

# the emotions in early chinese philosophy

CURIE VIRÁG



THE EMOTIONS IN EARLY  
CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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## Preface

A famously enigmatic passage in the *Huainanzi* (c. 130 BCE) explains that when the legendary figure Cangjie 倉頡, with his two sets of eyes, first invented writing, “Heaven rained millet and the demons wailed at night.”<sup>1</sup> What writing has to do with showers of millet and howling demons has been the source of much perplexity, but scholars have settled into the idea of the talismanic function of writing as a means of exerting control over the phenomenal world—including the world of demons.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the truth of this particular passage may be, it dramatizes a more general observation about the workings of language and of naming in general: that the inscribing of a word, or the coming into currency of a term or idea, may not so much indicate a new awareness of its existence, as signal an endeavor to tame, order, and comprehend it in new ways.

If we consider the emotions as “demons” of a sort—as forces in the world that are not entirely within human control or understanding, but that are nevertheless real—then the naming of these particular demons may represent a similar gesture to give them order and form by placing them within the domain of human comprehension. Many names have emerged to give shape to this realm of experience since Warring States thinkers began to theorize about it, but perhaps none so revealing as the new collective category of *qing* 情—a term that corresponds, at least structurally, to what we have come to recognize as emotions, passions, or feelings.

As far as we can gather from the surviving texts, it was around the fourth century BCE that the realm of emotions came into view as a focus of major philosophical interest, and that the term *qing*—which originally referred to the condition of things in the world—came to acquire a distinct psychophysical and

1. William Boltz, *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1994), 132. *Huainanzi* Ch. 8, *Sibu Congkan* 21/8/4.11.

2. Catherine Despeux, “Talismans and Sacred Diagrams,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 529.



human focus. Over the course of the Warring States period (c. 475 BCE–221 CE), thinkers proposed diverse theories about the nature of emotions and their proper role in moral life. But out of a wide range of possibilities there eventually emerged a mainstream account, canonized during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), that was united by the assumption that emotions and desires—despite the dangers they posed—were also a force of coherence and unity, that they gave access to true understanding of the world, and that they furnished a basis for cognitive and moral agency. Such an emphasis on the normative potential of human emotions would eventually become recognized as a defining feature of traditional Chinese thought and culture.

This historical trajectory, especially as considered from a comparative context, raises a host of questions: How did the mainstream account of emotions become mainstream, and why did it come to possess such authority? How, conceptually, did *qing*—which had previously referred to the condition of things in the world—come to refer to something like what we might call “emotions,” which seem to represent the realm of subjective human experience? Moreover, why did emotions become a focus of debate in the first place? Why did thinkers theorize about the emotions, and what did they think would be accomplished by such theorization? What was at stake in this enterprise?

Given these multiple levels of concerns, I have engaged in a rather different sort of scholarly undertaking from what has been pursued by most scholars who have studied the problem of emotions in early Chinese philosophy. Much of the scholarship on this topic has been concerned centrally with the issue of how the early philosophers evaluated the emotions. This has often led to the conclusion that a given thinker either rejected or condoned them, or both, leading then to a need to resolve the apparent contradiction of such a position. I have not been persuaded that it is productive to take on the issue of ethical evaluation without first examining what it is we are speaking about when we invoke the concept of emotions. My conclusion has been that the early mainstream thinkers conceptualized the realm of emotions in quite an expansive way, and that, while recognizing that they could interfere with the pursuit of virtue, distort our perceptions, and harm our peace of mind, they also envisioned another level at which they could represent the inherent, patterned reality of human beings, and thus required proper fulfillment. In view of this, to observe that a given philosopher thinks that the emotions are good or bad, normative or deviant, does not get us very far. Before undertaking this level of inquiry, it is necessary to confront other, more fundamental questions: What were the emotions, phenomenally speaking? Why was the topic so important for early thinkers? And what forces shaped the trajectory of development in thinking about the emotions?

One way to investigate such questions without losing sight of the ideas themselves is to interrogate the conceptual paradigms, assumptions, and logic upon which these ideas were articulated—in other words, to investigate those realms

of thought that, as Geoffrey Lloyd has aptly described, were “not a formally elaborated part of any natural philosopher’s theory, but rather a common and deeply ingrained way of thinking and talking about the world.”<sup>3</sup> Such an interest is what led to a concern in this study with the “naturalism” of early thinking about emotions—a term that I understand not simply as a metaphor or analogy meant to illustrate or justify theories of emotion, but as a way of understanding and making sense of how the world works. The juxtaposition of inquiry into emotions and “reality” thus reflects a convergence that is not only conceptual but also historical: that is, the mainstream account of emotions as both intelligent and intelligible, and as furnishing a standard of human fulfillment, went hand in hand with an emergent naturalistic conception of things in the world as characterized by distinct inclinations and patterns. Like the cosmos itself, which was coming into view during this period as a coherent realm that functioned according to cyclical, patterned processes, human emotions came to be similarly recognized as embodying the patterned workings of human beings.

