The OSCAR PUBLISHING Services
American Journal Of Social Sciences And Humanity Research

VOLUME Vol.06 Issue02 2026
PAGE NO. 119-124
DOI 10.37547/ajsshr/Volume06Issue02-26

Ethical Doctrines in The Major Schools and Intellectual Traditions of Chinese Natural Philosophy

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Received: 31 December 2025; **Accepted:** 23 January 2026; **Published:** 28 February 2026

Abstract: Ancient China was one of the earliest civilizations in which social and philosophical thought emerged and developed. Science and culture in China evolved in a distinctive and unique manner. By the middle of the second millennium BCE, a structured economic system had been established in the Yin (Shang) state. In the 12th century BCE, as a result of military conflicts, political authority transferred to the Zhou tribe, and their rule continued until the 3rd century BCE. During this period, religious and mythological worldviews predominated, providing distinctive explanations for the origin of the universe and natural phenomena, while also exerting a significant influence on the development of secular knowledge.

Keywords: Chinese mythology; Chinese philosophy; Yin–Yang; Five Elements (Wu Xing); Confucianism; Daoism; Mohism; Legalism.

Introduction: Ancient Chinese philosophy encompassed a diverse array of schools and intellectual currents. Prominent thinkers within these traditions—acknowledged as leading scholars of their era—sought to articulate philosophical principles while addressing practical issues concerning nature, society, and human life. Their approaches were guided by ethical ideals and social visions, aiming to harmonize human behavior with cosmic and societal order. The solutions proposed by different schools were not uniform, reflecting the boundless complexity of the universe, which cannot be fully captured by a single theoretical framework. This intellectual diversity underpinned the richness of Chinese philosophical discourse, allowing multiple perspectives to coexist and offering varied approaches to moral, social, and natural phenomena. Understanding this pluralism is essential for appreciating the development of ethical and cosmological thought in ancient China.

In Chinese mythology, the entire cosmos—including heaven, earth, and natural phenomena—is often personified and imbued with divine qualities, forming the environment in which human life unfolds. From this mythologized cosmos emerges a supreme principle that governs the existence and order of all things and events. This principle is typically represented as the Shangdi (Supreme Deity) or, in some contexts, as Tian (Heaven).

Ancient Chinese philosophy, as part of a conservative civilization, relied heavily on the culture of religious texts. Unlike in India, the pursuit of liberation or spiritual emancipation was not a central concern. Instead, Chinese thought emphasized practical and pragmatic approaches to life. Many Chinese philosophers came from modest socio-economic backgrounds and often worked within the administrative structures of the vast imperial bureaucracy. Numerous influential Chinese thinkers arose from this social and political environment, which shaped their philosophical perspectives and ethical reasoning.

Under the influence of widely respected and acknowledged sages, Chinese philosophical thought gradually took shape. Although the identities of many

of these early thinkers remain uncertain, they emerged from the spiritual and mythological milieu, freeing themselves from purely legendary narratives and developing some of the earliest cosmological and ethical conceptions. In their philosophical outlook, mythological and secular knowledge were closely intertwined, complementing one another. Chinese philosophy reached its flourishing period during the so-called "Warring States" era, which is recognized as the "Golden Age" of Chinese thought (6th–3rd centuries BCE). The principal philosophical currents that emerged during this period included Yin–Yang theory, the Five Elements (Wu Xing), Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, and Legalism.

In ancient China, the weakening of centralized state power led various branches of the central administration to establish philosophical schools, often to exert influence over local rulers. These emerging schools collectively came to be known as the "Shizya" (or "Zhixia"), a designation that reflected their specific social status within the broader society. The term Shizya literally translates as "house," highlighting the notion of a distinct intellectual "household" or lineage within the political and social framework of the time.

1. The Confucian school was founded by scholars, intellectual elites, and skilled artisans, with the primary aim of promoting and developing the ideas of Confucius. In this context, their practical activities were centered on the dissemination of the concept of benevolence (Ren), which constituted the core ethical principle of their teachings.

2. The Daoist school, founded by Laozi, was established by ascetics and scholars who embraced a cosmological and reflective approach to life. Many of its adherents originated from chronography institutions, where they compiled records and annals exploring themes such as success and failure, existence and destruction, joy and suffering, as well as antiquity and contemporaneity. Through the concepts of "purity and emptiness" and "diminishment and weakening," these thinkers developed what was regarded as the "royal art" of self-preservation, integrating philosophical inquiry with practical guidance for aligning human life with the Dao.

