaction; out of alignment). There is also a growing number of Western students learning Chinese at college, for whom the inclusion of the Chinese will be a boon. Finally, there are a great many Chinese students who know

or are learning English, who may be interested in this analysis. There is, to my knowledge, no Chinese language equivalent of this monograph.

The temporal scope of this book is “early China,” and focus here is on the 350-year period from roughly 500–150 BCE, though I have taken into account texts from about 1000 BCE down to 139 BCE.¹ The reason for this temporal scope is that the primary sources of this inquiry are the “Scholars’ texts” (子書) and, to a lesser extent, the classics that more or less precede them. This focus is inescapable because, out of all early Chinese literature, Scholars’ texts are the most concerned with self-cultivation, broadly construed; the classics, despite being older and more authoritative, are much less concerned with this topic. In the time period delineated here, there are five classics and about twenty-five received Scholars’ texts. In addition, there are another dozen “fragmented” Scholars’ texts and another two dozen excavated Scholars’ texts relevant to this survey.² These texts are foundational to much of Chinese intellectual history and to cultural history across East Asia.

Many students in the West are puzzled about where these Scholars’ texts fit into Western academia: are they philosophy or religion or something else? It is curious that in China they are considered philosophy but in America they (or, at least, some of them) are considered religion.³ Although both “philosophy” and “religion” are notoriously difficult to define (though

1. Precise dating of the earliest parts of the Chinese classics is impossible, and even accurate dating for most Scholars’ texts is a fraught enterprise. The “roughly 1000 BCE” comes from the assumption that at least parts of some of the classics date to around the time when the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) displaced the Shang dynasty (1570–1045 BCE), that is, around 1045 BCE. The “139 BCE” is the date of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, which is the last Scholars’ text to be included in this survey. Dating early Chinese texts is also complicated by the fact that the contents of some texts were not all written at the same time; that is, some parts of a given text might have been added later, while other parts may have been altered—minimally or substantially—by later editors.

2. Briefly, “Scholars’ texts” are what we might call “philosophy” or “intellectual history,” while the five “classics” are on a variety of topics: political history (*Shujing*), poetry (*Shijing*), divination (*Yijing*), protocol (*Liji*), and court records for the state of Lu (*Chunqiu*). For more information on the received classics and Scholars’ texts, see Michael Loewe, ed., *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China, 1993).

3. “Philosophy” in Western academia usually means “Western Philosophy.” There are, however, a handful of Philosophy departments in America which include Chinese philosophy. I might note that the classics and Scholars’ texts are also central to a kind of “Classics” department in China called *Guo xue* 國學 that has no equivalent in Western academia; it is sort of like “intellectual history” within Chinese history.

the foundational definition of “philosophy” as “love of wisdom” is both simple and beautiful), the answer to the question above is: it depends on how you define “philosophy” and “religion.” If you think that a “religion” necessarily includes one or more deities that want worshipping, as distinct from ancestors that want venerating, then this monograph is philosophy.⁴ Nevertheless, the teachings of scholars like Kongzi⁵ are typically taught in Religion courses in America.⁶ In any case, the question does not in any way intrude upon this study. Chinese Scholars’ texts are relevant to both philosophy and religion, as well as to intellectual history and literature.⁷

My methodology in this book is decidedly less historical and more philosophical. By this I mean that I focus more on ideas than on names and dates or on the contextualization or evolution of ideological debates (as important as these are). Take the following quotation, for example: “Yao asked Shun saying: ‘What should be served?’ Shun answered: ‘Serve Heaven.’ [Yao] asked: ‘What should be made use of?’ [Shun] answered: ‘Make use of Earth.’ [Yao] asked: ‘What should we be devoted to?’ [Shun] answered: ‘Be devoted to the people.’” (堯問於舜曰：「何事？」舜曰：「事天。」問：「何任？」曰：「任地。」問：「何務？」曰：「務人。」)⁸ This exchange is relevant to the present study because it highlights three central constituents of the early Chinese worldview: Heaven, Earth, and humans. It also reveals

4. For the difference between “worshipping” and “venerating,” look into any account of the “Rites controversy” in 16th–18th century China.

5. I use “Kongzi” instead of “Confucius” because it is important to contextualize him as one “scholar,” i.e., “zi” (子) among many. In fact, one might transcribe the Chinese as “Kong Zi” rather than “Kongzi” to show that the last two letters are in fact an honorific, but convention, and a desire to not give the impression that “Zi” is a surname, conspire to put them together.

6. For an excellent book on Ruist (Confucian) “a-theistic” religiosity, see Roger Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

7. And to political history as well; see Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009).

8. *Shizi* 尸子 ch. 9 (仁意). All translations are mine, mainly for the purpose of consistency, and I am greatly indebted to many previous translators. Translators often must choose between word-for-word accuracy and overall elegance; in this book I aim for the former. Words in brackets are added for correct English grammar, added clarity, or to provide context. However, some translated words are not, strictly speaking, in the Chinese and I do not bracket them. One example of this is in “If-then” sentences, where the Chinese has an implied “If” and an articulated “then” (則). A second example is the subject of verbs, which in the Chinese might be articulated at the beginning of the passage and only implied thereafter.

three important actions within that worldview: serving, using, and devotion. If this were a different kind of book, the focus may well be on the figures of Yao and Shun, since Yao and Shun are the fourth and fifth of the semi-legendary, mytho-historical “Five Thearchs” (五帝) that were said to rule before the first Chinese dynasty. Yao and Shun are very important to the cultural history of China, but their names, putative dates, and historicity are not central to the concern of this monograph and therefore discussion of these kinds of figures is curtailed in the following pages.

