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THE JOY OF KNOWLEDGE PUT INTO PRACTICE. THE COSMOTECHNICAL VIEW ON ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE IN ANCIENT CHINA

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ABSTRACT. Classical Chinese thought slowly formed from the 9th century BCE onward through the Spring and Autumn era but reached its pivotal point during the so-called Warring States era (5th to 2nd centuries BCE). According to historical records, during these three hundred years more than four hundred wars of different scales raged across the Chinese world. These wars brought with them their own consequences like famines and abject poverty, terrible inequality and disillusionment. An intellectual history forming in these conditions understandably and inevitably was influenced by these conditions. In this context, the Hong Kong philosopher Yuk Hui presents his thesis of "cosmotechnics", the view that merely understanding the world is not enough, it is paramount to change it for the betterment of people's lives. This is the theoretical underpinning of much of classical Chinese thought, according to Yuk Hui, and therefore also for the drive to acquire knowledge. Thus, one unique aspect of classical Chinese thought is its interminable insistence on how man's every action must have a reason beyond that action itself and any sort of philosophizing that does not lead to practice in changing the environment for the good of the people inhabiting it, is a wasted and useless thought. Therefore, there are a number of words and concepts related to the acquisition of knowledge in Classical and modern Chinese, like "learning" 學, "teaching" 教, "discussion" 論, "argumentation" 辯, and so on, but all these are encompassed within "the way" 道, specifically the "correct way of doing a thing", i.e.: actual practice, rather than mere thought alone. I aim to present several examples of this from remote Chinese antiquity and classical Chinese thought within the framework of what I term "cosmotechnical joy" stemming from making people's lives better.

Keywords: China, philosophy, thought, knowledge, pragmatism, Confucianism, Daoism, legalism

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Contextual framework for the fundamental view of acquisition of knowledge in classical Chinese thought

Throughout classical Chinese thought there are a number of concepts relating to knowledge that might be familiar to most of us working within the field of philosophy, but the over-arching conceptual framework they are embedded into is quite different from the western canon of philosophy. This alone should compel us to engage with it in a serious manner, rather than just set it aside claiming it is not philosophy, but a mere set of pre-philosophical bits of wisdom, which itself in turn is looked down upon as a series of diluted and pithy statements not worthy of our serious philosophical gaze.[2] In the following pages I aim to present various aspects of classical Chinese thought relating to the acquisition of knowledge that set it aside from our well known western canon, but not to its detriment, on the contrary, to its advantage. What I aim to show is that classical Chinese thought is not pre-philosophical as it is often derided, but rather post-philosophical: it does not merely think for the sake of thinking, but in order that practice might flow naturally from thought - and especially that it may change the world for the better for those inhabiting it.

A very detailed analysis of certain differences and their origins between western and Chinese philosophical systems - bearing in mind that neither of these two are monolithic wholes without inner variation - can be traced to how we view each of these systems. Jin Yuelin 金岳霖 in his text titled *Chinese philosophy*[3] points out that often times in western academia people view Indian philosophy as otherworldly (来世), Greek philosophy as unwordly (出世) and Chinese philosophy as worldly (入世)[4]. These are specific terms in Chinese, the first one pertaining to Indian philosophy in his analysis meaning it deals with the next life, the second with regards to Greek philosophy pertains to appearing in the world as in Plato's ideal world appearing in the concrete world we live in, and finally the one pertaining to Chinese philosophy meaning to go into the world, but with the caveat that into a secular world, experiencing the real world. As he further clarifies this is seen as a negative, as he puts it: "*Chinese philosophy sticks to the kernel of its subject*"[5], because, again as he puts it: "*it is never propelled by the instruments of thinking*

[2] On this point see: Bryan W. Van Norden: *Taking back philosophy - a multicultural manifesto*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2017., specifically pages 12 through 38.

[3] See: Jin Yuelin: *Chinese Philosophy*, in: *Dao, Nature and Man*, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2019.

[4] See: Jin Yuelin, quoted above, 2019, p. 2.