Recognizing the way in which the inquiry into human emotions in early China was bound up with the endeavor to achieve true and objective knowledge of the world, and was thus part of a more general naturalistic intellectual orientation, provides a way to resolve a number of long-standing interpretive puzzles involving the conception of emotions in the mainstream texts, and to challenge some persistent and untenable categorical divisions that are often invoked in the study of Chinese philosophy more generally. A naturalistic approach offers a plausible way to make sense of the apparently contradictory assessments of emotions in all the mainstream texts without resorting to the idea that these thinkers were fundamentally conflicted about the emotions, held irreconcilable views about them, or were ambivalent. More basically, it undercuts the validity of certain dichotomies—largely Western and modern—with which emotions have been approached by scholars of Chinese philosophy. It thus shows that conceptual oppositions such as subjective versus objective, emotion versus reason, and thinking versus feeling cannot, in their conventional formulations, properly be applied to the study of the early mainstream thinkers, because they force the entire discussion of the emotions into a choice between two problematic positions: that emotions are irrational and subjective, and thus fundamentally distinct from cognitive and rational processes, or else that all thought and judgment are to be subsumed under the realm of emotions.

One of the difficulties I encountered in writing this book was that I found myself continually plunging into topics, sources, methods, and disciplines that I did not necessarily feel equipped to deal with. To a certain extent, this speaks to the sheer complexity and vastness of the topic at hand. But it also reflects the

3. Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, “Greek Antiquity: The Invention of Nature,” in *The Concept of Nature. The Herbert Spencer Lectures*, ed. John Torrance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 11.

somewhat Zhuangzian, “wandering” path that led me to write a book on emotions in early Chinese thought. This book is the result of an unexpected detour that began with the idea—extremely naïve, in retrospect—of including one “introductory” chapter about the early thinkers in a book that was to be otherwise devoted to conceptions of emotions in the late Six Dynasties to the Southern Song periods (roughly the sixth–twelfth centuries). Since the latter had been the topic of my dissertation, I was expecting things to move along fairly quickly. But as I began to work through these early texts, I quickly came to realize that these early thinkers had even more to say on this topic than I had expected, and that the issue was far more complex than I had ever imagined. To make a reasonable attempt to make sense of their ideas—as opposed to collecting a few supposedly representative passages on *qing* for each of the major thinkers and then moving on—was not a task to be wrapped up in a few months. As I continued with the project, torn between the desire to linger and explore and the pressure to write up my quick synthesis and move on, one chapter grew into two, and then to three. Eventually the whole project as I had originally conceived it became untenable. I needed to write another book.

Even with an entire book, there is much that cannot be covered. I have not provided a comprehensive survey of the wide range of possibilities of thinking about emotions in early China. Nor have I, in the context of any given thinker, provided an exhaustive account that covers all relevant discussions of the topic. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the thinkers of the mainstream tradition, and in particular, a certain shared orientation and logic exhibited in the mainstream texts, even while each is distinguished by its own set of concerns and values. But what I have compromised in terms of exhaustiveness of textual and topical coverage I hope I have made up for in other ways. I have not pursued a history of ideas here, but have sought to explore issues of a more general relevance pertaining to what the shifting discourse of emotions has meant in the evolution of thought and values in early China. Motivated by a broader historical interest, I have highlighted the convergences in thinking about emotions, cognition, and subjectivity, and sought to situate developments in these domains within the larger unfolding of thinking about ethics, politics, and the natural world. I have not pursued much by way of cross-cultural or comparative explorations, but the kind of approach I have taken here could presumably be the starting point for productive comparative investigations of shifting values and conceptions of emotions across cultures.

Other kinds of wandering have also led me to the topic of this book, and these have been of a more personal nature. I have long been fascinated with how people in the past might have thought about, and experienced, the emotions differently, and how these ways of thinking and feeling might have evolved over time. I suppose if I were to dig further into my psyche for an explanation, I would probably find a number of contributing factors having to do with my experience

living in multiple cultures, which required me to navigate in worlds with different emotional norms and value systems. However, it is not clear that any of this experience would have surfaced in my historicizing consciousness had I not read, early on in my academic formation, Norbert Elias's *Civilizing Process*, which alerted me to the possibility that aspects of ourselves that seem to be so unthinking and immediate, like our feelings of shame and disgust, might bear the imprint of structural forces far larger than anything we could envision from the ground, in our immediate world of personal interactions. The work of Elias, along with a number of other seminal writings I read while studying medieval and early modern cultural history at Berkeley, very much solidified my interest in tracing the genealogies of ideas, values, and norms. And although I eventually shifted my attention from Europe to China, the questions that had captivated me all along accompanied me like good old friends—or perhaps like desperate demons awaiting their fate.