A second issue in differentiating philosophical from historical monographs is that ideas (and texts) are situated in a particular historical context but have a tendency to evolve. Of particular concern for the present study is the degree to which we should consider these self-cultivation practices as situated in the centuries during which the primary texts were written, the degree to which they were re-imagined in later Chinese cultural history, and the degree to which they may be relevant to a modern, Western reader.⁹ As a sinologist, the first context has priority for me, but as a teacher of undergraduates, the second and third contexts inevitably come into play. Because this topic is already quite broad, for reasons of space, I will not consider the second context at all, interesting as it certainly is. And because of my imagined audience (of undergraduates), the third context may impinge upon the first more than some of my colleagues may find comfortable, but I hope they will remember my goals here. However, this is not an “either-or” problem whereby we must choose between reading ancient texts *only* as they related to their original audiences or construing them *only* as they match modern concerns.

For example, a primary aspirational figure since the time of Kongzi is the *junzi* 君子, which I translate as “noble person.” While “person” is indeed an accurate translation of “*zi* 子,” which here does not mean “scholar” (as it does with “Kong-*zi*”), but rather is an extrapolation from “child” or “son,”¹⁰ it has been argued that “noble man” is a more honest translation, given

9. As Stephen Angle says, “There is an inevitable tension between historical fidelity and philosophical construction. The former pushes us toward carefully qualified, highly context-sensitive interpretations; the latter, toward generalization, loose paraphrase, and critical emendation. No matter what our goals, anyone dealing with an intellectual tradition finds him or herself pulled back and forth between these poles.” Stephen Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

10. “*Junzi*” prior to Kongzi literally referred to the “child” or “son” of “noble,” that is, high-ranking, parentage. Kongzi famously reconfigured the term to refer to any person of moral worth, much as an English “gentleman” from a landed estate eventually evolved into any person with manners.

that premodern China was patriarchal, and the likelihood of the authors of these texts assuming that a woman could be a “noble person” is quite small. Nevertheless, I translate it as “noble person” not because there was a slim possibility that at least some of these authors were more egalitarian than their peers, but because these texts, to the degree that they are received as relevant to a modern audience, can still speak to us. This is particularly true of a topic as perennial as self-cultivation. I realize that a desire to be “relevant” can be problematic; but regardless of my audience, I am an academic first, and it is my goal always to be historically accurate first, and relevant to a modern audience in their own terms second. I will, however, be both historically accurate *and* relevant to a modern audience—as with the translation of “noble person”—whenever I can.

A third methodological decision was to emphasize certain concepts by capitalizing the first letter of those words, as I have done with “Heaven” and “Earth” above. Chinese has no upper or lower case, so these emphases are only for Western audiences unfamiliar with such concepts. I have tried to keep this to a minimum, with only Scholars’ texts, Heaven, Earth, the Way, Yin-Yang, the One, and the Great One so designated. Three of these will be discussed shortly. Two other terms that are quite important, and that have been capitalized by other authors, but not by me, include “virtuosity” (德) and “goodness” (仁). While I find that emphasizing some words in this way has pedagogical value, it should be remembered that the Chinese authors themselves did not, because they could not. Nevertheless, the decision to capitalize some terms and not others remains a subjective one.

A fourth methodological decision was to rely mostly on primary sources and to scale back the use of secondary sources, particularly those not in English.¹¹ This was done partially to make the work more accessible to non-specialists and partially because returning to the original sources is a fitting place to start. After all, most of the primary sources have been translated into English, whereas almost none of the secondary scholarship in Chinese has. Moreover, I think that text criticism—that is, paying close attention to language—is an extremely important skill. For example, what exactly *did* the authors of the American constitution’s “Bill of Rights” mean in the single sentence of the Second Amendment? Or what *should* be the takeaway from the first verse of the “gospel” of John: “In the beginning

11. In anticipation of a potential criticism of this book as not explicitly engaging with the literature of the field, I want to emphasize that my *primary* intended audience consists of American undergraduates who, if my decade of teaching is anything to go by, are decidedly *not* interested in scholarly debate (at least, not in a book-length monograph).

was the *Logos*, and the *Logos* was with the Deity, and the *Logos* was the Deity?"¹² For close readers, even prepositions (such as "with" in the quote above) matter. Text criticism, in its simplest form, asks us to carefully consider such questions. Secondary sources are certainly invaluable for giving us more perspectives on these issues, but it is always good to begin at the beginning, which, in this case, are the primary sources.