[5] Ibid.

either into the dizzying heights of systematic speculation or into the depth of a labyrinth of elaborate barrenness."[6] He also makes of point to emphasize that for most of western academia, Chinese philosophy merely consists of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism[7]. This is then ironic on two counts: first in that Chinese philosophy is much more complex to those in the know and second in that Buddhism is an Indian school of philosophy and was later imported into China. There is one more point he makes I find important to detail, that is: the three above mentioned schools of philosophy are not taken into consideration as such either because they are merely seen as religions, which is explicitly incorrect with regards to Confucianism, and semi-incorrect with regards to Daoism, but also because not even Buddhism is merely a religion without any philosophical baggage.[8]

The Hong Kong philosopher Yuk Hui 許煜 claims that the main difference in how western philosophy and Chinese thought approaches the world around them is that while in the western canon the main tendency of analysis always ever was cosmology, i.e. the explanation of the world around us, in Chinese philosophy it always ever was cosmotechnics.[9] According to Yuk Hui, cosmotechnics (cosmos+tekhné) is the view that the world is the totality around us as we experience it and the main thrust of philosophy and the acquisition of knowledge should be to change the world to the benefit of all those inhabiting it. This already sets out the main point of my paper: in Chinese thought the acquisition of knowledge is not happenstance, does not merely exist for the joy of the person acquiring said knowledge, but by default has a goal that goes beyond the person of the one acquiring knowledge. Acquiring knowledge happens because the one possessing knowledge has a moral obligation to change the world for the betterment of the lives of everyone around them, preferably for the betterment of "all under Heaven" or 天下, who may lack the knowledge necessary to manifest this change.

Yuk Hui uses a parallel argument to prove his point. According to him, in ancient Greek mythology the point of the myth of Prometheus demonstrates that the Gods punish Prometheus exactly because by giving humans the ability to make fire, Prometheus dared to change the world so ordered by the Gods. In this worldview, changing the world seen as perfectly ordered by the Gods, is an irredeemable offense against the Gods themselves. On the other side of the planet, in Chinese mythology, one of the greatest mythical heroes is the person named Yu, the

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 See Yuk Hui: *The questions concerning technology in China: an essay in cosmotechnics*, Urbanomic, Falmouth, 2017.

Great 大禹. He is seen as one of the greatest early rulers of China, founder of the Xia dynasty 夏朝, and as an outstanding moral character. Traditional Chinese historiography puts the Xia dynasty between 2070 and 1600 BCE, therefore the personage of Yu, the Great is semi-legendary. He is most well-known for introducing the knowledge of flood controls to the Chinese people in the story titled "Yu, the Great, controls the floods" or 大禹治水. According to the story Yu did not use magic to control the floods, but rather had a complex system of irrigation canals built that diverted the floodwaters into fields and rice terraces, therefore not only nullifying the negative effects of the floods, but also using the power of water to help the peasantry save their crops. Therefore, Yu the Great not only changed the course of the world, but he did so in order to curtail the famines and other disasters that followed in the wake of multiple flood seasons.

In Yuk Hui's view it is central to the idea of cosmotechnics that some sort of actually existing technology is used to change the current state of affairs, rather than just being explained away through wonderous heroes and magic. Yu, the Great, did not merely snap his fingers and made the floodwater disappear, but rather used the technology of irrigation canals, dams and dykes to divert water away from where it was not needed to where it actually was needed. Not only that, but according to the legend, while working on this system, Yu, the Great, actually lived with the workers, shared their lives, took part in their joys and sorrows while directing the flood, rather than just being a larger than life hero who has little interest in their actual lives.[10] This is the cosmotechnical view: the one who possesses knowledge the people at large lack sharers their lives, therefore knows their hardships and struggles, so he felt the moral obligation of changing the world in a way that benefits all who share their lives in that world. The acquisition of knowledge is only ever legitimate as far is it is implemented for the betterment of people's lives that share the world with the one who possesses knowledge that can change the world. This is an extremely positive and anti-individualist conception of knowledge that I came to not only deeply love throughout my studies in Chinese thought, but also deeply respect in the most explicit sense of the word respect.

