

BOOK REVIEW

A Panoramic History of Traditional Chinese Ethics

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Yi-Ting Zhu. *A Panoramic History of Traditional Chinese Ethics*. Springer, 2021, xxxiv+337 pp. ISBN: 978-9811612510

Abstract: Is there a period in the history of ethical thought that most vividly captures humanity's perception of morality? Can traditional ethical concepts provide meaningful insights into today's economic, religious and political challenges? Yi-Ting Zhu addresses these profound questions in *A Panoramic History of Traditional Chinese Ethics*. This work explores the historical narratives preserved in digital archives, reflecting the economic, socio-political and religious conditions of ancient China. Spanning from the West Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1616–1912), the book offers a comprehensive study of traditional Chinese ethics. Originally written in Chinese, this translated work consists of seven chapters, including an introduction, a brief chronology of Chinese history and a postscript. Beyond examining the development of Chinese ethical thought, the book also draws comparisons between Chinese and Western ethical traditions. Yi-Ting Zhu examines Chinese ethics through sociological and ideological frameworks, tracing its historical significance in contemporary discourse.

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Generally, ethical thought has often been confined to historical contexts. However, Chinese history stands out for its rich tradition of ethical thinking, which has been deeply valued in traditional Chinese culture (p. xi). Yi-Ting Zhu's methodological approach extends beyond historical interpretations to examine the practical and philosophical dimensions of ethical dilemmas. Notably, the digitization of these ethical traditions contributes to enhancing human conditions by making them accessible and relevant to contemporary discourse.

The primary goal of this historical study is twofold: first, to investigate the theoretical disputes and intellectual struggles among various schools of thought across different eras; and second, to analyze their ethical systems to uncover foundational ideas and key distinctions. The book also delves into the social and ideological origins of ethical concepts across different periods, tracing their evolution and examining the progression of ethical issues in various historical stages. This approach seeks to identify the logical relationships and developmental patterns among competing schools of thought (p. xiii). In essence, the study explores the trajectory of Chinese ethical thought, where diverse schools of philosophy contended to illuminate China's political, economic, and social realities (p. xvii). The book systematically examines the evolution of these ideas across different historical periods. By digitizing these traditions, the author aims to present both the strengths and limitations of Chinese traditional ethics from a realistic and practical perspective (p. xxx).

The first chapter examines the origins of traditional ethics by exploring the ethical thought of the West Zhou period (西周, 1046–771 BC), which emerged during the era of slavery. Preceding this, during the Xia Dynasty (夏, 2070–1600 BC), there were no formal written records of ethical thought, apart from a few ancient

anecdotes (p. 2). This chapter sets the stage for understanding the 'patriarchal hierarchical pyramid of sovereignty' (p. 7) characteristic of the West Zhou dynasty. This period was marked by a unified ideological system integrating politics, religion, and morality. Zhu argues that one of the most significant achievements of this era was the Zhou people's recognition of the patriarchal system's necessity, further developing ethical thought inherited from Shang's concept of 'Heavenly Destiny.' This notion emphasized 'nurturing virtues and respecting virtues' (pp. 15-16). The Zhou people not only acknowledged the value of morality but also embraced the idea of being rewarded for virtuous actions, positioning themselves as active agents of societal reform.

Chapters two and three trace the evolution of Chinese ethical thought from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods through the Han Dynasty and into the Wei-Jin period. The second chapter examines the emergence of four influential schools of thought—Confucianism, Mohism, Daoism, and Legalism—during China's transition from a slave to a feudal system. Confucianism emphasized "benevolence" and hierarchical care to uphold the patriarchal clan system, while Mohism advocated 'universal love' and utilitarian ethics. Daoism introduced 'nonaction' (wu wei 无为), favoring a naturalistic and human-centered approach, and Legalism proposed an amoral framework, prioritizing the rule of law for societal organization (pp. 25-27). These schools profoundly shaped Chinese ethical and sociopolitical institutions. The third chapter shifts focus to the Han Dynasty, where Daoist "non-action" was rejected, and Confucianism became the state ideology, promoting social cohesion during the Western Han (p. 192). However, the Wei-Jin period challenged these Confucian ideals, marking a turning point in the development of Chinese ethical thought.

Chapters four to six trace the evolution and transformation of Chinese ethical thought during key historical periods. Chapter four examines how unchecked Confucianism in the Wei-Jin

period led to various corrupt practices in the society, prompting scholars to integrate Daoist metaphysical ideas into a reimagined Confucian ethics (pp. 213–14). Chapter five explores the influence of Buddhism during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–581 AD) and the Sui and Tang periods (581–907 AD), introducing debates on "ethical secularism vs. religious transcendentalism" and "human Dao vs. heavenly Dao," which added complexity and diversity to Chinese ethical thought (p. 232). Chapter six delves into the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), highlighting a rationalist turn in ethical philosophy.

The seventh chapter highlights key philosophical developments focusing on influential thinkers like Wang Yangming and Huang Zongxi. Wang Yangming argued that 'no principle is beyond the heart, and nothing is beyond the heart' (p. 289), advocating for equality between genders, social classes and power dynamics while critiquing the self-serving adoption of Confucianism (pp. 292–98). His ideas challenged orthodox Confucian values by emphasizing the conflict between 'heavenly principle' and 'human desires.' During the Qing invasion of the Ming Dynasty, Huang Zongxi's assertion that 'the people are the master, the monarch the servant' (p. 298) became emblematic of a Chinese Enlightenment, encouraging challenges to sociological and ideological norms.

The postscript summarizes the book's objective and the ethical thoughts it explores, describing it as a "panoramic window to showcase Chinese intellectual and spiritual legacy" (p. 327). The study, thus, highlights the progression of ethical thought in ancient China and its potential relevance to contemporary issues. Zhu's meticulous examination of the historical evolution of Chinese ethical thinking from broader sociological and ideological perspectives makes the work particularly insightful. This book is indeed invaluable for those interested in Chinese ethics and policy-making, with implications for applying these principles to modern challenges, including in the digital age.