Finally, a fifth method is my use of the "principle of charity," which is relatively standard in academia, but not quite as widespread outside of it.¹³ Using this principle means that when one encounters two claims that do not seem to fit together but presumably ought to, then we will try, within reason, to make it work. For example, "desire" is a tricky topic in many East Asian intellectual traditions, and "knowledge" is problematized in the *Laozi*, which says that sages "cause the people to be without [contrived] knowledge and without [contrived] desire" (使民無知無欲).¹⁴ Note the bracketed words that I added. Without them, the sentence implies (or might be taken to imply) that all knowledge and all desire are bad, given the correct assumption that sages, as aspirational figures, only do good things. But that would imply that the knowledge gained from reading the *Laozi* itself was bad, and that the ordinary desires for food and sleep are bad. One could, at this point, simply throw the books away for being ridiculous, but the "principle of charity" asks us to continue reading and see if the author says other things that would lead us to think that there are implied modifiers, like the two I added. Reading this sentence in the context of the rest of the chapter, which is about the effects of conspicuous consumption on society, one will see that the bracketed additions are justified. Authors do not always say what they mean, but sometimes it is worthwhile to try, charitably, to make sense of their words.

The "principle of charity," however, can backfire in two ways. Whenever one describes a large and complex topic, someone will almost inevitably say that the description is "reductive." This can mean that either the analysis is over-simplified or one-sided. Regarding oversimplification, given that I am analyzing a broad and multivalent topic which spans several centuries with an abundance of relevant primary sources, a degree of simplification is unavoidable, but it is my hope that what follows is not an *over*-simplification.

12. The biblical "John" 1:1.

13. This issue is sometimes articulated as a "hermeneutics of charity" versus a "hermeneutics of suspicion." On the other hand, it is possible that one can be too charitable. To paraphrase Saul Lieberman: "Nonsense is nonsense, but the *history* of nonsense is scholarship."

14. *Laozi* 老子 ch. 3.

The issue of one-sidedness does not, I think, apply to the present study, given that I focus on a specific area of intellectual history, and not on early Chinese culture in general.

Reasons for Writing

The primary reason for writing this book is to convey the breadth and importance of self-cultivation in early China to those who are interested. But there are other reasons why one might come to be interested in this topic. One is that it can increase “global-mindedness,” that is, the attitude that we are all, in some sense, “global citizens.” As Donald Munro said, “I must admit that I hope that the reader may seriously entertain and consider some of the assumptions behind the Chinese view of man and society. I hope so because I expect this will make his own reflections on social problems more flexible and rational, because he understands that there are other ways of looking at things.”¹⁵ Although he was writing about “social problems” and I am not (or, not directly), the idea still stands. Learning about other paradigms—cosmic, psychological, religious, philosophical—is useful for critically thinking about one’s own paradigms.

Critical thinking is especially important, and especially difficult, on texts in which people are emotionally invested. And while Western readers typically may not attach much emotion to texts with which they are unfamiliar (how could they?), Scholars’ texts do carry significant weight in China. Quoting Laozi in China is not unlike quoting Plato, or even the Bible, in the West. We might define “critical thinking” as the ability to identify and question our own assumptions, with the goal of either substantiating or altering them. In cross-cultural exchanges, this has the effect of moving our thinking from a zero-sum, black and white, “which narrative is true and which is false?” approach, to one that is centered on a multivalent, “let’s weigh the evidence” attitude that may well result in critical-minded ambivalence. This way of thinking allows for a deeper engagement with global-mindedness, resulting in a kind of multicultural individual. Global-mindedness and critical thinking, then, should not just be thought of as providing paradigm foils for one’s own cultural assumptions, that is, for checking ethnocentrism: expanding one’s conceptual and literary repertoire is a worthy end in itself.

15. Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1977), ix.

Historical-mindedness is another valuable cognitive skill that is strengthened by reading books like this one. History is the backbone of global-mindedness and is the material upon which critical thinking acts. Reading history, however, returns us to the problem of historical context and modern applicability. As G.E.R. Lloyd warns, “forcing issues by raising questions that are foreign to the actors’ own views and concerns” can be a problem in monographs like this one, especially when considering ancient ideas that touch upon (or seem to touch upon) issues of contemporary relevance.¹⁶ This is an issue even for literature that belongs to one’s own culture. Is reading Jane Austen, for example, an exercise in romantic escapism or contemporary commentary? Surely it can be both. Further afield in both space and time, is it fair to ask if early Chinese authors would concede that a woman can be considered a “noble person”? They probably never gave such a question any thought. Although I do think it can be a valid exercise to interrogate antique writings with modern and alien questions,¹⁷ this problem is (hopefully) avoided here by considering self-cultivation in Chinese terms. So, while the problem of context remains a live one, and very much worth considering, reading history, especially of cultures not one’s own, presents unique opportunities for cultivating historical-mindedness. A thousand years ago, Lü Zuqian (1137–1181) gave us some advice on how to read history:

Generally speaking, when [people] look at history, [they simply] look at [times of] order and take them to be orderly, and look at [times of] disorder and take them to be disorderly: [that is, they] look at one thing and just stop inquiring at that one thing. How could [they thus] attain historical-mindedness? [You should imagine yourself] as if you personally were in the midst of the situation, and look at the benefits and dangers of the matter, and the fortunes and misfortunes of the time. [You] must close the book and think about them yourself, prompt yourself to go through these matters, and [think about] what would have been the appropriate way to deal with them. If [you] are historical-minded in this way, then [your] learning will advance,

16. G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 10.

17. To stay with the Jane Austen example for just a moment longer, although the term “female gaze” does not appear in any of her works, or in any of the works of her contemporaries, having been coined much later, it seems to me a fair and interesting question to ask whether or not her novels do in fact articulate a “female gaze.”

and [your] knowledge will increase, and [you] will experience growth.