From this we can understand why the word 道 (dao) became such a central aspect of all Chinese thought in the classical era. 道 is often translated into English as "the Way" and most often related to Daoism, but in truth all the various schools

[10] For the story of Yu, the Great, controlling the floodwaters see: 戴逸 (Dai Yi); 龔書鐸 (Gōng Shūduó) (2003). 中國通史. 史前 夏 商 西周 [History of China. Illustrated student edition], 智能教育出版社, Xianggang, 2003. For a similar parallel reading with ancient Greek myths see: Lu, Xing: *Rhetoric in ancient China, fifth to third century, B.C.E.: a comparison with classical Greek rhetoric,* University of South Carolina Press Publishing, Columbia, 1998, pp. 46-47.

of Chinese thought reference it in more ways than one and always according to their different understanding. For this reason, the word is often more correctly translated as "the correct way of doing this or that thing". Doing is the central concept there, for the word 道 has two elements in constructing its meaning: 辶 carrying the meaning of "to walk" and 首 carrying the meaning "head". Thus, the most basic meaning of the word is looking in the direction one is walking: thought and action having the same end goal. This is why it is often rendered as "the way" or "the correct way of doing something", which only comes from thought and action being unitary.[11] This is an absolutely central concept in Chinese thought: any philosophy from which practice does not flow for the betterment of the people's lives is absolutely meaningless and useless verbalism. Throughout my PhD research I constantly encountered this line of reasoning most especially, but not limited to the Legalist school of thought or 法家.

Studying a question as opposed to merely thinking of it

Let us now turn our gaze to certain particular instances of this throughout classical Chinese thought. Even though Confucianism or 儒家, "the school of the literati", isn't the only school of thought in China, it is often thought of in that way in the west.[12] So let us take it as our point of departure. The central work of Confucianism has been the so-called *Analects of Confucius,* the 論語. The very first lines of the work collecting the supposed sayings and arguments of Confucius, or Kong Zi 孔子, as he was known, are thus: 子曰：學而時習之，不亦說乎 or "*Is it not a delight, said the Master, to acquire knowledge and put it into practice?*"[13] Here we already see that joy is not simply linked with studying, but explicitly with

[11] This is such a far-reaching aspect of Chinese thought that from the earliest known records and such early scriptures as the Book of Changes 易經, the origin of which is lost to the mist of the earliest eras of Chinese antiquity, it leads as far as Wang Yangming 王陽明 declaring in the 15th century that "thought and action are one" 知行合一. This does not mean that they are the same, but that they are two aspects of the same whole. Essentially, Wang is declaring that theory and practice are one, an incredibly revolutionary thought for the 15th century.

[12] A simple glance at non-scholarly books on non-European forms of philosophy can attest to this with Daoism being the only other Chinese school of thought mentioned, if ever. I am discounting Buddhism here, since Buddhism is an Indian school of thought that arrived in China around the 4th century AD with Chan Buddhism being the first local variation on it. For scholarly articles dealing with this topic see for instance: Paul R. Goldin: *Those who do not know, speak: translation of Laozi by people who do not know Chinese*, in: *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese philosophy*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2005, pp. 119-135.

[13] See: Xu Yuanchong: *Thus spoke the Master*, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, 2019, p. 9.

applying what one has studied. Let's see another part of the *Analects* to further clarify this aspect: 子曰：吾嘗終日不食，終夜不寢，以思，無益，不如學也 or "*Once, said the Master, I spent a whole day and a whole night in thinking, without eating and sleeping. I got no result and found it better to learn.*"[14] The implication here is exactly that "pure thought" or 思 is just that, while studying or 學 is something that has a chance at a practice, at being implemented and used in a very concrete and material sense. This is why he states that he should have been studying something instead or 不如學也. This statement can also be translated as "it was not as good as studying" or "not as useful" as studying if we contrast it with the statement that pure thought is 無益 or "useless".