Finally, this book has been long in the making, and the path I have taken to bring it to completion has itself been the ultimate act of wandering, but it is hoped that it was all to a good end. I began working on the book during my first post-PhD research leave, which I spent in Budapest as a fellow at the Collegium Budapest when it was in its final year. The year I spent there, working in the inspiring atmosphere of the beautiful eighteen-century building in the Castle District that housed the institute, and conversing and sharing meals daily with colleagues who were expert in fields far removed from my own, had a deep impact on me, both personally and intellectually. My experience there encouraged me to think more broadly about my research and to see connections with other realms of inquiry—including the sciences. I am grateful to Daniel Brooks, Éva Gonczi, Gábor Klaniczay, Piroska Nagy, Xavier Barral i Altet, Zsuzsa Hetényi, and all the other fellows and staff at the former Collegium, for many inspiring conversations and for their warm and enthusiastic support of my work.

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My children have accompanied me on this long journey, and during the years that I have been occupied with writing this book, I watched in awe as they grew into strong, confident, sensitive individuals, each busy with projects of their own. Adrienn, wise beyond her years, invariably dispensed good advice, and was always ready to converse with me about the big questions of life, science, and religion. Ilona kept us all sane as she quietly, and without fanfare, went about accomplishing amazing things with her usual determination and focus.

Sebastian, my youngest, despite dwelling most of the time in a parallel universe of structure and form, bread-baking and music, somehow remembered to check in with me regularly about the progress of my book, and to ask when it would finally be finished. This little trio has been the greatest inspiration in my life and I dedicate this book to them.



## *Introduction*

During the Warring States period (c. 475 BCE–221 CE) in China, the emotions became a focal point of intense philosophical debate. Early thinkers espoused wide-ranging views about the nature of emotions and their proper role in moral life. Some argued that they were passive, involuntary responses to things in the world, while others claimed that they were active forms of personal engagement. Some insisted that they were amoral and needed to be shaped in accordance with proper norms, while others regarded them as the basis for moral intuitions and the source of genuine values. Out of such diverse possibilities a certain orientation toward these issues came to be adopted—namely, that despite their tendency to go awry, emotions and desires functioned according to the patterns and workings of the natural world, and that their fulfillment was a necessary feature of the fully realized human existence. They were a crucial part of proper and intelligent engagement with the world, and they formed an important basis of cognitive and practical agency.

How, why, and with what significance such views became authoritative are the basic questions that drive this book. Focusing on those thinkers who would constitute the mainstream philosophical tradition—Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Laozi, and Zhuangzi—as well as one thinker, Mozi, who did not, I examine how a particular shared orientation emerged and developed to form what would be known as the “traditional” Chinese perspective. The goal of this study is not just to trace evolving conceptions of emotions in early Chinese philosophy but also to interrogate the role of emotions in the very inception of an ethical tradition in China. My argument is that the mainstream account of emotions as both intelligent and intelligible, and as furnishing a standard of human fulfillment, went hand in hand with an emergent naturalistic conception of things in the world as characterized by distinct inclinations and patterns. By virtue of its potential to link inner and outer realities, our emotional disposition—whose workings were now intelligible—could furnish the grounds for claiming that moral agency resided in the self, and that we had direct access to true knowledge and values.

The idea that emotions are ethically significant and have positive connotations has been gaining currency in recent scholarship on early China, particularly during the past decade. However, the exploration of this vitally important



topic has been hampered by the persistence of a set of conceptual dichotomies that are ripe for reevaluation. These dichotomies have been much challenged in contemporary philosophy of emotions and cognitive science,<sup>1</sup> but have persisted in Sinological scholarship. They include, most notably, those of emotion versus reason (or feeling versus thinking), practice versus theory, body versus mind, and subjectivity versus objectivity.

A longstanding assumption in the study of China more generally has been that “traditional” Chinese thinkers did not fully distinguish between emotion and cognition, and that both functions were the domain of a single faculty—the mind/heart (*xin* 心). Early Chinese philosophers, accordingly, regarded the cognitive and emotive faculties as part of a fully integrated whole. One version of this admittedly appealing view has been the rather startling conclusion that emotions are *indistinguishable* from what one might, in the “West,” refer to as “thinking” or “reasoning.” Since, the argument goes, knowledge in China has been traditionally conceived in the context of practical concerns, social interaction, and self-realization, it cannot have been directed toward some kind of “objective” understanding of the world. After all, didn’t we all know that there was no metaphysics in China, and therefore no concern with “truth” as such?