3. The "School of Darkness and Light" was established by scholars who emerged from astronomical institutions—observers of celestial phenomena such as the sun, moon, stars, and cosmic cycles, as well as temporal changes. These founders, who were both cosmologists and early scientists, sought to understand the fundamental principles governing the universe and the natural order, forming a school that integrated cosmological observation with philosophical inquiry.

4. Legalism was established by scholars who emerged from judicial institutions and sought to complement the traditional moral-based governance (Li) with formalized rewards, punishments, and codified laws. This school emphasized strict legal regulation as the foundation of social order, advocating that effective governance relies on clearly defined laws and administrative enforcement rather than solely on ethical or ritual propriety.

5. The "School of Names" was founded by scholars who emerged from ritual institutions, addressing the discrepancies between nominal designations and actual practices in ancient official positions and ceremonies. Their work focused on harmonizing names with realities, ensuring that ritual protocols and administrative titles corresponded appropriately to social and political functions.

6. The Mohist school was founded by scholars who emerged from temple custodians responsible for ritual observances and social order. Its principles emphasized frugality and the promotion of "universal love" (Ci Yan), advocating concern for all individuals (Xian) and respect for the valuable and capable (Min). The Mohist teachings rejected the notions of predetermined fate and enforced uniformity, encouraging ethical conduct and social responsibility guided by rational evaluation and merit.

7. The Vertical and Horizontal (Political Alliances) school was established by scholars originating from diplomatic institutions, whose practical work emphasized executing affairs based on directives rather than debate. These founders focused on applying strategic guidance in political negotiations and alliances, prioritizing pragmatic action over theoretical deliberation in governance and interstate relations.

8. The eclectic, encyclopedic, or "Free School" was established by advisors who synthesized ideas from Confucianism, Mohism, the School of Names, and Legalism. These scholars combined diverse philosophical doctrines to maintain social and political

order within the state, integrating ethical, logical, and legal principles to guide governance and administration effectively.

9. The Agrarian School was established by scholars emerging from institutions responsible for managing the eight major state affairs (Ba Zhen) in Xun's administrative system, as well as secondary offices overseeing food production and livestock management. These founders focused on agricultural administration, emphasizing practical governance and the efficient organization of farming and rural resources.

10.The "School of Minor Commentaries" was founded by lower-ranking officials who collected information on public sentiment based on street-level rumors, disorder, and social unrest. While these schools maintained distinct intellectual orientations within society, they gradually declined with the increasing dominance and institutionalization of Confucian teachings.

The sources documenting these ten philosophical schools can be traced in the encyclopedic works of the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE, such as Lüshi Chunqiu (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals) compiled by Lü Buwei, and the Huainanzi (The Master of Huainan). In the former (Book 2, Chapters 5–7), a list of "Ten Eminent Figures under Heaven" is provided:

- Laozi, exemplifying guidance for many;
- Confucius, extolling benevolence (Ren);
- Mozi, representing moderation;
- Guan Yin, celebrating purity;
- Lezi, honoring existence;
- Tian Pian, advocating equality;
- Yan Zhu, emphasizing self-interest and egoism;
- Sun Bin, symbolizing strength;
- Wan Byao, promoting ambition and initiative;
- Er Lian, exemplifying adherence and conformity.

These figures reflect the moral, ethical, and philosophical ideals recognized as guiding principles in early Chinese thought and demonstrate the integration of various schools within the broader intellectual and political landscape of the period. In the Huainanzi, the final synthesizing chapter (Chapter 21) presents ideas regarding the socio-historical conditions underlying the emergence of philosophical schools. These are outlined in the following sequence:

1. Confucianism;
2. Mohism;
3. Guanzi's teachings, which integrated Daoism with Legalism (4th–3rd centuries BCE);
4. The teachings of Yan-stzi, which harmonized Confucianism and Daoism and are notably expressed in Yan-stzi Chunqiu (Master Yan's Spring and Autumn Annals);
5. The doctrine of Vertical and Horizontal (Political Alliances);
4. Shen Buhai's teachings on "Punishments and Names" (Fa and Ming);
5. Shan Yan (Guan Sunyan, 4th century BCE) and his legalist doctrines;
6. Daoist-influenced teachings of Laozi and the Huainanzi.

