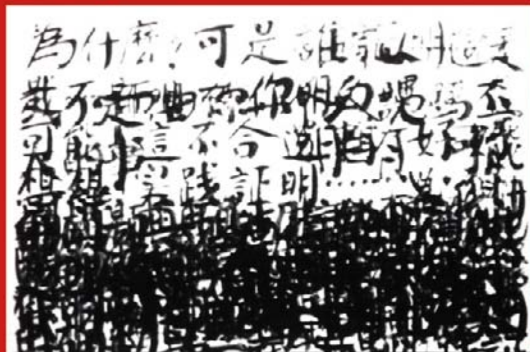
THE SIREN AND THE SAGE

Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China



STEVEN SHANKMAN & STEPHEN DURRANT

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Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant

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IN MEMORIAM
MARSHALL AND EMILY WELLS

Filial Piety

I

Odysseus loved his father, it is true,
But when he saw him after twenty years,
Did he embrace him, giving him his due
Of filial affection, shedding tears
Of pity for the old man's ceaseless grieving,
Soothing a father's pangs for a son's leaving?

II

He pondered tender thoughts but in the end
Chose to conceal himself so as to observe,
Coolly detached, Laertes' grief and bend
A son's compassion to the explorer's nerve.
So curious Odysseus put his men
At fatal risk to see the Cyclops' den.

III

Child of Odysseus, aching to explore
Distant locales beyond the cozy West,
I am poised to leave for China. But what for?
To ensure that old Laertes gets no rest?
Confucius says you must not travel far
From parents but remain near where they are.

IV

Reluctantly, because Laertes ails,
I choose to stay. The exotic names now sting,
Ringing of thrills just vanished. Not one fails
To evoke regret: Baotou; Hohhot; Beijing;
Shangdu, the summer palace of great Khan;
Xian; Taroko Gorge; Hualien; Yinchuan.

V

Odysseus crossed the seas. Although I feel
His fabled urge to hear the Sirens' song,
When fathers ail I heed the tough appeal
Of sage Confucius saying sons belong
At home with family, that one must be
Princely, observing filial piety.

Steven Shankman

Introduction

Preamble

In today's global village, we are constantly aware of what is going on in remote regions of the world, even if we are frustrated at not being able to resolve crises that we view on our television sets and can instantaneously discuss with others, sometimes thousands of miles away, on our telephones or computer screens. This was not, of course, the rule in the history of civilizations. In antiquity, for example, impressive civilizations existed and produced great artists and thinkers who had little or no awareness that other artists and thinkers, thousands of miles away, were at that very moment producing equally great works of poetry and philosophy. Such is the relation of ancient Chinese to ancient Greek culture.

Seemingly unaware of each other's presence, the cultures of ancient China and ancient Greece stand as two major influences on the course of world civilization. The texts and cultural values of classical China spread throughout East Asia and became the basis of learning in such countries as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Even today, some scholars speak of a "Confucian East Asia" and attribute the startling rise of Pacific Rim economic power to a Chinese style.[1] Likewise, Greek civilization is credited with creating many of the intellectual paradigms of the West. Modern philosophy, science, and technology, many argue, occur at the end of the track first laid down in ancient Athens. Both of these cultures are products of what Karl Jaspers calls the "Axial Age,"[2] a time that extends from approximately 800 to 200 BCE when creative thinkers seem "everywhere to have sprung up amid the variety and instability of small competing states."[3]

We are intrigued by evidence that ancient China and ancient Greece may have actually been aware of each other's presence, even though that knowledge was presumably indirect and mediated by nomadic peoples in Central Asia. Quite recently, for example, Chinese silks were found in a fifth-century BCE Athenian grave, a startling discovery that argues for the existence of connections between the West and the Far East several centuries before the known existence of the Silk Routes.[4] Certainly Indo-European peoples were in close contact with the Chinese from as early as the second millennium BCE and may have acted as a bridge between East and West.[5] If comparative work on ancient Chinese and Greek literature were limited to such historically demonstrable incidents of interconnectedness, however, then comparatists would have closed up shop long ago. Perhaps the essence of at least one central meaning of "comparative literature" is contained in Aristotle's observation that it is the mark of a naturally lively mind to create metaphors and thereby to see connections between things (*Poetics* 1459a), sometimes between things that on the surface might appear quite disparate and unrelated. To the question, "Why compare Greece and China?" we would reply, "How is it possible *not* to compare them?" In our increasingly multicultural world, if we are to avoid isolationism and the Balkanization of humanity into discrete cultural entities, it seems to us that we must all be comparatists.

