HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

BY THE TRANSLATOR

For those unfamiliar with Chinese history, a brief outline of the period covered in this volume may be helpful. Traditionally, Chinese history commences in very early times with the Five Emperors: Fu Hsi, Shen Nung or the Divine Farmer, Huang-ti or the Yellow Emperor, Shao Hao and Chuan Hsü. These semi-divine beings were followed, according to tradition, by Yao, the first really human ruler (supposed to have reigned 2357-2256 B.C.). Yao was succeeded upon his death, not by his son, who was considered ‘unworthy’ to receive the empire, but by Shun (2255-2206), who had already been Yao’s minister. During Shun’s reign China was troubled by a terrible flood, conquered only after nine years through the heroic efforts of the Great Yü, who constructed dikes and made waterways. Yü became emperor after Shun’s death, and founded the first Chinese dynasty of Hsia. With him, too, the Empire became hereditary, the throne passing after his death to his son.¹

Gradually, however, the Hsia dynasty fell into decay, reaching its lowest depths with its tyrannical last ruler, Chieh (1818-1766 B.C.), who is supposed to have engaged in the most abandoned debauches in a park containing, among other things, a lake of wine. A revolt broke out and Chieh was overthrown by a new hero, T’ang, who founded the Shang, also known as the Yin, dynasty (1766-1123 B.C.). This dynasty later also slowly declined, and its last ruler, Chou (1154-1123), is said to have rivalled Chieh in cruelty and debauchery.

Meanwhile, the small state of Chou (not to be confused with the name of the ruler Chou, just mentioned), had been gaining power in western China under its ruler, King Wen (1184-1157). King Wen was followed by King Wu (1156-1116), who revolted against the tyrant, Chou, overcame him, and so founded the Chou dynasty (1122-256 B.C.), the longest in Chinese history. After his death the work of consolidating the empire was greatly furthered by his brother, the Duke of Chou, who acted as regent during the early years of the young succeeding king.

Such is the traditional account of early Chinese history. Yet actually, the first authentic date in China is that on which an eclipse of the sun occurred in 776 B.C., and which is recorded in one of the

¹ Yü has sometimes been criticized in later times for this fact. Cf. pp. 115-116, where the traditional account of Yao, Shun and Yü is given.
earliest classics, the *Shih Ching* or Book of Odes (II, iv, Ode 9). All chronology prior to this date is questionable. Through archæology, however, and the deciphering of the archaic inscriptions scratched upon bone or tortoise shell by the Shang people for divination purposes, we are now learning more and more about the Shang dynasty.¹ We know, for example, that the list of Shang kings as traditionally given is correct, although their exact dates cannot yet be determined; and gradually we are realizing that many features of Chinese civilization that were formerly supposed to have originated in the Chou dynasty, actually go back to the Shang.

For the ages preceding the Shang dynasty, even archæology does not help us very greatly, and the actual existence of such figures as Yao, Shun, Yü, etc., is highly problematical. Several of them, and the Five Emperors preceding them, are probably culture heroes. Thus Fu Hsi is supposed to have invented nets and traps for hunting and fishing; the Divine Farmer, Shen Nung, to have invented the plough; and Huang-ti or the Yellow Emperor, to have invented wheeled vehicles, boats, etc. Mythical though these heroes may be, however, a knowledge of them is highly important to the reader of ancient Chinese philosophy, because of the frequency with which they are referred to in philosophical writings. Thus Yao and Shun, together with T'ang, founder of the Shang dynasty, and Kings Wen and Wu and the Duke of Chou of the early Chou dynasty, are the sages and heroes *par excellence* of the Confucians, who always speak of them when referring to the golden age of antiquity. The wicked tyrants Chieh and Chou, last rulers of the Hsia and Shang dynasties, are often opposed to them. Yü, the conqueror of China's great flood, and founder of the Hsia dynasty, while also well spoken of by the Confucians, is the particular hero of the Mohist school established by Mo Tzü. And Huang-ti or the Yellow Emperor was adopted, if not invented, by the Taoist school as its patron.²

Our knowledge of Chinese history prior to the sun eclipse of 776 B.C. is thus rather uncertain, whereas following that date, the historical records become increasingly rich and reliable. When the Chou dynasty came into power, it elaborated a feudal system that was analogous in many ways to feudalism in Europe, being composed of a large number of feudal states, all of them of comparatively small size.³ These were supposed to render homage to the House of Chou, whose capital was situated near the present city of Sian in Shensi. We must remember that the China of that time was very small, and was largely confined to the north China plain and the Yellow river basin.

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² For the relations of these semi-mythical figures with the various philosophic schools, cf. p. 283.
For a while this system seems to have operated reasonably well, but before long the Chou dynasty, like its predecessors, began to deteriorate, and in 771 the capital was sacked during a sudden attack of barbarians from the west, the king was killed, and the seat of government moved to what is to-day Loyang, in Honan. The Chou rulers never recovered from this blow, and during the centuries that followed they became more and more helpless, until they were nothing more than figure-heads.