At the beginning of this chapter, the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi are highlighted, while Chapter 2 presents Yan Zhu, who, along with Mozi, Shen Buhai, and Guan Sunyan, forms a quartet. Collectively, these form a structured set of ten (I Ven Ji), illustrating the interrelations between the philosophical schools. Notably, the characteristics of the Vertical and Horizontal (Political Alliances) school, as well as the historical origins of other philosophical traditions, are linked through a comprehensive framework that demonstrates their interconnectedness within the socio-political and intellectual history of early China.

Natural-philosophical ideas in ancient China were often applied as guidelines for organizing social life. The Shu Jing (Classic of History) discusses three moral virtues and their application in governance. The first virtue is Zheng (correctness), referring to the ability to act rightly and justly; the second is Qian (ability or competence); and the third is Rou (gentleness or flexibility). A central concern of this philosophical tradition was the relationship between Heaven and humanity, and the role of humans within the cosmos. According to legend, the Taiping Jing, authored by Yu-chi, was directly inspired by Heaven:

"Heaven is the great power of Yang; Earth is the great power of Yin. Humans occupy the central position in all things. Heaven constantly flows downward,

transmitting its vital principles to Earth. Earth receives this flow and transmits it upward. Both principles converge at the center, thereby positioning humans harmoniously in the middle."

Natural philosophers held that the harmony between Heaven and Earth is the source of life. However, within this framework, Heaven plays the leading role. The practice of revering Heaven and performing ritual obeisance emerged from this worldview. This cosmological and ethical perspective was widely applied throughout ancient Chinese philosophy, providing both a metaphysical foundation and practical guidance for human conduct and governance. The term "Han" originated as an ethnonym for the Chinese empire. During the formation of the centralized Han Empire, the Lüshi Chunqiu compiled by Lü Buwei and Ban Gu acquired canonical status within traditional scholarship. Over the course of Chinese history, this work continued to be studied and elaborated upon. Later developments, particularly by scholars such as Zhang Sicheng (1738–1801) and Zhang Binlin (1890–1936), were supported and systematized by Feng Youlan, who concluded that the six principal philosophical schools were not only shaped by different professions but also by diverse social backgrounds and lifestyles.

The longevity of these compilations provides significant insight into the ideological perspectives of the schools regarding society, offering a rich source for understanding the social and philosophical thought of the period.

According to the earliest philosophical teachings in ancient China, the cosmos, bounded by Heaven and Earth, operates according to the principles of Yin and Yang. The Yang principle is interpreted as an active force that penetrates the essence of things, while Yin represents a passive, observing principle associated with darkness. However, understanding Yin and Yang as mutually exclusive is erroneous, since their interaction produces a harmonious unity: forces combine, directional flows acquire specific patterns, and the relationships between Heaven and Earth are revealed.

The dynamic interplay of Yin and Yang constitutes a dialectical movement of unified change. The mutual interaction of phenomena ensures transformation and development. From this interaction, six categories arise: thunder, wind, fire, water, return, and tranquility. These categories were widely applied to address cosmological, terrestrial, and human-related issues, providing a conceptual framework for interpreting natural processes, ethical conduct, and social order.

The Yin–Yang School (Yin Yan Jia) was an ancient Chinese philosophical tradition specializing in natural-philosophical, cosmological, and numerological issues. Often referred to as the School of Dark (Yin) and Light (Yang), its adherents sought to interpret events solely from the perspective of natural forces, which is why it is commonly classified as a natural-philosophical school.

The principles of the Yin–Yang School formed the foundation of traditional Chinese spiritual culture and scientific thought. Calendars were developed based on astronomical calculations, and their accuracy was of critical importance not only for agricultural activities but also regarded as an expression of the "Heavenly Son and his counselors' benevolent care."

The study of celestial phenomena played a central role in ancient Chinese medicine, which integrated elements of cosmology, biorhythmology, and climatology. Later, the principles of the Yin–Yang School (Yin–Yang Jia in pinyin) were widely incorporated into Neo-Confucian thought and religious Daoism. The central concept of the Yin–Yang School is the universality of the dual forces of Yin and Yang, combined with the cyclical interactions of the Five Elements: Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, and Earth. The development of the entire cosmos was understood through this framework: "This art arises from the transformations of the Five Forces [Five Elements], and if extended to the furthest boundaries, there is nothing it cannot encompass."

These ideas provided a foundational framework for interpreting natural processes, human health, and cosmic order, demonstrating the integrative approach of early Chinese natural philosophy.

- Wood strengthens, Water ages, Fire is born, Metal becomes constrained, Earth dies.