The ancient Chinese and Greek fields offer a rich and even representative terrain in this regard. In what sense "representative"? Let us briefly consider the related matters of language and script. Chinese is the oldest attested written language of the Sino-Tibetan language family and is spoken today by more people than any of the world's languages. Classical Greek is one of the oldest written languages of Indo-European, the language family with the most native speakers. In fact, speakers of the Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European language groups together account for about three-quarters of the world's population.

The ancient Greek and Chinese languages work in very different ways. Classical Chinese, the literary language of China in the period from roughly 500 to 100 BCE, is primarily monosyllabic;[6] the word most often corresponds to a single syllable, which in turn is written by a single Chinese character. Because classical Chinese, like most forms of modern Chinese, is uninflected, there is no way to determine what we often call "parts of speech" from the form of the word itself. Instead, linguistic function depends upon word order or occasional grammatical particles. Ancient Greek, in contrast, is a highly inflected language that fashions words, through extensive verbal morphology, into complex patterns of relationships. This linguistic distinction, stated all too simply here,

parallels a whole array of differences that can be traced in early literature (the Greek epic and the Chinese lyric), history (Greek history as unified story and Chinese history as a "fragmented" presentation), and philosophy (Greek tendency to systematize and Chinese emphasis upon situational response).[7]

The written form of these two languages also stands in sharp contrast. Ancient Greek is written with an alphabet that derives from the early Phoenician script and probably appeared, at the latest, by the tenth century BCE. Some have gone so far as to argue that "the decisive step towards acquiring individuality is not writing as such, but alphabetic writing ... [i.e.] the principle of representing the individual sounds which are relevant in a language."[8] Chinese writing, as is well known, is perhaps the most striking, and certainly the most tenacious, system of nonalphabetic writing in world history. The origin of Chinese script is a subject of dispute, but it is clearly attested as a fully developed system in the oracle-bone script of the thirteenth century BCE. Chinese graphs presumably had a pictographic origin, but, by the time of the oracle bones, most had become stylized in ways that obscured their pictographic or ideographic origins. Phonetic principles were used extensively as the script developed, and were fundamental to the elaboration of a full-fledged writing system.

It is not our intention here to become embroiled in the issue of whether or not reading Chinese involves a fundamentally different psychology than reading Greek or any other alphabetic script. What is important for us is that the Chinese themselves have traditionally seen a relationship between their script and the natural world that the script represents and in which it was often felt to participate. Xu Shen (30?–124?), the author of the first etymological dictionary of Chinese characters, says that the first steps toward writing were taken when the mythological emperor Bao Xi (= Fu Xi, traditional dates *c.* 2800 BCE) "lifted his head up and observed the images in the sky; bowed his head down and saw the formations of the earth; and then looked out at the patterns on birds and beasts and the veins of the earth." Later, Xu Shen goes on to say, the Yellow Emperor's wise minister Cang Jie (traditional dates *c.* 2500 BCE) invented written characters when he "saw the tracks of birds and beasts and understood that one can perceive differences in their distinctive patterns."[9]

This notion of the natural origins of Chinese, whether ultimately right or wrong, is reinforced by the strong emphasis in China upon calligraphic art and the link between the strokes of the written text and those of the artist's brush that depict bamboo, flowers, mountains, and other aspects of the natural world. Surely, it is more difficult to break the link, which some would call arbitrary, between the written word and

the world it represents in a script like Chinese than in Greek, where the units of the script represent units of sound and nothing more. With Chinese writing there is, at the least, a tenacious *illusion* of direct and natural participation in the world of those things and ideas writing is meant to depict.