(大抵看史，見治則以為治，見亂則以為亂，見一事則止知一事。何取觀史？如身在其中，見事之利害，時之禍患。必掩卷自思。使我遇此等事，當作何處之。如此觀史，學問亦可以進，智識亦可以高，方為有益。)¹⁸

In the following chapters, if you “prompt yourself to go through these matters,” you may find much that is commendable, and much that you agree with. This, on the surface anyway, should be odd. What common ground could there possibly be between twenty-first-century Westerners and some philosophical-minded authors living two and a half thousand years ago, on the other side of the world? They certainly lived very different lives, so doesn’t some of their advice sound suspiciously modern? I think the answer must lie in the modifier “philosophical-minded.” Some things about the human condition remain relatively constant. How to take care of yourself would certainly count as one of them.

Another question arises: if ancient advice on self-cultivation is largely a matter of what we might now consider “common sense,” why bother to read it? The aforementioned global-mindedness and historical-mindedness are two reasons. Another is that people seem to like to feel part of a larger narrative, a longer tradition, so it seems intrinsically interesting that a modern reader can connect with a culture so long ago and so far away.¹⁹ But

18. Lü Zuqian 呂祖謙, *Lü Donglai wenji* 呂東來文集 (台北: 臺灣商務, 1968), 19:431; cf. Burton Watson in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, eds. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 660. Note: *zhi* 抵 (clap) is a loan graph for *di* 抵 (many); hereafter I will denote this by an X = Y construction, thus: 抵 = 抵.

19. For those who may think that “a culture so long ago and so far away” may have too little in common with “us” (however one might define that pronoun), I agree with Edward Slingerland’s view: “When it comes to the study of early China, we need to acknowledge that the early Chinese were fellow *Homo sapiens*, with bodies and minds very much like ours, moving through a physical/cultural world that, because of convergent cultural evolution, was broadly similar to ours. They developed distinctive cultural ideas and practices, but these cultural forms remained ultimately grounded in shared human cognitive structures and adaptive challenges.” Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 9–10.

of course it is highly unlikely that you will consider everything you read in this book to be unsurprising or “common sense.” If that were the case, then I would not have written it.

Disparity of Sources

There are dozens of early Chinese Scholars’ texts, most of which have been categorized as belonging to different schools of thought.²⁰ As such, many of these authors are often characterized as being “in conversation” with each other across the decades and centuries of our chosen time period. One might object that in the following pages I do not deal adequately with the “conversational” aspect of these sources, and that I do not pay sufficient attention to the disparity of my sources, insofar as some came to be considered more important than others. But while it is certainly true that many of these texts were, in some sense and to some degree, in conversation with one another, the details of their temporal precedence, and therefore the direction of the conversation, is open to considerable debate, and is far beyond the scope of this work.²¹ Also, these conversations are not really relevant to my argument. Here, I only want to outline what self-cultivation meant in early China, not what it meant to a particular author or in a particular text. Likewise, which schools of thought emphasized which aspects of that outline are not of concern to my project. The narrative that I weave in the following pages does not hew to any one text or tradition and therefore is not “faithful” to any one of them. But that does not mean that this narrative is thereby compromised or somehow inauthentic. It is a work of syncretism,

20. The phrase “schools of thought,” when applied to pre-Qin texts, has in recent decades become an item of contention for some scholars. In my view, the acceptability of this phrase usually hinges on the rhetorical problem of how one defines “school.” If you agree with, for example, Kenneth Brashier’s claim that “A school implies an institutionalism that includes a number of scholars consciously identifying with a particular idea system,” then the phrase is probably inappropriate. (Kenneth Brashier, *Ancestral Memory in Early China*, Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011, p. 6.) On the other hand, if you can countenance a “school of thought” as an analytic tool for recognizing similarities among texts, then it may be a useful construct. For my extended argument, see Paul Fischer, “The Creation of Daoism,” *Journal of Daoist Studies* 8 (2015): 1–23.

21. For my thoughts on how early Chinese texts circulated and were reproduced, see Paul Fischer, “Authentication Studies (辨偽學) Methodology and the Polymorphous Text Paradigm,” *Early China* 32 (2008–2009): 1–43.

considering a body of work from an intellectual milieu that very much valued syncretism. The various authors that I cite may well have disagreed about how to, say, best administer a country, but the concepts they used and the cultural norms they took for granted were to a very large degree unanimously shared. That continuity is what I draw from.

