Although Chinese philosophical thought is as old as Western philosophy (both first emerged in the sixth century BCE), Chinese thought was not widely recognized as a kind of “philosophy” until 1920, when Chinese intellectuals, such as Hu Shih, in their efforts to modernize, began to see significant similarities between some ancient Chinese thought and Western philosophy. Still, in earlier centuries, evidence reveals that Chinese thinking had caught the attention of some writers, several of whom referred to it as “philosophy.” For example, in 1687, in a book written by Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries who wanted to convert the Chinese to Christianity, the Chinese thinker Kongzi (Kung Tzu) was said to be a “philosopher.” In this book, for the first time, Kongzi’s name was latinized as Confucius. Shortly thereafter, Mengzi (Meng Tzu; fourth century BCE), latinized as Mencius, was similarly designated by the Jesuits as a “philosopher.”

But what is the Chinese word that these Jesuits translated as “philosopher”? In Chinese, as we’ve seen, Confucius’s and Mencius’s names are pronounced Kongzi (or Kung Tzu) and Mengzi (or Meng Tzu). Of course, these are phonetic spellings in our own alphabet, not in the characters of the Chinese alphabet. The Chinese word zi (or tzu) means something like “master,” so that Kongzi (Kung Tzu) is “Master Kong” and Mengzi (Meng Tzu) is “Master Meng.” By the first century CE, the Chinese also used the word jia (chia), which literally means “house,” to refer to different schools of thought. Thus there was the ru jia, or ju chia (the Confucianists), the Mo jia (Mo chia) (the Moists, followers of Mo Ti, or Mozi [Mo Tzu]), the dao jia (tao chia) (the Daoist, or Taoist, thinkers), the ming jia (ming chia) (literally “the school of names,” often referred to in English as the Logicians), and so on. English-speaking scholars who can read the texts of these Chinese scholars say that, although the concepts in them are not exactly like any body of thought in the West, they most closely resemble what we call “philosophy.”
How have the Chinese translated the Western term “philosophy”? You might think that they would translate the word as jia (chia), and translate “philosopher” as zi (tzu). But it isn’t as simple as that. At first, the Chinese did not recognize any similarity between European philosophy and their own ancient thought systems. But eventually, as East-West relations grew more complex, the Chinese began to identify words in their language that seemed to capture somewhat corresponding concepts in the English language.

It all started in the 1850s, when Europeans, mainly the British and French, began to exert some influence within China through economic exploitation. At about the same time, the American commodore Matthew Perry forced Japan (by threat of military superiority) to open its doors to Western trade and influence. Worried about being colonized as India had been and as China seemed on the verge of becoming, the Japanese responded by learning as much as they could about Western science and technology. They set up Western-style universities, at first hiring American and European professors but gradually training their own Japanese professors. During this period, they had to find a way to translate the names of all the Western sciences—physics, chemistry, engineering, philosophy, zoology, etc.—into their own language.

Because the Japanese script uses about 2,000 Chinese characters (kanji), the Japanese employed these characters to translate the European words for these Western sciences or disciplines. Accordingly, they selected a pair of Chinese characters to mean “philosophy.” Although the Chinese and Japanese pronounced these same words very differently, the Chinese adopted the Japanese convention for translating “philosophy.” Around 1900, both the Japanese and Chinese used the same written words to translate “philosophy.” The Japanese, though, pronounced the word “tetsugaku”; the Chinese, “zhushway.”

Around 1920, the Chinese decided that some of their own traditional writing (Confucianism, Taoism, Moism, Ming Jia [Chia]) should also be called “zhushway,” as well as some Indian texts. They thus soon identified three major philosophical traditions—Chinese, Indian, and Western. Today, many philosophers agree that China, India, and Greece (the birthplace of Western civilization) are indeed the three great, original centers of philosophy in the world. All three regions developed philosophy at approximately the same time (roughly 600 BCE), though, as far as we know, they did so quite independently of one another.
Further, all three philosophies arose as critical reflections on these regions’ own cultural traditions. From these centers of origin, philosophy then spread to other cultures. Greek philosophy, for example, was adopted and modified first by the Romans and then by the Arabs, Europeans, North and South Americans, Australians, and so on. Chinese philosophy began to influence the Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese. And Indian philosophy was embraced by the Tibetans, Burmese, Cambodians, and Balinese.

Like Western philosophy, Chinese philosophy has a creative, formative, “ancient” period (500 BCE–200 AD). During these years, virtually all of the original ideas were conceived. It also has a consolidating, synthesizing, “scholastic” period (500–1500). During this era (known as the “medieval” period), the original ideas were criticized, refined, combined, organized, and made consistent. They were also integrated with a newly emerging religion, Buddhism, which was introduced from India and had been unknown by the Chinese in the ancient period. (This phenomenon parallels the introduction of Christianity into Western thought in the fifth century.)

Unlike with Western philosophy, however, Chinese philosophy has had no “modern” period. “Modern philosophy” is a concept developed by Westerners in response to the rise in Europe of modern science, the Industrial Revolution, and the emergence of modern capitalist, democratic nation-states. Together, these phenomena signal a kind of historical mega-shift that never occurred in China. The nearest equivalent to “modern philosophy” in China is that country’s reaction to Western thought from the seventeenth century to the present.

Yet the ancient period in Chinese philosophy was extremely fertile. Individual philosophers established many different schools of thought—the Confucianists, the Moists, the Logicians, the Taoists, the Legalists—all arguing with one another. During the “medieval,” or “scholastic” period, the pendulum swung between Confucianism and Taoism-Buddhism. Confucianism (as an official part of China’s bureaucracy) tended to predominate during periods of political unity (the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties), while Taoism-Buddhism gained power during the intervening periods of political disunity (when scholars turned from the frustrations of politics to a life of private, inner contemplation).

As you read the selections below, ask yourself whether you think the Chinese classics ought to be interpreted as a kind of philosophy. How similar and different are they from Indian and Western thought? Or, is this body of
writings something else entirely? If so, what might be the ramifications of treating Chinese thought as a kind of “philosophy”?

**Suggested Further Reading**


Chuang Tzu (see Zhuangzi).


Lao Tzu (see Laozi).