Previous comparative studies of ancient Greece and China

A considerable body of scholarship comparing ancient Greece and ancient China now exists. Despite occasional attacks upon broadly comparatist endeavors and upon the allegedly simplistic ways in which they have sometimes proceeded, the numbers of such comparative studies are increasing and are yielding valuable results. One might argue that the work of Western sinology, which has primarily been conducted in languages profoundly influenced by the very vocabulary and categories of the Greeks, is innately comparative and has sometimes labored under an anxiety generated by Greek literature and philosophy. Certainly many of the most influential works of sinological study frequently mention classical Greece and regard it as a crucial and perhaps even dominant point of reference for all educated Western readers. The second volume of Joseph Needham's multivolumed *Science and Civilisation in China,* which is surely one of the most valuable sinological works of the century, is a case in point.[10] Needham makes hundreds of references to Greek thought in this text, including over forty references to Aristotle alone. Benjamin Schwartz's masterful study of traditional Chinese philosophy, *The World of Thought in Ancient China,*[11] is a more recent example. Ancient Greek philosophy is mentioned in his work more than thirty times, even though Schwartz's subject, as the title indicates, is ancient China.

Many native Chinese scholars, sometimes fresh from graduate study in the West, often use Greek philosophy as a touchstone for their own tradition and even may be said to have labored under an anxiety induced by the Greek model. Hu Shi's *The Development of the Logical Method in Ancient China* is a splendid example.[12] Hu's work, which was first submitted as a dissertation at Columbia University in 1917, is filled with a spirit of advocacy, which was not unusual among Chinese intellectuals of his generation. Hu wished to resuscitate "logical methods" that he believed existed in ancient China but had been fettered by the dominance of a moralistic Confucian tradition. His purpose was "to make my own people see that these methods of the West are not totally alien to the Chinese mind" (p. 9). The predominance of logic is, to him, the most admirable characteristic of the West. Comparative studies, such as his own implicitly is, should, he

believes, attempt to uncover those aspects of the Chinese tradition that have the potential of directing China toward Western-style science and technology. Even a scholar like Kung-chuan Hsiao, who is much less inclined to refer to Greek comparisons or to advocate emulating Western ideas, cannot help but conjecture, in the last words of a long and highly useful volume, that if Greek philosophy or Roman law rather than Buddhism had been introduced into China during the third century BCE, "one can at least safely conclude that political thought and institutions would have displayed a more positive content, and more rapid change, or advance."[13]

Specialists in Western philosophy and classical Greece largely ignore China. There have been noteworthy exceptions, including two we shall note briefly here: F. S. C. Northrop and G. E. R. Lloyd. Northrop is a philosopher who published a book in 1946 entitled *The Meeting of East and West: An Inquiry into World Understanding*.[14] In this book, the author establishes a sweeping contrast between a Western knowledge that is expressed in "logically developed, scientific and philosophical treatises" and an Eastern knowledge in which an individual concentrates "attention upon the immediately apprehended aesthetic continuum of which he is a part" (p. 318). Elsewhere, he explains that the former derives "concepts by postulation" and the latter "concepts by intuition."[15]

Such a sweeping comparison as that presented by Northrop comes perilously close to positing the existence of the very kinds of "mentalities" that the distinguished historian of Greek science G. E. R. Lloyd would like to "demystify." Lloyd's extraordinarily lucid and provocative study *Demystifying Mentalities*[16] is an attack upon the theory of distinct cultural mentalities such as Lévy-Bruhl's belief in a "primitive mentality" or James Frazier's notion of magic, religious, and scientific mentalities as the three progressive stages through which a civilization truly worthy of the name must ascend. Lloyd's criticisms of the idea of mentalities are convincing. He compares certain aspects of ancient Greek and ancient Chinese thought that may appear to represent essentially distinct mentalities. He contrasts "a Greek preoccupation with foundational questions and a readiness to countenance extreme or radical solutions" with Chinese "well-developed pragmatic tendencies, with a focus on practicalities, on what works or can be put to use" (p. 124). Lloyd then explains this contrast not by inferring the existence of an essential Hellenic and an essential Chinese mentality. He sees the contrast as deriving, instead, from concrete differences in the sociopolitical contexts of the two cultures. There is nothing in Warring States China, he notes, equivalent to the plurality of constitutions and political organizations of the Greek city-

states, circumstances that promoted intellectual competition. Moreover, in China philosophical argument seems always to have been articulated as an attempt to persuade an emperor, king, or duke, a situation that Lloyd believes inhibited certain types of argumentation. Lloyd's ideas on the distinctions in Greek and Chinese thought and their respective political contexts are extremely useful.