Another potential objection to broad surveys like this one is that the author may have cherry-picked the evidence for their claims. In a work this broad, there is no hope for demonstrably countering such a contention. For a narrower claim, one might marshal all the evidence and counterevidence and then proceed accordingly. Here I will make claims and adduce evidence, but a single monograph cannot include all possible counterevidence that would enable readers to draw their own conclusions. I am attempting to create a unified theory of self-cultivation, but there is a crucial difference between a scientific theory and an arts theory. While both are explanatory ideas originating from human creativity, the material world of science cannot be contradictory, while the imaginative world(s) of the arts can be, and usually is. Therefore, no single theory of self-cultivation in early China will ever account for all of the discrepancies of opinion among the sources. For what it is worth, despite the caveat of the “argument from authority” fallacy whereby students should not blindly trust authority figures, I have sought to be objective.

A slightly different potential objection is that I give short shrift to the supernatural, which may lead to the impression that early China was uncommonly secular. I have two replies to this. First, the supernatural simply does not play a very large role in this particular field of inquiry (i.e., self-cultivation), during this particular period of time, among the authors of the Scholars’ texts. It is true that in later times, alchemy, for example—both the interior and exterior kinds—will become an important part of self-cultivation for a certain segment of the population. But that is a much later development. Second, more broadly, early Chinese Scholars’ texts are in fact astonishingly, though not completely, secular. Reading them in isolation may well give the mistaken impression that early Chinese society as a whole seldom dealt with the supernatural. Other works on early Chinese cultural history will balance any such impression.²² But, despite my comparing self-cultivation with soteriology above, it is not my goal here to

22. One such work is Poo Mu-chou 蒲慕州, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

give a balanced view of the supernatural in early China. Ultimately, any historical survey like this one will be a simplification. Despite academia's justifiable penchant for problematizing things, simplification has its place too.

Technical Terms

The mental paradigms through which we apprehend the world often come into focus when we learn about other cultures. Discovering these new paradigms, considering them, and juxtaposing them with one's own cultural paradigms is often a gradual process. To get us started, it would be a good idea to discuss the general contours of the early Chinese worldview. In the West, and extending eastward across the Indian subcontinent, there is an implicit understanding that there are one or more heavens above, and one or more hells below, with earth situated in between. Powerful deities that want worshipping reside in heaven, malevolent entities to be feared are in hell, and immortal human souls either go up to the one or down to the other after death. Early China does not share this paradigm. Looking at the scholars' literature as a whole, there is a heaven, but no one lives there, there is no hell, and human souls are not eternal.²³ Nothing in early Chinese culture was thought to be eternal; rather, the principle of ceaseless change and transformation is an underlying assumption among the authors we consider. The souls of humans may persist for a time after death, and humans that were powerful in life sometimes continued to be powerful after death, for a time, typically a few decades (though a precise time frame is never given). Local nature spirits were also thought to be active, and spirits and ancestors were both sacrificed to, at least by the royal family and other powerful clan patriarchs. What regular people believed and practiced is nearly impossible to discern because they typically did not leave records of such

23. Some early authors claim that royal ancestors "live" in Heaven, possibly as stars in the night sky. See, for example, *Shijing* 詩經 #235 (文王), where the dead Zhou King Wen is described as being "in Heaven" (于天). But whatever this implies, it is not really comparable to an idyllic abode of happiness where the souls of all morally good people go to reside; cf. Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs: The Ancient Chinese Classic of Poetry* (1937; edited with additional translations by Joseph Allen; New York: Grove Press, 1996), 227. For more on the connection between ancestors and stars, see David Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

things. But if the corpus of Scholars' texts is in any way representative of regular people and their beliefs (a claim that I am not making), then spirits and ancestors played a vanishingly small role in their lives.

These differences are important to remember because people naturally assume that other cultures are in fact similar to their own. So I want to reiterate that the early Chinese paradigm is not at all like the Western paradigm.²⁴ The authors who wrote the Scholars' texts, with very few exceptions, were quite uninterested in propitiating spirits or ancestors. It seems such sacrifices were the business of a tiny elite and not particularly relevant to the good life of the people. But it is quite possible that the corpus of Scholars' texts is *not* representative of regular people. There does exist a small amount of counterevidence to the claims just made about heaven and hell. There were those who did think that at least some people went to a kind of heaven, that there was a kind of Hades-like afterworld where souls might meet, and that it was potentially efficacious to sacrifice to certain spirits when you got sick.²⁵ I do not at all wish to sweep this evidence under the rug, but neither do I want to give the impression that we can comfortably use our cultural paradigms (in particular, the creator-deity, immortal souls, and eternal heaven or hell paradigm) to apprehend those of early China, particularly within the pursuit of self-cultivation. The differences clearly outweigh the similarities. Though there is no quick route to assessing all such differences and similarities, it will be beneficial to set the stage with a discussion of three things: Heaven and Earth, and the Way.

HEAVEN AND EARTH (天地)

Heaven and Earth constitute an indissoluble cosmic dyad. They comprise the widest parameters of the cosmos; nothing exists outside of them. No deities precede them, command them, or match them in any sense. They are responsible for the existence of everything, including humans.²⁶

24. The "not at all" is, given what I just said in note 19, a hyperbolic rhetorical flourish. And yet, even upon reflection, I wish to keep this sentence as is, but want to note here that it is a pedagogical (and literary) device.