Many versions of this basic reading have been posited by various scholars in their studies of particular early philosophers. One of the most active proponents of such an approach has been Roger T. Ames, who along with David Hall, has written extensively on the nature of thinking in early China. In the context of Confucius’s thought, for instance, Ames and Hall have proposed that

[T]hinking for Confucius is not to be understood as a process of abstract reasoning, but is fundamentally *performative* in that it is an activity whose immediate consequence is the achievement of a practical result. Far from a means of lifting oneself out of the world of experience, thinking for Confucius is fundamentally integrative, a profoundly concrete activity which seeks to maximize the potential of the existing possibilities and the contributing conditions. Thus, in place of any activity that merely assess an objective set of facts and/or values, thinking for Confucius is *actualizing* or *realizing* the meaningfulness of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Although I would agree with some of the observations made here about what thinking represents for Confucius, the polarization of forms of thinking

1. The idea of a separation of reason and emotion continues to be undermined by current neuro-scientific studies, which have shown the difficulties of extricating emotions from cognitive processes. The pioneering study of this is Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994). For a recent study that focuses on the integration of emotive and cognitive-perceptual processes in the brain, see Luiz Pessoa, *The Cognitive-Emotional Brain* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).

2. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 44; italics in original.

into the opposing camps of immanent versus transcendent, performative versus abstract, integrative versus objective, and so on, introduces what I think are invalid distinctions. Such observations accord with the general idea that thinking and feeling—and effectively, what is right and what one wants—are virtually indistinguishable for many early Chinese philosophers. As James Behuniak has asserted in the context of Mencius: “Mencius subordinates any morality based on doctrines (*yan* 言) that stipulate what is appropriate and advocates in their place a morality based on the spontaneous prompts of feeling (*xin* 心).”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the implication is that early Chinese thinkers did not recognize a genuine distinction between “objective” reality and “subjective” experience.

Such characterizations have been challenged by scholars who have stressed the importance of “cognitive” or “rational” considerations for early Chinese philosophers, and indeed, have noted even a tendency toward “dualistic” forms of thinking. Edward Slingerland, following the approach of David Nivison, has observed that the “holist” reading of Chinese thinking is rooted in a longstanding European interest in reading into the Chinese past a harmony of reason and emotion that was perceived to have been lacking (or lost) in the European tradition.<sup>4</sup> Although such a critical perspective has been extremely valuable in highlighting the role of more “reasoned” or “cognitive” considerations among early Chinese thinkers, it has also tended to reaffirm the sense of an opposition between reason and emotion.

The approach I opt for here is to step out of such dualistic categories altogether, while building on the many insights of scholars who have deployed them in their readings. My strategy for doing so will be to consider early philosophical discussions of emotions within a broader context of the evolving conceptions of the self and the human, and their links to emergent perspectives on the natural world. The rationale for this approach is my sense that the meaning and historical significance of early debates over emotions, and the eventual formation of an authoritative mainstream approach to emotions, can only be properly understood in view of the establishment of a certain naturalistic picture of the world. The problem that has occupied most scholars who have confronted the issue of

3. James Behuniak Jr., *Mencius on Becoming Human* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 12.

4. For Slingerland’s survey and critique of the “holist” reading and proposed “weak dualist” approach, see his “Body and Mind in Early China: An Integrated Humanities-Science Approach,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013): 6–55. Slingerland’s emphasis on the distinct cognitivist and emotivist strands in the thought of early mainstream philosophers is a prominent feature of his study *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The “two-root” model of moral motivation that Slingerland develops is based on the approach of David Nivison, “Two Roots or One?” and other essays on Confucius, Mencius, Mozi, and Xunzi, in *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. David S. Nivison and Bryan W. Van Norden (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1996). My review of the holism vs. dualism controversy, and alternative proposal for how to reconcile the apparent tensions between “emotions” and “reason” in the early Chinese philosophy, appears in Curie Virág, “The Intelligence of Emotions? Debates over the Structure of Moral Life in Early China,” *L’Atelier du Centre de Recherches Historiques*, <http://acrh.revues.org/6721>.

emotions in early Chinese thought—namely, the normative status of emotions and desires—is thus, in my view, secondary to the problem of what the emotions *were*—as phenomena in the world. This is a question to which all the mainstream thinkers proposed a complex answer: one that recognized the multivalence of emotions, and thus their potential for deviance and harm, as well as their crucial importance in the properly realized human life.