The period from 722 to 481 B.C. is generally known as the Ch’un Ch’iu period, a term derived from the Ch’un Ch’iu or ‘Spring and Autumn Annals,’ an historical chronicle of the state of Lu during these years. During this time more and more power was usurped from the House of Chou by the feudal lords, who became completely independent, and several of whom assumed the title of ‘king’. An attempt at preserving order was made by establishing the institution of Pa or feudal Leader. This was a title assumed at various times by whoever happened to be the most powerful feudal lord at the time, and who had the power to convok the other lords to assemblies, and to discharge many of the functions formerly performed by the Chou kings. The first of these Pa was Duke Huan of Ch’i (685-643).¹

Despite these efforts at maintaining the status quo, it was evident that the feudal system, and with it the old institutions and ways of life, were changing under the impact of many new and irrepressible social and economic forces. The use of iron, which seems to have become fairly general in China about 600 B.C., may have been one of these forces.² Many feudal states were swallowed up by the few more powerful ones, who were ever extending their territories through constant warfare. It was an age of uncertainty and of expansion, both geographically and intellectually. The confines of what was known as China became greatly increased with the rise to power of a state like the semi-barbaric Ch’u in the south, which came to occupy much of present Honan, Hupeh and Anhwei. In this age of unrest there began, toward the end of the Ch’un Ch’iu period, the Period of the Philosophers, as it is called in this book, a period inaugurated by Confucius (551-479), and largely coincident in time with what in political history is known as the period of the Warring States.

This Warring States period, which followed the Ch’un Ch’iu period, began in 403 B.C., when the state of Chin split up into the three states of Han, Wei and Chao, and ended in 221 B.C. with the complete unification of all China. All the social and economic movements that had begun during the preceding age acted throughout this period with ever increasing violence. Thus many of the former

¹ For the names of the other four Pa traditionally listed, cf. p. 112.
² For an account of these movements during the Ch’un Ch’iu period, and during the age that followed, see ch. 2.
feudal aristocracies lost their power, while the peasants, who had been the virtual serfs of their overlords, gained independence. Terrific and continuous wars were waged between the seven large states that still remained on the stage, striving for supremacy. At the same time the age was one of philosophical activity such as has perhaps been unparalleled elsewhere in the world, save in classical Greece. Literally thousands of scholars, belonging to every school of thought, travelled about from state to state offering their services to the different rulers.

Finally, this political and intellectual anarchy was brought to an end by Ch’in, a barbaric state occupying much of present Kansu and Shensi. This state had never contributed a scholar of importance, but by ruthless methods, and the skillful utilization of astute advisors recruited from other parts, it succeeded, from its strategic position in the west, in making enormous increases in its territory. In 256 B.C. it put an end to the long impotent House of Chou, thus extinguishing the Chou dynasty and establishing the Ch’in dynasty in its place; and in 221 B.C. its great ruler, Ch’in Shih-huang-ti, conquered the last of the feudal states, and so unified China, actually for the first time in history. Feudalism was abolished, and replaced by a central government with a system of provincial administration essentially the same as the provincial system used to-day.

Despite these good measures, Ch’in Shih-huang has gained the undying hatred of later Chinese because of his notorious decree of 213 B.C., ordering the burning and destruction of most books throughout the empire. This was the logical culmination of his attempt toward intellectual as well as geographical unification, and of making a complete break with the past. Though the importance of this Burning of the Books has probably been exaggerated, it nevertheless dealt a blow to the hitherto flourishing philosophical schools from which they never fully recovered.

The ruthlessness that had brought the Ch’in dynasty into being, however, also led to its speedy collapse. Rebellion broke out soon after Ch’in Shih-huang’s death in 210, and lasted for several years until China was again unified in 206 by a man who, though of peasant origin, rose to become Emperor and to found the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). This dynasty resembled in several respects the contemporary Roman Empire in the West. It was an age of unifying and codification, which saw the beginnings of the Chinese examination system and of many other social and political institutions that have existed since that time with only minor modifications almost down to the present day. Though the feudalism abolished by the Ch’in dynasty was at first revived, it was later greatly restricted by the central government, so that never since then has it played a part in China in any way comparable to that in the West.
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It is natural that with this political and social unification, the tremendous philosophical activity of the preceding feudal period, already seriously crippled by the Burning of the Books, should be still further curtailed. Unlike the Ch'in dynasty, the Han dynasty fostered scholarship and was not anti-cultural, but for various reasons this scholarship was encouraged to move along specified lines dominantly Confucian, and the final triumph of Confucianism over the other schools was largely brought about by the Han ruler, Wu-ti (140-87 B.C.), at the suggestion of the noted Confucianist, Tung Chung-shu (179 ?-104 ? B.C.).

This does not mean that since then other forms of thought have not been important in China. Buddhism, introduced from India during the succeeding centuries, has been particularly influential. The fact remains, however, that Confucianism since that time has usually been accepted as orthodox, at least by China's ruling and intellectual classes, even if it has no longer been the pure Confucianism of Confucius, but one into which many other streams of thought have been assimilated. And with the supremacy of Confucianism, the various historical, poetical and philosophical texts used by Confucianism, most of them written during the Chou dynasty (though not put into final form until the Han), have played a dominant rôle in Chinese thought. These are now generally known as the Chinese Classics.

For this reason Chinese philosophy may be conveniently divided into two periods. One is that period beginning with Confucius, and lasting until about 100 B.C., when Confucianism gained acceptance as the official orthodoxy. This is termed in the present work the Period of the Philosophers. The other period extends from about 100 B.C. until recent times, and is termed the Period of Classical Study. It is the first of these two periods that is dealt with in the present volume.

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1 See p. 403.