In a more recent book, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (1996), Lloyd continues his criticism of the tendency of some scholars to identify distinct Greek and Chinese mentalities, and he notes that his primary objection to such an approach is that "it provides not even the beginnings of an explanation, but at most a statement of what has to be explained."[17] What he believes comparatists must do is to seek out what *questions* each side of the comparison were actually trying to answer. Such examination, he attempts to demonstrate in this book, sometimes reveals that the Greeks and the Chinese were addressing entirely different problems and that apparent equivalences between the two often prove, when examined in this light, to be illusory.

In the past few years, a number of other important works have appeared in the area of Sino-Hellenic comparative studies. Most of these new works come primarily from the sinological community and they tend to focus on the allegedly distinctive features of Chinese culture, a culture which the authors of these books often view as the West's "other." We have benefited from many of these studies, which we frequently cite in our notes. Limitations of space will not permit us to discuss all of them here. Three recent comparative projects are, however, particularly relevant to *The Siren and the Sage* and we wish to acknowledge them now.

Perhaps the most sweeping comparative study currently under way is, like the present book, a collaborative project. The sinologist Roger T. Ames and the philosopher David L. Hall have coauthored three provocative books. The first of these, *Thinking Through Confucius*, is an exercise in rethinking Confucius (Hall and Ames might say "unthinking" Confucius) in the light of certain issues in contemporary Western philosophy. In their second and more sweeping work, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, Hall and Ames pursue a contrast between what they call "second problematic thinking," which can also be labeled "causal thinking," and "first problematic thinking," which they associate with "analogical or correlative thinking." Their book establishes a very strong contrast between a classical Western emphasis upon transcendence, order, and permanence and a Chinese preoccupation with pragmatism, vagueness, and change. At each stage of their compar-

ison, Hall and Ames acknowledge the presence of philosophical countertrends in each civilization, thus blunting the criticism that they have overessentialized the two sides of their comparison. Their third book, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*,[18] centers upon three topics – self, truth, and transcendence – that they believe "permit the most efficient advertisement of the barriers existing between Chinese and Western interlocutors."[19] While we reach certain conclusions similar to those of Hall and Ames and owe a debt to their research, our comparative work has a different focus. Our goal is to investigate equivalent figurations or symbolisms rather than to produce a sweeping set of contrasts between East and West.[20] We shall suggest certain patterns of similarity and difference that emerge from a close investigation of a select number of texts, texts that we mainly approach from a literary perspective.

Lisa Raphals's suggestive *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* is a comparative study that is, like ours, more strictly literary than that of Hall and Ames. Her work is, however, both more narrowly focused and more technical than *The Siren and the Sage*. Raphals's theme is "the provenance of metic intelligence"[21] in classical Greece and China, a topic she derives from the famous study of the French classicists Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant,[22] and whose fortunes she traces forward into such postclassical Chinese novels as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*c.* 1500) and *Journey to the West* (*c.* 1600). Our study, in contrast to that of Professor Raphals, is confined to the classical period of these two cultures: in Greece we end with Aristotle (384–322), in China with Sima Qian (145–86 BCE). While our themes and focus differ from hers, we nevertheless share Professor Raphals's belief that comparison, if it is to proceed at all, must first attempt to understand each intellectual tradition in its own terms.[23]

François Jullien, in several recent books, has attempted to do just this.[24] Rejecting "naive assimilation, according to which everything can be directly transposed from one culture to another,"[25] Jullien, it seems to us, tries to identify distinctive terms or tendencies of traditional Chinese culture that have rarely been discussed precisely because they are so thoroughly and naturally embedded in Chinese discourse. These features, such as a privileging of indirect expression or an emphasis upon the "deployment" or "situation" of a thing rather than its inherent quality, to give two examples, become for Jullien a wellspring from which to explain Chinese "difference" as well as a foundation upon which productive comparison with Western culture can be built. There is little doubt that his comparisons are driven by the Chinese side