The mainstream vision of emotions, as I will elaborate in this book, was that it represented the characteristic patterns or dispositions within human beings, giving genuine access to the workings of the world. This was part and parcel of an emergent naturalistic vision that regarded the cosmos itself as a coherent, intelligible realm characterized by certain patterns and dispositions. When the mainstream thinkers argued that human emotions—*qing* 情—represented the characteristic inclinations of human beings, they were already taking for granted that nature itself functioned in certain intelligible ways. In forwarding such a claim, they were not making a category mistake, conflating inner and outer, subjective and objective, feeling with thinking. Instead, they were arguing that human beings possessed the capacity to optimize and fulfill themselves so as to be in alignment with the workings of the cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

Fundamental to this idea was the belief that humans had access to knowledge of *how things are*. Emotion and cognition were integrated to the extent that the optimal realization of one's human potential required emotional fulfillment and accordance with right understanding of how things properly should be. Moreover, as fully realized, emotions were not just subjective, irrational impulses that had nothing to do with the conditions of the external world or with the project of properly grasping this world. Emotions could also be sources of true understanding of the world. Such understanding, to be sure, was not a quest for "metaphysical truth," but it was, in a basic way, objective in the sense that it was directed toward the attainment of knowledge of the world and its properties. The story of the emotions in early China is, thus, a story of how a certain tradition of thinking about emotions could affirm the cognitive and ethical agency of the self without relinquishing the full range of perceptual powers at one's disposal—powers that engaged our emotional intuitions and dispositions, as well as our reasoning capacities.

5. I use the term "cosmos" in the quite broad sense as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which has, as its first definition, "The world or universe as an ordered and harmonious system," and which thus points to a conception of the world as a unified, intelligible whole; *OED* Online, [www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/42251?redirectedFrom=cosmology](http://www.oed.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/view/Entry/42251?redirectedFrom=cosmology). I do not assume by this term, as is standard among historians of Chinese science, a theory of cosmic correlations, whereby the realms of the human, political, astronomical, and so on are linked in a web of causal relationships. Such a conception is a formulation that emerged in certain historical contexts, most notably, the late Warring States and Han periods. As I shall argue here, there were significant cosmological theories predating the late Warring States period, which assumed that the universe operated according to certain distinct and knowable patterns and tendencies. More will be said on this issue in the section "Competing Naturalisms and Models of the Self," where I invoke the term "nature" in a way that is interchangeable with "cosmology."

# WRITING THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS IN CHINA

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in emotions as an important historical problem in its own right. In part, this is due to the larger wave of scholarly interest in emotions that has pervaded all disciplines and that has been gaining momentum in the past several decades. The result has not only been an outpouring of studies on emotion-related topics but also a “rehabilitation” of emotions in the popular imagination: emotions, as it turns out, are not such a bad thing after all, and the ancients didn’t think so, either.<sup>6</sup> Much of this is resonant with developments in the philosophy of emotions over the past half century or so, in which philosophers have been at pains to emphasize that emotions are not at odds with reason and cognition, but work in tandem with them. This view has been most closely connected with the cognitivist account of emotions championed by Robert Solomon and others, which has stressed that emotions involve processes normally attributed to thinking, reasoning, judging, and evaluating, and are therefore not in basic tension with the intellect. This approach has become more or less mainstream.<sup>7</sup>

This pattern can be seen in Sinological scholarship as well, where there has been a dramatic reversal in evaluations of “traditional” approaches to emotions. The emotions have long been a popular topic for scholars working on late Ming and Qing Dynasty (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE) literature—the themes of love, passion, and sexual desire having been ubiquitous in the flourishing vernacular culture of the time. But in part because of the negative evaluations of “traditional” morality, as popularized by Ming-Qing authors, it has been long taken for granted that earlier intellectual traditions denied and suppressed natural feelings and desires in the name of conformity to strict codes of behavior (in the case of the Confucian tradition) or of achieving equanimity and detachment (in the case of the Daoist and Buddhist traditions).<sup>8</sup> After over a century of bad press, scholars of early Chinese philosophy and religion have been at pains to correct such misreadings, emphasizing that few pre-modern thinkers

6. Thomas Dixon traces the history and significance of this emotions “rehabilitation project” in *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

7. See, e.g., Robert C. Solomon, *Not Passion’s Slave: Emotions and Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Other philosophers who have stressed the cognitive and evaluative dimensions of emotions include Robert Gordon, William Lyons, Jerome Neu, Ronald de Sousa, and Michael Stocker. Applying similar categories in the analysis of ancient Stoic texts, Martha Nussbaum has defended the view that emotions are cognitions, *tout court*, but that this is a realm that involves a broad range of activities, including perception, desire, evaluation, and judgment; see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

8. Much of the scholarship has focused on the so-called cult of *qing* that began in the late Ming period. This is itself a fascinating development that speaks to the particularities of late Ming thought and cultural life. On this, see Anthony Yu, *Rereading the Stone: Desire and the Making of Fiction in Dream of the Red Chamber* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers. Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

categorically rejected the emotions and desires as problematic, or claimed that they were incompatible with the moral life.