The *Analects* are full of similar thoughts with regards to knowledge, but it is important to note that thought is not simply a negative term, for Kong Zi also notes: 子曰：學而不思則罔，思而不學則殆 or "*To learn without thinking, said the Master, risks to be blind, while to think without learning risks to be impractical*"[15]. Without going into all the details, what again we see here is that it is learning and study that takes the leading role, not merely thought, exactly because it is learning that carries within it the seed of practice. This is also the reasons why thought without learning is perilous: either because it errs or because it becomes useless.[16] Anyone can think whatever they may, but study is much more rigorous, systematic and always aiming at practice, rather than just flights of fancy.

This can also be seen in the Confucian insistence that personal conduct, i.e., the practical application of correct thought, of the ruler heavily influences the entirety of people under his rulership: 其身正，不令而行；其身不正，雖令不從 or "*An upright ruler, the Master said, will be obeyed though he gives no order. If he is not upright, he will not be obeyed though he gives orders.*"[17] Thus we see that the application of knowledge learned influences the entirety of the state and its harmony. Merely thinking, but not practicing what may come of thinking is completely useless, since people cannot read minds, but only action: this is why the personal conduct of the elite is so important for Confucianism.

[14] See: Xu Yuanchong: *Thus spoke the Master*, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, 2019, pp. 109.

[15] See: Xu Yuanchong: *Thus spoke the Master*, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, 2019, p. 16.

[16] This ought to be read in parallel with the famous anecdote of the above mentioned Wang Yangming who according to legend at the age of 16 sat in front of a bamboo stalk for seven days trying to meditate on it to gain understanding, but failed, therefore leading to the conclusion that pure thought is not enough to gain knowledge and one must rigorously study. For the life of Wang Yangming, who is undoubtedly one of the most interesting figures of Chinese intellectual thought, see: Dong Ping: *Historical background of Wang Yangming's philosophy of mind*, Springer, NY, 2020, especially chapter 1, pp. 30-33.

[17] See: Xu Yuanchong: *Thus spoke the Master*, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, 2019, p. 89.

Knowledge without limits

Daoism is a very interesting and very complicated set of philosophies, religious views and political thoughts. There is no way to reconcile every single aspect of it without any contradictions - and this is what makes it so interesting, yet to many readers of it also so uncomfortable.[18] One of the most basic Daoist tenets is that 吾生也有涯，而知也無涯 from the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 most often translated as "*Man's life has limits, yet knowledge is limitless*".[19] As most people probably know, the central tenet of Daoism is that the totality of reality is always ever incomprehensible for the human mind. This is what is meant by those famous lines of the *Daode Jing* 《道德經》: 道可道，非常道，名可名，非常名 or *"The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way, the name that can be named, is not the constant name*"[20]. The classic translation can also be rendered as "the path that can be walked is not the eternal path" for 道 in this sentence structure is first a noun and then a verb. What is important to note that there is no value component in this statement: it merely conveys the idea that the correct way of reality may never be known to human thought. This of course stems from man's life being limited, while knowledge is limitless. This is also seen in the same passage of the Daode Jing at the very end where it is stated: 玄之又玄，眾妙之門 often translated as "*mystery within every mystery, the gateway of the manifold secrets*"[21]. In other words: whatever knowledge we may gain will merely open up new contradictions to be solved later. This is all interesting, but where does practice come into play in the Daoist philosophy on knowledge?

In the chapter titled Xu Wugui of the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 we read a story of the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, one of the most important semi-mythical rulers of ancient

[18] For a wonderful essay on Daoism absolutely shattering the commonly held views on it see: Paul R. Goldin: *Those who don't know speak - translations of the Laozi by people who do not know Chinese*, in : Paul R. Goldin: *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy*, University of Hawai'i, Honolulu, 2005, pp. 119-135. The closing remarks of the essay are especially pertinent to the topic of this essay: "The Daode Jing is old; it is alien; it is Chinese; and it is difficult. These are the recalcitrant facts that too many readers seem disinclined to accept. Instead, they seek out the most facile translations and consume insipid approximations of the original. This phenomenon must be attributable at least in part to intellectual laziness. The public is not obliged to restrict itself to academic monographs, but readers still have a responsibility to investigate the merit of a translation before adopting it. Little research is necessary to discover that there is more to Daoism than 'letting events take their course' and that the scary political overtones cannot be disregarded as the detritus of imaginary interpolators. Like any profound work of philosophy, the Daode Jing is dangerous. We do it no justice by pretending that it is easy to swallow. Chinese philosophy made simple is no longer Chinese philosophy."