25. For more on these issues see, for example, Lai Guolong, *Excavating the Afterlife: The Archaeology of Early Chinese Religion* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

26. This paradigm is, like most ancient cosmologies, earth-centric, and is not commensurate with our modern paradigm, in which the earth is but a tiny speck in the vast, star-filled cosmos.

Heaven and Earth arose spontaneously from primordial formlessness. They are uncaused and, though early China has no explicit cosmic eschatology, they will presumably someday return to homogenous formlessness. In the meantime, we live betwixt them, our heads wandering through the former, our feet roaming across the latter. Their primary accomplishments are the creation of the seasons (and phenology in general), and the foundation of the agricultural cycle that is, in turn, the foundation of human civilization.

There is no single creation story in early China that compares with the “Genesis” account in the West. There are, however, many shorter, almost off-handed, observations by a number of different authors. One reads: “When Heaven and Earth first began, Heaven rarefied and thereby was completed, Earth solidified and thereby was formed. The harmony of Heaven and Earth’s union is the great mainstay of [all] living things.” (天地有始，天微以成，地塞以形。天地合和，生之大經也。) ²⁷ Much more will be said about the principle of harmony and its influence upon human society later. For now, let us stay focused on our two subjects. “Heaven is said to be open, Earth is said to be tranquil, thus they do not intrude [upon one another].” (天曰虛，地曰靜，乃不伐。) ²⁸ This speaks to the grounds of their harmony, but in a more active vein, “Heaven is where *qi*-substance(s) all issues forth; Earth is the inevitability of [natural] principle(s).” (天者氣之所總出也，地者理之必然也。) ²⁹ More than a thousand years later, “*qi*-substance” and “principle” came to form the foundation of Neo-Confucianism, the mainstay of intellectual history not only in Song dynasty (960–1279) China, but across all of East Asia. *Qi*-substance is what we might call “matter,” except it is conceived as much more fluid, self-moving, and multivalent than lumpish “matter.” (In fact, *qi* can be conceived of as a “process” as much as being a “substance,” so “*qi*-fluctuating-substance” or “*qi*-process-substance” would be more accurate, albeit less wieldy.) Everything is made of it, even Heaven and Earth. Principle refers to the natural inclinations of things, both living and nonliving. It is a general term for what things do spontaneously when left to their own devices. We will return to these concepts in chapter 1.

27. *Lüshi chungqiu* 呂氏春秋 ch. 13.1 (有始); cf. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 278.

28. *Guanzi* 管子 ch. 36 (心術上); cf. W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985, 1998), 2:72.

29. *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 ch. 11 (泰錄); cf. Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master: A Rhetorical Reading* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 93.

Heaven and Earth, then, are both self-created and creators of other things. They are also exemplars for humans: “Heaven prevails with correctness; Earth prevails with equanimity; humans prevail with calm tranquility.” (天主正，地主平，人主安靜。) ³⁰ Our calm tranquility should be patterned on the correctness and equanimity of Heaven and Earth. One aspect of Heaven’s correctness is its impartiality. “Heaven covers [all] without partiality; Earth bears [all] without partiality, the sun and moon shine [on all] without partiality, the four seasons proceed without partiality. [They] proceed with their virtuosities and the myriad things obtain consequent maturation with them.” (天無私覆也，地無私載也，日月無私燭也，四時無私行也。行其德而萬物得遂長焉。) ³¹ “Virtuosity” refers to the function of inanimate objects, the functional ability of living things, and the ethical virtues of humans. It combines the skill of a “virtuoso,” the various “virtues,” and the charisma of skillful and virtuous people. Another good translation might be “power.” It is a very useful and very important term that we will meet quite often in the following pages. We are specifically asked to imitate the impartiality of the cosmic dyad: “How can we be selfless? By imitating the main precepts of Heaven and Earth.” (庸能己無己乎？效夫天地之紀。) ³² Further: “Those who can give without taking are the companions of Heaven and Earth.” (能予而無取者，天地之配也。) ³³ Heaven is rarified, open, correct, and impartial; it extrudes *qi*-substance and covers us. Earth is solid, tranquil, equanimous, and impartial; it conveys the inevitability of natural principles and it supports us. They act together in harmony. So far, so good.

Since they are responsible for the existence of everything, including people, in a sense they are like cosmic “parents.” But the metaphor of “parents” raises the dicey question of the degree to which they are like Western deities, specifically the degree to which they are anthropomorphic. There are two answers to this question. The first is that they *used* to be conceived as more anthropomorphic but became less so over time, even to the point of not at all. There is more evidence for the anthropomorphism of Heaven, in particular, in the early years of the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE) than in its later years, many centuries later. The second answer is: it depends on who you ask. It is like someone asking if Westerners think that “Mother

30. *Guanzi* ch. 49 (內業); cf. Rickett, *Guanzi*, 2:43.

31. *Lüshi chunqiu* ch. 1.5 (去私); cf. Knoblock and Riegel, *Lü Buwei*, 73.

32. *Guanzi* ch. 38 (白心); cf. Rickett, *Guanzi*, 2:90.