In the context of early Chinese philosophy, the focus of the first major scholarly discussions about emotions in English was the concept of *qing*. *Qing* is a particularly intriguing term because, as mentioned earlier, it came to possess a remarkable multivalence that straddled the ontological divide between what we normally recognize as “subjective” and “objective” realities. Prior to the fourth century BCE, *qing* referred to the objective condition of the world—to “circumstances,” “essential reality,” or “situation.” From the fourth century onward, the term came to acquire its distinct emotional sense, and began to be invoked in taxonomies of basic human feelings, which were conceived variously as four, six, or seven, and encompassed some combination of the feelings of joy (*xi* 喜), anger (*nu* 怒), sadness (*ai* 哀), delight/pleasure (*le* 樂), fear (*ju* 懼), love (*ai* 愛), dislike (*wu* 惡), and desire (*yu* 欲). The emotive sense of *qing* did not displace the previous sense of *qing* as “how things are”; instead, the term achieved an expanded range that bridged the gap between reality, in a more descriptive sense, and feeling as experienced.<sup>9</sup>

Much of the Sinological literature on *qing* has been devoted to making sense of when and how a naturalistic term referring to the reality of things came to refer to passions and feelings. In an article that sparked much scholarly discussion, A. C. Graham sought to trace the origins of the emotive sense of *qing*, and argued that this meaning did not emerge until Han times.<sup>10</sup> After considerable debate on this issue among a number of scholars, Christoph Harbsmeier and Michael Puett argued persuasively that the term *qing* possessed a wide semantic range before the Han period, and already encompassed the realm of emotions and desires. In Puett’s reading, this broad semantic range is significant in the way that it demonstrates the presence of competing accounts of *qing* for various ends, even in the thought of one thinker. The semantic range, then, could demonstrate an ambivalence vis-à-vis the emotions—an espousing of two basically different positions with respect to the emotions, each meant to

9. Christoph Harbsmeier identifies seven distinct (if often overlapping) basic categories of meanings in early Chinese usage: (1) factual: the basic facts of a matter; (2) metaphysical: underlying and basic dynamic factors; (3) political: basic popular sentiments/responses; (4) anthropological: general basic instincts/propensities; (5) positive: essential sensibilities and sentiments, viewed as commendable; (6) personal: basic motivation/attitude; and (7) emotional: personal deep convictions, responses, feelings. I would hesitate to so clearly define (3), (4), (5), and (6) outside the realm of emotional experience, as popular sentiment and personal judgment involve a strongly affective component. But as Harbsmeier himself admits, the differences between these categories are overstated in his study for the sake of pointing out important distinctions. See “The Semantics of *Qing* in Pre-Buddhist Chinese,” in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Halvor Eifring (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 69–148.

10. A. C. Graham, “The Meaning of *Ch’ing* [*Qing*],” in “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* 9 (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), 59–65. The implicit narrative in Graham’s reading is a progression toward greater awareness of subjectivity. I shall resist any such teleology moving toward modern subjectivity in this study.

justify a different conclusion that was important for Xunzi's ethical and political theory.<sup>11</sup>

Puett's emphasis on the coexistence of multiple meanings of *qing* raises an important issue that has occupied much recent scholarship on the conception of emotions in early China, and that also lies at the heart of my study—namely, what to do with the apparently conflicting assessments of emotions in a single text? For, indeed, it is a striking fact that, in all the mainstream philosophical texts, from the writings of Xunzi, with its strongly worded injunctions to control and suppress the emotions and desires, to the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, with their ascetic tendencies—we find, at once, passages that seem to call for the suppression or control of emotions, and passages that validate them as guides for proper living. The problem of reconciling these apparently conflicting evaluations of emotions has been a central priority in the scholarly literature on emotion.