[19] See *Zhuangzi*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1999, p. 43.

[20] See: Lao Tzu: *Tao te Ching*, Penguin Books, London, 2009, p. 3.

[21] Ibid.

China, starting out on a journey with his entourage. On the way they get lost - which is in and of itself philosophically significant, although we cannot go into these details here - and they encounter a young stable boy tending to some horses grazing the field. Through their discussions they realize that the young boy is in truth a sage. So, the Yellow Emperor starts asking him about the correct way of governance, but at first the young lad is reluctant to answer, but on further pressing from the Yellow Emperor, he finally says: 亦奚以異乎牧馬者哉？亦去其害馬者而已矣 or "*What difference could there be between ordering all under Heaven and tending to the horses? One needs only to get rid of all that is harmful to the horses.*"[22] The correct way of governance is a type of knowledge, yet as we see here again, that knowledge entails not merely knowing, but also putting that knowledge into practice, in this case: getting rid of everything that is harmful to the horses.[23]

Law is the expression of taking care of the people

The Legalist school is one of the most unjustly maligned schools of classical Chinese thought. Because they were in several, but not all aspects almost a complete antithesis of Confucianism and the latter won the ideological, but not the practical battle, for two millennia Legalism was attacked and slandered at every turn. Despite this, it was also used at every turn and especially at every critical junction of Chinese history due to its practical and domineering nature which was a very useful set of skills when the establishing of strict social order was needed during times of crises. The views of the legalists with regards to knowledge were likewise influenced by this domineering pragmatism in every conceivable way.

Although there are absolutely amazing figures within the history of Legalism, from Han Fei to Wang Anshi[24] and beyond, we shall only take a look at certain views

[22] See Wang Rongpei's translation in: *Zhuangzi*, Foreign Language Press, Beijing, 1999, p. 415.

[23] We have no chance of going into the finer details of the political philosophy espoused here. Suffice is to say that this single thought can dispel all the "well, actually Daoism is the first libertarian philosophy in history" myths and further down we will see another similar thought. In truth Daoist political thought is so far removed from any sort of libertarianism, that they cannot even see each other, let alone be on the same page. The political undertones of Daoism, to my experience, at least to those who understand them, seem to be the most alarming aspects of Daoist thought. For more on this, see my paper: *No enlightenment for you! Western misunderstandings of Daoism imply a deeper misunderstanding of Chinese history in general* in: Rozália Klára Bakó (ed.) and Gizela Horváth (ed.): *Argumentor 7: Error*, Partium Press, Oradea, 2022, pp. 191-205. For a detailed description of the life and rites of early Daoist communities in China see: Terry F. Kleeman: *Celestial Masters History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2016.

[24] My insistence on counting Wang Anshi 王安石 among the legalists seems to garner controversy, but the majority of the second chapter of my PhD aims, among other things, to prove that Wang

of knowledge found in the *Book of Lord Shang* 《商君書》. The Book of Lord Shang is traditionally attributed to Shang Yang 商鞅 chief minister (相) of the state of Qin during the Warring States era, but it is unknown what parts of the book he actually wrote, if any at all.[25] He, or the reformers the book attributed to him are based on, unleashed a series of political, economic and social reforms that strengthened Qin so much that by 221 BCE it conquered all the other warring states and unified China for the first time in its long history.

A series of views on knowledge come right at the beginning of the book which is presented as a debate between Shang Yang and a number of Confucian scholars that supposedly took place in the presence of the king of Qin.[26] Despite this we can read through and glimpse what legalists might have thought about issues like knowledge, since Shang Yang is often remembered as the arch-legalist - and depending on who you ask, either a bloodthirsty villain who dispossessed the aristocracy or a reformer with a grand vision tirelessly working for the good of the common people.