33. *Guanzi* ch. 2 (形勢); cf. Rickett, *Guanzi*, 1:77.

Nature” is an anthropomorphic deity. It is a common phrase, and some people do think of nature as a “her” and, in fact, there are plenty of people who worship “her,” but I think most would agree that most Westerners use “Mother Nature” metaphorically, not literally. The same can be said of Heaven.

Heaven is fundamentally only one half of the cosmic dyad of Heaven and Earth, but like the “master” of a house in a patriarchal society, it gets much more press than its partner. In earlier texts, like the classics, several anthropomorphic actions and emotions are ascribed to Heaven. The *Shujing* says: “When Heaven looks down upon the people below, it measures their propriety, and sends down years that are either long-lasting or not long-lasting. It is not that Heaven causes people to die prematurely, [but rather that] people cut short their own lives/destinies.” (惟天監下民，典厥義，降年有永有不永。非天夭民，民中絕命。) ³⁴ The *Shijing* says: “Heaven protects and settles you with great security, causing you to have ample richness. [It is] why [your] blessings will not be eliminated, causing you much increase, so that everything will be abundant.” (天保定爾，亦孔之固，俾爾單厚。何福不除，俾爾多益，以莫不庶。) ³⁵ The *Yijing* says: “The way of Heaven is to send down help but [still] shine brightly, the way of Earth is to lie low but [still] send [things; e.g., plants] up. The way of Heaven is to take from [those who are] excessive and give to [those who are] humble, the way of Earth is to change [those who are] excessive and flow towards [those who are] modest.” (天道下濟而光明，地道卑而上行。天道虧盈而益謙，地道變盈而流謙。) ³⁶ These three classics should suffice to show a degree of anthropomorphism in early accounts of Heaven. While it may be easy to take the verbs “look” and “send down” as metaphorical, it is somewhat harder (though not impossible) to do this with “protect,” “settle,” and the rest.

The evidence in the preceding paragraph seems to present a clear picture of an anthropomorphic, deity-like Heaven. Yet these self-same writings undermine this conception by equating, in a sense, above with below. For example, the *Shujing* also says: “Heaven’s keen hearing and sight derive from our people’s keen hearing and sight [toward good rulers]; Heaven’s discern-

34. *Shujing* 書經 ch. 24 (高宗彤日); cf. James Legge, *The Shoo King*, 2nd ed. (1894; rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 264.

35. *Shijing* #166 (天保); cf. Waley, *The Book of Songs*, 138.

36. *Yijing* 易經 #15 (謙), “Tuan” (豕) commentary; cf. Richard Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 229.

ment and fearsomeness derive from our people's discernment and severity [toward bad rulers]. There is a connection between above and below, so be respectful, those who possess the soil [i.e., rulers]." (天聰明自我民聰明，天明畏自我民明威。達于上下，敬哉有土。)³⁷ What does it mean that the one "derives from" the other? And what is the nature of the "connection" between above and below? Literal-minded scholars say that an anthropomorphic Heaven simply sees what we see, but metaphorical-minded scholars say that "Heaven" here is a metaphor for "the will of the people." I find the metaphorical reading more persuasive, and suspect that later authors, who over time anthropomorphized Heaven less and less, would have read it this way.

Xunzi, in particular, thought that "Heaven" was just another name for "nature." He wryly observed: "[One] performs the summer rain sacrifice and it rains, but why? [I] say: there is no reason why. It is the same as if [one] did not perform the summer rain sacrifice and it rains." (雩而雨，何也？曰：無何也，猶不雩而雨也。)³⁸ A famously wise counselor named Guan Zhong concurred: "Qi Duke Huan asked Guan Zhong: 'What should kings revere?' [Guan Zhong] replied: 'Revere Heaven.' Duke Huan raised his head and looked at heaven. Guan Zhong said: 'What I mean by "Heaven" is not the blue-sky heaven. Kings should take the people to be Heaven.'" (齊桓公問於管仲曰：「王者何貴？」曰：「貴天。」桓公仰而視天。管仲曰：「所謂天，非蒼莽之天也。王者以百姓為天。」)³⁹ Here, too, a metaphorical reading whereby "to be" means "to be the same as" and not "to stand in for" makes more sense, for if Xunzi believed in Heaven as some kind of "higher power" that is concerned with human affairs, then this passage would be insulting to it. This may be a decidedly counterintuitive metaphor in the West, but in the East it has a pedigree stretching back over two thousand years.

The benevolence of an ostensibly anthropomorphic Heaven sometimes appears to have been doubted, but closer inspection usually reveals that humans deserved whatever disaster, natural or otherwise, had been visited

37. *Shujing* ch. 4 (皐陶謨); cf. Legge, *Shoo King*, 74.

38. *Xunzi* 荀子 ch. 17 (天論); cf. Eric Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 179.