Methodologically, resolving these contradictions involves taking a rather broad approach to the problem of emotions—one that is not limited to a particular Chinese concept or idea. I shall not, therefore, pursue a history of *qing* or of any other specific term deemed to be the Chinese equivalent of what we might refer to as “emotions” in English. Instead, I will deploy the term “emotions” as my general category of reference. By this I refer to an entire spectrum of interrelated phenomena, from involuntary, physiological responses to external stimuli, to basic human dispositions and inclinations, to forms of cognition and perceptions of meaning, and to judgments and evaluations. In maintaining an expansive conception of emotions that can encompass quite diverse accounts of what the emotions are, I am not simply acknowledging the obvious fact of their complexity and multivalence. A more substantial point is that the topic of my inquiry is not what the emotions *are* per se, but what people understood them to be. Early Chinese debates over emotions were as much about the quality, depth, and scope of the experience they represented, as they were about how to evaluate them morally. One of the basic concerns of this study is, thus, precisely to show that what we conceive as “emotions” was a site of tremendous controversy in early China, and that the divisiveness of the issue was due, in large part, to the fact that it could be defined in so many ways and approached at so many levels. That it sustained such a variety of interpretations was because so much hinged on one's definition of it.

One might reasonably object that it is incongruous to apply this decidedly modern and foreign term to discuss facets of Chinese thought that are so deeply rooted in their specific conceptual and historical context. Indeed, this particular term is arguably more objectionable than a term such as “feelings” or “passions,”

11. See Harbsmeier, “Semantics of *Qing*,” and Michael Puett, “The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *Qing* in Early Chinese,” in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. Halvor Eifring (London: Brill, 2004), 37–68.

in that the term “emotions” was coined in the nineteenth century by natural scientists seeking to promote their own materialist account of affective life.<sup>12</sup> However, the term “emotions” is the one in currency, and the rich body of scholarship surrounding this topic pertains to the many aspects of human life and experience that I am interested in addressing in this study. This makes it optimal for my purposes, which take as a given that emotions could be conceptualized in fundamentally different ways, and subject to extremely diverging evaluations. There is, moreover, the added methodological value of using a “foreign” term, which is that it enables one to launch an investigation into an entire spectrum of relevant terms and ideas in the Chinese philosophical tradition, and thus frees us from the constraints of a single Chinese term.

Since my concern is not to follow the career of a particular emotions term, but to trace the very ways in which certain realms of experience that we would associate with the emotions are subject to shifting conceptualizations and linguistic formulations, it is important to cast one’s net broadly so as to take into account the many levels of reality that we are dealing with. At the same time, it is only when we confront the full range of possibilities for conceptualizing the emotions that we can appreciate the particularity of the tradition of thought that would become mainstream, and that would acquire the force of normativity in imperial China. Thus, considered as one among a diverse range of possible approaches, the mainstream account of emotions as comprising the underlying, patterned constitution of human beings comes into view as the product of a contingent history—one in which conceptions of the human are continually debated and subject to reevaluation.

Terminologically speaking, I shall consider a rather expansive vocabulary of terms that includes not only *qing* 情, but also various particular emotions, such as *xi* 喜 (joy), *nu* 怒 (anger), *ai* 哀 (sadness), *le* 樂 (delight/pleasure), *you* 憂 (sorrow), *bei* 悲 (grief), *ju* 懼 (fear), and *ai* 愛 (love). I will also examine terms of preference such as *hao* 好 (liking) and *wu* 惡 (disliking), as well as motivational states such as *yu* 欲 (desire) and *zhi* 志 (intention, focused inclination). Beyond references to emotions, emotive states, and so on, I shall also be concerned with verbs of cognition such as *si* 思 (to think) and *lü* 慮 (to reflect); moral feelings such as *jing* 敬 (respect) and *xiao* 孝 (filial affection); and specific moral virtues such as

12. As Thomas Dixon has shown, the use of the term “emotions” to refer collectively to these heightened physical and mental states is a fairly recent phenomenon. The term was specifically coined in the early nineteenth century to define, in physiological and biological terms, aspects of human experience that had hitherto been understood in a more complex, subtle, and differentiated manner. Previously, there had existed a variety of terms such as “appetites,” “passions,” “affections,” and “sentiments,” indicating the movements of the various levels of the soul, and categories such as “affections” and “moral sentiments,” which entailed both “rational and voluntary movements of the soul, while being subjectively warm and lively psychological states.” The replacement of this differentiated vocabulary by the single term “emotions” was, thus, of momentous significance, and it is to this event that we can trace the reductive view of emotions as “a set of morally disengaged, bodily, non-cognitive and involuntary feelings.” Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions*, 3.



*ren* 仁 (humaneness) and *li* 禮 (ritual propriety, propriety). And finally, given my focus on relationship between thinking about emotions and thinking about the self's relationship to the world, I will examine the discussions surrounding terms of self-reference such as *zi* 自, *ji* 己, *shen* 身, and *ti* 體 (body); psychophysical sites within the human constitution in which emotions were presumed to operate, especially *xing* 性 (human nature, the inborn nature) and *xin* 心 (the heart-mind); terms of movement and activity such as *dong* 動 (movement, activity), *gan* 感 (arousal), and *ying* 應 (response); and references to the cosmos as a whole and its fundamental constituent elements: *tian* 天 (heaven/nature), *tiandi* 天地 (heaven and earth), *li* 理 (pattern/coherence), *ziran* 自然 (what is so of itself/spontaneity), *dao* 道 (the Way), and *qi* 氣 (material/psycho-physical force).