One of the things we read in this first chapter titled "Reform of Law" or 《更法》 is: 是以聖人苟可以強國，不法其故；苟可以利民，不循其禮 or "*Therefore a sage, if he is able to strengthen the state thereby, does not model himself on antiquity, and if he is able to benefit the people thereby, does not adhere to the established rites.*"[27] From this we already know that in the legalist conception of knowledge, pragmatism comes first: if you have set out a goal for you, which is the strengthening of the state[28] in this case, you ought not to be limited by ancient rites,

Anshi in his thought and especially his actions was a staunch legalist who only called himself a Confucian because there was no other way he could function within the bureaucracy of the Song dynasty. Even compared to other dynasties the Song might be called a "reactionary Confucianism" in its ideology, despite all the absolutely mind-blowing scientific, philosophical and literary breakthroughs achieved, like the movable printing type, a good four hundred years before Guttenberg, for instance. Bi Sheng 畢升 between 1041 and 1048 created a movable type using an amalgam made from clay and glue hardened through baking which created a material similar to porcelain. This of course is a mere follow up to the first printed book in history being the *Diamond sutra* dating to around year 868 during the Tang dynasty.

[25] For the textual history of the Book of Lord Shang, see Yuri Pines: *The Book of Lord Shang: Apologetics of State Power in Early China*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2017, especially pp. 25-59.

[26] This debate most probably never took place in this form. Primary sources on the life of Shang Yang, like the *Records of the Grand Historian* 《史記》 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 do not record any such debate taking place, but rather only three times Shang Yang went before the king to petition his reforms. For more information on this see Yuri Pines quoted above.

[27] See *The Book of Lord Shang*, The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2006, p. 7.

[28] In the legalist conception of state, the only legitimate state is that which takes care of the needs of the largest masses of people, especially the farming population. Viewed from this angle, the legalist insistence on strengthening the state becomes a much more moral and a lot less cynical point of departure than most people are willing to give legalists credit for.

customs and traditions, but only concern yourself with solving the contradiction at hand. Likewise, if you can benefit people, you need not adhere to rites - this is a direct attack on the Confucian insistence of following the rites set out in the *Book of Rites* 《禮記》. A similar thought is expressed not long after, when in this supposed debate Shang Yang states: 故知者作法，而愚者制焉。賢者更禮，而不肖者拘焉。拘禮之人不足與言事，制法之人不足與論變 or

> *Therefore, a wise man creates laws, but a foolish man is controlled by them; a man of talent reforms rites, but a worthless man is enslaved by them. With a man who is enslaved by rites, it is not worth while to speak about matters; with a man who is controlled by laws, it is not worthwhile to discuss reform*.[29]

Again, we see a tireless pragmatism here: both rites and laws can be reformed as the times need and anyone who is confined by either laws or rites is not even worthy of discussion. Again, we see how the problem presented to us and its possible solutions is what is important and not sacred rites or unmovable laws, not even any sort of joy derived from possessing knowledge. This is exactly why the Book of Lord Shang ultimately states in this chapter: 法者所以愛民也 or "*Law is the expression of taking care of the people*". Whatever the sage or wise man does, he so does to benefit the people through the practice and implementation of his knowledge in whatever field the problem necessitates.

Due to constraints of length we cannot analyze other classics of Legalism like the *Hanfeizi* 《韓非子》 here, no matter how much they would improve this small text, but in that book it is a recurring theme that those wise men who acquire knowledge and hide away from the world in caves and ravines for spiritual practice selfishly keeping their knowledge to themselves are one of the so-called "five vermin" 五蠹 of the state: completely useless, selfish and loathsome people, as well as the author(s) outright saying that 忘民不可謂仁義 or "*He who does not take note of the [conditions of the] people cannot be called benevolent and righteous."*[30] We can however mention a point made in the book with regards to problems of applying practical knowledge into practice. In the *Hanfeizi* there is an entire chapter usually translated as *Solitary indignation*, the original title being 《孤憤》. The entire chapter deals with people who have amassed knowledge, but instead of striving to apply that knowledge to better their surroundings, they set up in caves, forests, secluded hermit spots and have nothing but cynical contempt for the world. The very first lines of the chapter go as follows:

[29] See *The Book of Lord Shang*, The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2006, p. 11.
[30] See: *Hanfeizi*, The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2018, p. 1511.