- Fire strengthens, Wood ages, Earth is born, Water becomes constrained, Metal dies.

- Earth strengthens, Fire ages, Metal is born, Wood

becomes constrained, Water dies.

- Metal strengthens, Earth ages, Water is born, Fire becomes constrained, Wood dies.

- Water strengthens, Metal ages, Wood is born, Earth becomes constrained, Fire dies.

These sequences reflect the dynamic and cyclical interrelationships of the Five Elements (Wuxing), illustrating the processes of generation, transformation, and control that govern natural, cosmological, and philosophical phenomena in ancient Chinese thought. Each element alternately strengthens, ages, gives rise to, becomes constrained, or dies, demonstrating the continuous interplay of forces that underlies both the natural world and human affairs. The spatial, temporal, and other characteristics of phenomena and events were categorized into five groups, each associated with a specific element. In this way, the entire cosmos was conceived as a harmonious and interrelated system. If a disruption occurred within any of these groups, the balance of the entire mechanism of the universe would be disturbed.

More complex structures could also be established, which operated according to explicit guidelines and instructions. According to the principles established by the School of Darkness and Light, for every action there existed corresponding directives and commands, which were further aligned with the four seasons, eight fundamental points (or conditions), the trigrams, and approximately the twelve zodiacal signs. Over the course of a year, these observations and calculations culminated in a structured 24-year cycle.This framework illustrates how early Chinese natural-philosophical thought integrated cosmology, timekeeping, and ritualized guidance to maintain cosmic, social, and political order.

By the mid-1st millennium BCE, the concepts of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements had been developed within separate esoteric traditions. The emergence of the Yin–Yang School is generally dated to the 5th–3rd centuries BCE. According to Joseph Needham, references to this school appear in the works of ancient Chinese philosophical traditions, such as Mojia or Minjia. However, to date, no extended texts of this school have survived. Its ideas can only be reconstructed from fragments found in sources such as the Shi Ji (Records of the Grand Historian, the most comprehensive account), Zhou Yi (Book of Changes), Lüshi Chunqiu (Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals), and several other classical records.

The teachings of the school encompassed both "celestial" (astronomical) and "terrestrial" (logical and economic) aspects. Fragments of these doctrines can be found in early texts such as the I Ching, Guoyu, and Lüshi Chunqiu, illustrating the integration of cosmological principles with practical, worldly concerns in ancient Chinese thought.In the second half of the 1st millennium BCE, according to ancient textual evidence, the prominent representative of this school, Zou Yan, integrated the concept of Yin–Yang with the Five Elements doctrine, which he associated with moral virtues (referred to as the "Five Virtues"). Consequently, the cyclical nature of the Five Elements was understood to extend beyond natural phenomena to historical processes, providing a framework for interpreting the rise and fall of ruling dynasties.

Confucian philosopher Dong Zhongshu, who developed and systematized the religious, ontological–cosmological, and methodological foundations of Confucianism, was the first to present the concepts of Yin–Yang and the Five Elements as a unified doctrine encompassing all aspects of the cosmos. Later, the natural-philosophical ideas of the Yin–Yang School were incorporated into the Confucian School of Classics (Jing Xue), as well as Neo-Confucianism and religious–occult practices, continuing their influence in the work of Chinese diviners, astrologers, magicians, alchemists, and physicians.The main representative of the Yin–Yang School was Zou Yan. Other notable figures associated with this school include Tzu-Wei (historian and astronomer, 6th–5th centuries BCE), the semi-legendary Rongcheng-zi, and Zhiang Zang (3rd–2nd centuries BCE). Their contributions illustrate the integration of cosmological principles with ethical, political, and practical concerns in early Chinese thought.As noted, philosophical thought in ancient China was diverse and developed across different periods. Scholars and thinkers sought to investigate a wide range of issues and problems. The doctrine of Yin–Yang can be seen as both a continuation and an elaboration of preceding philosophical traditions, integrating earlier ideas into a more comprehensive framework.

Thus, ancient Chinese philosophy encompassed

multiple schools and streams of thought. Prominent intellectuals, recognized for their philosophical acumen, attempted to provide practical solutions to numerous problems concerning nature, society, and human life. These problems were approached based on their own social ideals. Naturally, the solutions were not uniform, since the universe is vast and boundless, and cannot be fully encompassed within a limited system of theoretical principles. The diversity of philosophical schools and streams reflects this complexity and illustrates the pluralistic character of early Chinese intellectual life.

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