Developments in thinking about all these realms are of crucial importance for understanding the trajectory in which the mainstream account of emotions developed, and for keeping within view the basic multivalence of emotions. The emotions are, and always have been, many things—often many things in conflict with one another. History tells us that this multivalence has not only given rise to diverse formulations of what the emotions are but also has been a major source of fascination with the topic itself. This is a point that Ronald De Sousa has stressed by way of his image of emotions as a “philosophical hub.” De Sousa has noted that the potency of emotions as a category has to do with the way it leads us to basic questions of philosophy—questions pertaining to epistemology, ontology, logical form, philosophical psychology, and ethics—through the “antinomies” arising from them. And that, with respect to the basic polarities that define our thinking about human existence—such as those between inner and outer, reason and feeling, freedom and determination, unity and multiplicity, truth and falsity, passivity and activity, and so on—they represent conflicting and, often, equally viable propositions.<sup>13</sup>

This image of the emotions as a hub captures something of the wide spectrum of possibilities pursued by Chinese thinkers over the centuries: some argued that emotions emanated from within, while others stressed that they were provoked by events in the outside world; some argued that they possessed a natural coherence and direction, while others focused on their disruption of any unified purpose; some regarded them as sources of moral agency, while others emphasized their essential passivity; some argued for their importance in joining individuals together into a community, while others regarded them as fundamentally divisive and therefore requiring the force of more reasoned considerations. Such ontological and ethical ambivalence of emotions, and their potentiality to

13. De Sousa enumerates, in particular, five antinomies: the antinomy of rationality, the antinomy of objectivity, the antinomy of activity and passivity, the antinomy of integrity, and the antinomy of determinism. To this list he attaches a sixth point—the ambivalence of emotions—pertaining to the fact that the same situation can evoke multiple, and often incompatible, emotions. Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 1–20.



straddle both sides of the divide, has important bearing on my approach to the emotions. It must challenge, as I have argued above, the assumption that emotions represent a “subjective” realm that pertains to the perspectives and experiences of particular individuals and as such, are not “objective.” It also allows for a more seamless transition toward the idea that the wide spectrum of possibilities for thinking emotions in early China corresponded to diverse ways of conceptualizing the interaction and dynamic of influence between self and the natural world. Competing accounts of emotions sustained vastly different possibilities of thinking about this interaction, and the mainstream tradition settled on one in particular: one that affirmed that human beings could know the world, confer meaning, and embody the creative agency of the cosmos itself.

#### SHIFTING CONCEPTUAL AND MORAL LANDSCAPES

Historically, the emergence of emotions as a major focus of ethical discussion in early China accompanied the rise of philosophical inquiry itself. Explaining why a certain approach to the emotions came to dominate the early philosophical tradition thus involves probing some of the broader forces and developments that engendered philosophical speculation among Warring States thinkers. In recent decades, scholars of early China have sought to contextualize the emergence of philosophy during the Warring States period by linking intellectual changes with political, religious, and institutional developments leading up to this period. These studies have shown how a confluence of historical events—the creation of centralized, autonomous states, the emergence of the intellectual/scholar-official class (*shi* 士), the secularization of political life, and the shifting locus of moral authority—contributed to the interest in philosophical thinking and gave rise to a distinct set of concerns and priorities.<sup>14</sup> Although these developments will not be the focus of my attention here, it is worth providing a brief sketch now, both because they show the practical contexts in which philosophical ideas were formulated and because they provide a helpful reference point for elaborating the kinds of conceptual contexts that I do focus on in my study.

The period with which this study begins, spanning roughly the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, was one of political turbulence and sweeping transformations. Straddling the era between the late Spring and Autumn (*Chun qiu* 春秋) and Warring States (*Zhan guo* 戰國) periods, it was a time of intense political

14. The emergence of philosophical discourse in China around this time parallels contemporaneous developments in other major civilizations, including Classical Greece and India. Historians have long argued that this period in Chinese history represented a major turning point, and that one of its distinguishing features was a transition to an era of tremendous intellectual vitality. Following Karl Jaspers, Heiner Roetz has identified this period as China’s “Axial Age” moment, which it underwent in parallel with other great world civilizations. See Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction Under the Aspect of the Breakthrough Toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).