of the equation, which he argues provides a perspective that enables us "to envisage our thought from without" (*pour envisager notre pensée au dehors*).[26] This has invited the criticism that Jullien establishes an "other" (i.e. China) without having first explicitly defined and clarified his principal point of reference (i.e. Greece and the West).[27] While Jullien argues persuasively and often brilliantly for the predominance, in Chinese thought, of obliqueness or indirectness, in contrast to what he sees as the straightforwardness of Western discourse, he is not insensitive to the occasional indirectness of the Western philosophical tradition, as he suggests in his remarks on Plato's seventh letter.[28] From our perspective, however, the contrast is not as stark as Jullien would have us believe. We shall argue, moreover, that Plato's texts are far more oblique and suggestive than conventional wisdom allows or than Jullien – even when seen in the light of his more nuanced reading of Plato – suggests.

Whether our presentation of the two sides of the Greece–China comparison is properly balanced remains to be seen. Certainly we agree that each of these traditions is enormously rich and complex. It seems to us that any comparative study will almost of necessity flatten and oversimplify one or the other (or both!) of these two great traditions. Perhaps this should not overly concern us. Progress in this difficult comparative endeavor will perhaps best come from a variety of approaches and studies. No one scholarly work can ever hope to say all that might be interestingly said in comparing the literary productions of two cultures as vast and diverse as those of ancient Greece and ancient China.

The sage

Sage (*sheng ren*) is a term that appears throughout ancient Chinese texts to designate the person of ideal wisdom and understanding. The first Chinese etymological dictionary, written in approximately 100 CE, associates sageness with the ability "to penetrate" or "to comprehend."[29] In one of the earliest occurrences of "sage" in a Chinese text, *The Book of Historical Documents* (*Shu jing*, *c*. 300 BCE), it is glossed as follows: "Sageness is to understand all things." This is a notion of the sage as possessor of knowledge in the sense of encyclopedic comprehensiveness, a meaning that can be found in Confucius (e.g. *Analects* 7.34), who with characteristic modesty wisely denies that he has achieved such lofty status: "How would I dare to claim either sageness [*sheng*] or humaneness [*ren*]?" In the *Dao de jing*, Laozi transforms the ideal of sageness from encyclopedic knowledge into the wisdom that would allow a person to participate in the oneness that is

the *dao*: "By embracing oneness [*bao yi*], the sage [*sheng ren*] acts on behalf of all under heaven" (22.7–8).[30]

We wish to equate the "knowledge" of our subtitle with the ideal of encyclopedic comprehensiveness. But what do we mean by the "wisdom" of the sage? Let us look closely at the first chapter of the *Dao de jing*:

> If a way can be spoken (or followed), it is not the constant way.
> If a name can be named, it is not the constant name.
> Nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
> Named is the mother of the ten thousand things.
> Therefore,
> constantly have no intention (*wu yu*) to observe its wonders;
> constantly have an intention (*you yu*) to observe its manifestations.
> These two come forth together but are differently named.
> Coming forth together they are called mystery.
> Mystery upon mystery,
> Gateway to many wonders.[31]

This passage has been more often translated, read, and commented upon in the West than any passage of ancient Chinese literature.

The *Dao de jing*, sometimes translated as "The Classic of the Way and Its Power," is a small book traditionally ascribed to an enigmatic figure named Laozi (*c.* sixth century BCE) or "the Old Master" but surely written several centuries after the time in which Laozi is said to have lived. The opening chapter quoted above functions as a sort of epitome of the work as a whole, as Laozi addresses both the inadequacy and the necessity of language. Names, which cut the world of thought and thing into discrete units – and are, moreover, subject to constant change – can never adequately articulate one's experience of unity and origin. We would argue that it is impossible to express, at least in any strictly referential or purely discursive fashion, such experiences of unity or origin. "Nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth": why is the beginning [*shi*] nameless? Could it be that it is nameless, in part, because the beginning of all things cannot be conceptualized and therefore cannot be named? What was there *before* the beginning of heaven and earth (*tian di*)?[32] Nothing? But isn't that nothing still something?[33] It appears that, when we name, we name things in a referential manner. We live in a world of "the ten thousand things" (*wan wu*) and naming is the "mother" (*mu*) of these things in the sense that naming brings them into conceptual existence, allowing us to differentiate one thing from another, to communicate, and to manipulate reality as we must if we are to survive. But naming, while necessary, can also cut us off from the very experiences that the