

Chinese thought: from Confucius to Cook Ding

Roel Sterckx

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Walk into most bookshops in Australia today and one will be treated to an array of books, prominently placed, that claim to offer up some sort of insight about China. This is perhaps unsurprising given Australia's recent and (at the time of writing) rapidly deteriorating relationship with its largest trading partner. Nightly news carry reports of yet another embargo on some iconic Australian product – barley, wine, wool, beef, coal – as if the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) were working up the list of Australia's exports. Those in management positions in the education industry – and in higher education especially – who have presumed upon the steady (cash) flow of international students from the PRC must be hoping that Beijing does not run the red pen across it. In this geopolitical climate, many “China experts” have emerged to help the anxious onlooker decode the puzzle of “what the Chinese are *really* thinking” – partaking in a genre with a long history of scrutinising the “inscrutable oriental” for the occidentally positioned reader.

Fortunately, despite its paperback title being a clear publisher's ploy to tap into that market, Roel Sterckx's *Chinese Thought: From Confucius to Cook Ding* does not sit in that ignoble lineage (its first edition was published with the far less sexy title *Ways of Heaven: An Introduction to Chinese Thought* [Sterckx, 2019]). What the Joseph Needham Professor of Chinese History, Science, and Civilization at Cambridge University has delivered is instead a carefully arranged and argued book that situates the emergence of classical strands of Chinese thought in their socio-political context: namely, the breakdown of the Zhou dynasty (c. 1045–256 BCE) and the slide into what is known as the Warring States period (481–221 BCE). “China's masters of philosophy were a product of this age”, Sterckx points out, and the “chaos around them must have felt like the end of the world” (p. 16). It is amidst this tumult that the key problematic of Chinese thought emerges: “how does one cultivate and educate people and organise a state to gain advantage over its rivals?” (p. 19).

In this context, as Sterckx points out early on and reminds readers throughout, the questions posed by Chinese thinkers differ significantly from those posed by Western European philosophers (with the exception of pragmatists, perhaps) – the former concerned with “how” questions that are “predominantly human-centred and practice-oriented” (p. xi), by contrast to the more speculative “what” questions that bedevil the latter. Hence the difficulty of speaking of Chinese “philosophy” (哲學; *zhé xué*) with recourse to Western European categories like metaphysics, ontology, etc. – notwithstanding the courageous work of Wen Haiming (2012) and others since the term was borrowed from the Japanese in the 20th century in the shadow of imperial pressure. In any case, as Foucault (1989) points out, “thought” is a much more capacious analytical category than “philosophy” because, unlike the latter, the former foregrounds “the element of problems, or more precisely, problematizations” (p. 421). That is, thought arises historically in relation to certain problems agreed upon by people as needing to be addressed, which of course differ



depending on time and place. Policies or proverbs or parables or (much as it pains me to admit) spreadsheets can be regarded as historically salient artefacts of thought insofar as they carry traces of the problems they are meant to address; they are unlikely to be recognised as “philosophy”.

With this sensibility, Sterckx organises the central parts of his book around the key problematics that wracked those who sought to govern amidst pandemonium, and the solutions offered by the thinkers who were in their pay: How to discern the way (*Dao*) in a world of ceaseless change (Chapter 2); How to become a ruler and rule effectively (Chapter 3)? How does one learn to live rightly in relation to the collective (Chapter 4), spirits and ancestors (Chapter 6), and the natural world (Chapter 7)?; and How to behave in ways that strike the right balance between regularity and spontaneity (Chapter 5)? For educators, Chapter 4’s focus on the upbringing of children will be of particular interest. These chapters are bookended by a very helpful introduction and punchy conclusion. The first chapter situates “China in Time and Space”, offering helpful insights for the non-expert about the shifting geography of what many assume to be a self-evident land mass called “China”, as well as classical Chinese sensibilities about spatiality and temporality. And the final chapter offers a gripping account of how many of the arguments and positions in 416 pages hitherto can be condensed in the way Chinese thinkers have approached food – a hint of Sterckx’s earlier, more academically pitched *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China* (2011).

Throughout this work, Sterckx avoids establishing explanatory causality between the different forms of Chinese thought and present-day socio-political formations. Even though Confucianism forms the main column that all the others are arrayed against – Daoists, Legalists, Mohists – he commendably avoids a common tendency to seek in it some sort of cultural-ideological DNA for “why the Chinese are doing what they are doing”. While he does pepper the text with asides about contemporary Chinese politicians’ deployment of language from classical texts, Sterckx implies throughout that it is in their specific *uses* – inevitably selective – that the meanings of Chinese thought can be apprehended. He thus ends the book fittingly by pointing out that: “To most . . . thinking Chinese meant focusing on society, politics and the ethics of the here and now. The shape of the cleaver mattered little as long as it could cut. Perhaps not much has changed” (p. 432).

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