39. *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 ch. 4.18; cf. James Hightower, *Han Shib Wai Chuan: Han Ying's Illustrations of the Didactic Application of the Classic of Songs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 144.

upon them.⁴⁰ The *Shijing* notes, bitterly, “Great Heaven is not fair, to send down these plentiful troubles. Great Heaven is not kind, to send down these great injustices.” (昊天不備，降此鞠誼。昊天不惠，降此大戾。)⁴¹ But these “troubles” and “injustices” may be contextualized as the result of poor rulership. Heaven was thought to grant a “mandate” to benevolent rulers, which could be withdrawn, resulting in human conflict—the overthrow of the dynasty, say—or natural disaster. Heaven, it seems, “helps” those who throw the bums out (i.e., it serves as a powerful metaphor supporting people who overthrow incompetent rulers). Elsewhere, Heaven is depicted as caring, even while intolerant of poor rulership. “Heaven’s love for the people is deep. How could it allow one person to wantonly reign over the people, in order to indulge his excesses, and abandon the natures of Heaven and Earth? It certainly would not!” (天之愛民甚矣。豈其使一人肆於民上，以從其淫，而棄天地之性？必不然矣！)⁴²

The ideals of impartiality and love may seem contradictory, but Mozi combines them by saying that Heaven loves humans impartially, that “the sun shines on the evil as well as the good.”⁴³ Laozi, too, notes that “The Heavenly way has no favorites, [but] it abides with competent people.” (天道無親，常與善人。)⁴⁴ “Competence” does not necessarily carry moral overtones—though it may not necessarily exclude them either—but the

40. Usually, but not always: for the problem of an ostensibly “good” Heaven “allowing” bad things to happen to ostensibly good people, see Franklin Perkins, *Heaven and Earth are Not Humane: The Problem of Evil in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

41. *Shijing* #191 (節南山); cf. Waley, *Book of Songs*, 166. See also *Shijing* #257 (桑柔) for similar complaints.

42. *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (襄公 14); cf. Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, David Schaberg, *Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 2:1025.

43. *Mozi* 墨子 ch. 4 (法儀): “Heaven certainly wants people to mutually love and benefit one another and does not want people to mutually hate and rob one another. How do we know Heaven wants . . . [this]? Because it equally loves them and equally benefits them. How do we know . . . [this]? Because it equally causes them to have things and equally causes them to have food.” (天必欲人之相愛相利，而不欲人之相惡相賊也。奚以知 . . . ? 以其兼而愛之，兼而利之也。奚以知 . . . ? 以其兼而有之，兼而食之也。) cf. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *Mozi: A Study and Translation of the Ethical and Political Writings* (Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 59. The “sun shines on the evil . . .” quote is a common paraphrase of the biblical “Matthew” 5.45.

44. *Laozi* ch. 79.

emphasis is certainly on going about one's business intelligently.⁴⁵ Heaven is most concerned with practical things, like sufficient food for the people, harmony among people, and sacrificial "meals" for itself (provided only by rulers, not us regular folk). It does not ask to be worshipped or praised or loved. But, as mentioned above, it can mete out punishment for wrongdoing, that is, for incompetence.

One way that Heaven can intervene in human affairs is by allowing the overthrow of a bad ruler. Another, more common method, is by showing what might be called "displeasure" by allowing, or possibly even causing, natural disasters. Mozi was less concerned with bad rulers than with a defiant populace. This is why he focuses on people who do not "conform" to Heaven's mandated ruler, often known as a "Heavenly scion" (天子) rather than a "king" (王). For Mozi, rebelling against the ruler (at least, when it was not warranted) was as bad as rebelling against Heaven. "These days, if Heaven's stormy winds and bitter rains arrive in profusion, this is Heaven's way of punishing the people for not upwardly conforming with Heaven." (今若天飄風苦雨，溱溱而至者，此天之所以罰百姓之不上同於天者也。)⁴⁶

Xunzi, as we have seen, and quite possibly in "conversation" with Mozi, disagreed, saying: "When stars fall or trees groan, the people of the state are all afraid, saying: what is this? [I] say: it is nothing! It is [only] the changes of Heaven and Earth, the developments of Yin and Yang, and rare occurrences among things. It is okay to wonder at them, but not to fear them." (星隕木鳴，國人皆恐。曰：是何也？曰：無何也！是天地之變，陰陽之化，物之罕至者也。怪之，可也；而畏之，非也。)⁴⁷ Yin and Yang are the passive and active modes of *qi*-substance.⁴⁸ Heaven, with its constantly moving sun, moon, and stars, was seen as the epitome of Yang, while Earth, which in stillness accepts the quickening elements of rain and lightning (before later "giving birth" to the plants growing out of it), was seen as the epitome of Yin. Both of these will be discussed further in chapter 1. Here, the disparity of opinion on the anthropomorphic workings of Heaven and Earth is clearly evident.

45. "Competence," which may also be translated as "excellence" or "skill," is remarkably like the "virtue" that is the core of Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). For a discussion on the possible amorality of some early Chinese texts like the *Laozi*, see Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amorality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

46. *Mozi* ch. 11 (尚同上); cf. Knoblock and Riegel, *Mozi*, 116.

47. *Xunzi* ch. 17 (天論); cf. Hutton, *Xunzi*, 17.

48. For a book-length analysis of Yin and Yang, see Robin Wang, *Yinyang: The Way of Heaven and Earth in Chinese Thought and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).