> "Men well versed in principles of tact are always far seeing and clearly observing. For, if not clearly observing, they cannot discern selfishness. Men able to uphold the law are always decisive and straightforward. For, if not straightforward, they cannot correct crookedness."[31]

In the above context of opposing "sages" that having amassed knowledge seclude themselves in caves and forests cynically attacking the world while refusing to work to change it, what we see here again is that seeing far and observing clearly, as well as being decisive and straightforward, is useful only insofar it is put into practice. These men well versed in tact are not so for the sake of being well versed in tact, but so that they can discern - and combat - selfishness, and they are not decisive and straightforward for the sake of being so and so, but so that they can correct crookedness. This applies even to "esoteric" schools like Daoism too, where the arguably not too practical or pragmatic knowledge pertaining to "always being in tune with nature" is not learned for merely the sake of being in tune with nature, considering just how vague and esoteric this might sound on first thought, but much rather because that knowledge helps one determine the place of everything and everyone, including oneself, in the world which knowledge then leads to social harmony.[32] In the classical forms of Chinese thought, especially in the pre-Qin period, meaning up to the 2nd century BCE, this is such an overriding feature that it dwarfs all others, but heavily influences all further schools of thought as well.[33] It is so prevalent that up to this day exists a chengyu type of Chinese proverb that is based on the title and essence of the chapter mentioned above from the *Hanfeizi*: 憤世嫉俗, meaning "to be cynical and detest the world and its ways, but refuse to engage in making it better."[34] Whether abstract and esoteric or concrete and pragmatic, all forms of knowledge ought to be put to not merely practice, but the practice of making the world better for those who inhabit it. My point here being that all throughout classical Chinese thought, but especially in legalism, knowledge for its own sake is viewed as detestable cynicism and escapism even by the most "esoteric" of schools of thought.

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[31] Original text is the following: 知術之士，必遠見而明察，不明察，不能燭私；能法之士，必強毅而勁直，不勁直，不能矯奸。See: *Hanfeizi*, The Commercial Press, Beijing, 2018, p. 1998.

[32] For this see *Zhuangzi*, Hunan People's Publishing House, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 1999, specifically p. 550. For further clarification on this, see Terry F. Kleeman's book referenced above.

[33] For a heavily resourced compendium on this, see Wing Tsit-Chan: *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, NJ, 1963 as well as Xiao Jiefu and Li Jinquan: *An Outline History of Chinese Philosophy I & II,* Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2008.

[34] An interesting point here on the further life of this thought is that even today a cynic or a misanthrope in Chinese is often called a 憤世嫉俗者, one who cynically detests the world and its customs, but refuses to engage in improving either.

Conclusion

Although this essay is nowhere near comprehensive with regards to its topic, I aimed to show two things: 1.) in classical Chinese thought acquiring of knowledge is always hinged upon its eventual and inevitable implementation into practice with the moral aim of benefiting society or the entire world at large and 2.) that classical Chinese thought is not pre-philosophical, but post-philosophical where thought and practice are inseparably linked going as far as seeing the two as one. What I presented here is but a mere glimpse of this immense topic that cuts through Chinese intellectual thought like a sharp sword from its earliest days to its newest contemporary developments[35].

This is also the reason I claim on the other hand that Karl Marx's dictum that hitherto we have merely analyzed the world, but the point is to change it, wasn't anything novel in China when Marxist works were first translated into Chinese. Yuk Hui's demonstration of cosmotechnics and the points I raised here, as well as innumerable ones that didn't have place in this essay, irrefutably prove this point: the main thrust of Chinese thought from antiquity to today always ever was to change the world to benefit those that are inhabiting the world. This can most prominently be seen in Legalism where no sacred rite, no man-made law, no custom, no tradition is deterrent enough in the face of wanting to benefit the largest masses of people. This was the aim with which Shang Yang destroyed old customs of privilege of the aristocracy in the 4th century BCE thereby giving land to the peasantry and using law to suppress the merchant class, the same reason Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 advocated state monopoly on the production of salt, iron and wine[36] during the 1st century BCE, and likewise the same reason for the politico-economic reforms of Wang Anshi in the 11th century for dispossessing the aristocracy, abolishing the corvée and creating state institutions for supervising economic life and controlling large magnates.[37] In all of these instances we see that knowledge is never truly a goal in itself, but mainly a tool for a larger goal beyond possessing knowledge.

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[35] Some contemporary thinkers further clarifying this point are: Liang Qichao in *History of Chinese political thought* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, NY, 1930), Hu Jichuang in *A concise history of Chinese economic thought* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2009), Shen Fuwei in *Cultural flow between China and the outside world throughout history* (Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2009), Feng Youlan in *A short history of Chinese philosophy* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2015), Jin Yuelin in *Dao, Nature and Man* (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Beijing, 2019), as well as for instance the Mainland New Confucianism movement spearheaded by Jiang Qing in *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China's ancient past can shape its political future* (Princeton University Press, Princeton China, Beijing, 2012) along with the aforementioned Yuk Hui.

[36] See: *Discourse on Salt and Iron: a debate on state control of commerce and industry in ancient China*, University of California, Oakland, 1931.

[37] For a richly detailed description of all these and many other interesting aspects of Chinese economic thought, see Hu Jichuang: *A concise history of Chinese economic thought*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2009.

That larger goal is always benefiting the people in the most mundane and concrete sense, without flowery words, without excessive theories that only the wisest of men may comprehend, without moral grandstanding that only the most saintly may be able to reach. In this conception of knowledge joy does not come merely from knowing, but from applying your knowledge for the betterment of the lives of those around you. This leads as far as the last imperial dynasty of China, the Qing, during which a certain official, poet and calligrapher by the name of Zheng Xie 鄭燮 penned the following lines:

> When I hear the rustles of bamboo leaves outside my study,
> I feel it is the wails of hungry people.
> For petty county officials like us,
> Every concern for the people weighs in our hearts.[38]

There is no era of Chinese history where this argument would be missing and likewise no shortage of officials, thinkers (and doers), sages putting their knowledge into practice to ameliorate the hungry people wailing on the streets. Some of the most livid descriptions throughout both Chinese history and literature are concerned with such issues. One aspect of this is the aforementioned Wang Yangming's dictum that 知行合一 "knowing and doing as one", while another aspect is Fan Zhongyan holding the view that the ideal scholar-official is thus: 先天下之憂而憂，後天下之樂而樂 or "*They are the first to worry on the woes of all under Heaven, yet the last ones to enjoy its benefits*".

From the farthest removed antiquity to contemporary days, Chinese thought aimed at changing the world for the benefit of those who inhabit it, rather than just analyzing and understanding the world. I think this is an extremely admirable aim to have for an entire philosophical system even with its myriad schools and their internal and external contradictions. This I think warrants a much deeper and much more serious engagement with Chinese thought than most people and especially most academics are willing to do. Sinologist and philosopher Bryan W. Van Norden already laid the foundations for such an inquiry in his book *Taking back philosophy*[39] enumerating reason after reason why it is extremely limiting to philosophical thought that in most western educational systems "philosophy" consists merely of the western canon and nothing beyond. There is an entire world of philosophy beyond the western canon, and it would be high time familiarizing ourselves wasn't limited to individual projects, but rather systematic institution wide engagement with the outside world.

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[38] The original poem goes as such: 衙齋臥聽蕭蕭竹，疑是民間疾苦聲。些小吾曹州縣吏，一枝一葉總關情。Translation by Foreign Languages Press as quoted by Xi Jinping in his speech titled *Be a Good County Party Secretary*, in: *Governance of China II*, Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, 2017, p. 153.

[39] Bryan W. van Norden: *Taking back philosophy: a Multicultural Manifesto for Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, NY, 2017.

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