
**THE TURN TOWARDS PHILOSOPHY IN THE EARLIEST
COSMOLOGIES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF SELECTED EXCAVATED WARRING STATES-PERIOD
MANUSCRIPTS AND PRE-SOCRATIC FRAGMENTS**

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ABSTRACT

Excavated texts from the fourth century BC bring new elements previously thought missing in the earliest Chinese thought. They develop cosmological theories comparable to those found in the pre-Socratic tradition, especially in processual thinkers such as the Milesians and Heraclitus. The article explores the resemblances, suggesting that the Eastern and Western thought may have not been so radically different at the beginning. On both sides, the texts attest to a new stage of intellectual independence of an individual, using strikingly similar patterns of explanation and means of expression.

Keywords: early Chinese thought; cosmology; metaphysics; excavated texts; pre-Socratics; Anaximander; Anaximenes; oneness; process philosophy

The excavated texts from the Warring States period have brought substantial new material to the ongoing debate on whether the earliest Chinese thought should be treated as philosophy in the sense established in the Western tradition. The earliest cosmologies, as well as the intense questioning of the structure and functioning of the universe, expressed in fourth-century-BC texts such as the *Tàiyī shēng shuǐ* 太一生水, *Héng xiān* 恆先, and *Fán wù liú xíng* 凡物流形, represent an important turn towards the intellectual independence of the individual: these works lay out cosmological dynamics for an individual to accept through intellectual understanding, and subsequently, this understanding can guide how individuals adapt their actions to the whole of the universe.

In ancient Greece, a similar turn took place with pre-Socratic thinkers, most notably the Milesians and Heraclitus, giving birth to the tradition of what we today regard as philosophy. If we try to do justice to pre-Socratic fragments and disentangle them from the heavy terminological burden of Aristotelian, Platonic, and Peripatetic interpretations, we discover striking similarities with the above-mentioned Chinese texts, both on the level of expression and concerns involved. Also, the comparative perspective shows how, on both sides, researchers deal with similar methodological challenges related to the textual linguistics of fragmented material.

Newly discovered cosmologies and the Chinese philosophical narrative

The Warring States-period texts excavated towards the end of the twentieth century brought new stimuli to the ongoing debate about the “philosophical relevance” of ancient Chinese thought. This debate, as has been pointed out,¹ is plagued by ideological and emotional arguments. The question of “philosophical relevance” easily becomes a question of the superiority of one history-of-thought narrative over another. As a result, Chinese scholars often try to forcibly adapt their interpretation of ancient Chinese texts to the framework of Western philosophical discourses. In this context, it might be useful to treat “philosophy” not as a highly worshipped value label but rather as the indication of a specific genre or type of questioning.

The recently discovered texts of the *Tàiyī shēng shuǐ* 太一生水 (TYSS), *Héng xiān* 恆先 (HX), and *Fán wù liú xíng* 凡物流形 (FWLX), dated roughly to the mid-fourth century BC, contain elements that have previously been thought missing, or at least marginal, in the development of Chinese thought: cosmological inquiry and the questioning of the nature and structure of the Universe as a *cosmos*, or a well-ordered whole, from the perspective of an independently thinking individual. These elements challenge the belief that Chinese thought is somehow radically different from Western and that therefore the two cannot be compared.² Hall and Ames have even proposed a neologism, *acosmotic*, to emphasize the difference between ancient Chinese and Greek thought:

The classical Chinese are primarily *acosmotic* thinkers. By ‘acosmotic’ we shall mean that they do not depend in the majority of their speculations upon either the notion that the totality of things (*wan-wu* 萬物 or *wan-you* 萬有, ‘the ten thousand things’) has a radical beginning, or that these things constitute a single-ordered world (Hall and Ames 1995: 184).

Today, this position is being widely re-evaluated. The excavated texts, such as the TYSS or HX, are considered to contain the earliest examples of cosmogonic and cosmological thought. In the light of these texts, some previously neglected pieces of well-known received texts are being rediscovered and reinterpreted. The *Nèiyè* (*Guānzǐ*), *Zhuāngzǐ*, *Lǚshì chūnqiū*, and *Huáinánzǐ* contain interesting cosmological passages. Moreover, thanks to the fairly reliable dating of at least some of the excavated material, these elements seem to have appeared as early as the mid-fourth century BC. Some scholars even talk about a “cosmogonic turn” or a “fundamental shift in the philosophical terrain” of early Chinese thought.³

Is Chinese cosmology metaphysics?

In the debate about whether such a “turn towards philosophy” really took place, we often encounter questions about elements of metaphysics, transcendence, permanence, and

¹ Cf. Defoort 2001.

² Cf., e.g., Mote 1971; USA: Knopf 1971; Hall and Ames 1995, or Hall and Ames 1998.

³ E.g., Perkins 2016.

truth in ancient Chinese thought. To the detriment of the debate, these concepts are often applied vaguely and without taking into account their historical context. The late Professor Yu Jiyuan, in his article ‘Is Chinese Cosmology Metaphysics?’ (Yu 2011), summarizes the confusion caused by the inconsistent use of terms such as *metaphysical* and *cosmological* when it comes to ancient Chinese thought. He poses an important question: If Chinese thought supposedly lacks interest in metaphysical pursuits, being preoccupied with merely practical affairs (the functioning of the human world and society), how can it still have cosmological concepts? Are Chinese cosmologies not metaphysical? If not, what does it tell us about our understanding of the relationship between cosmology and metaphysics?

Building on this inspiration, I would like to suggest that metaphysics may not be the most appropriate reference frame when it comes to the earliest cosmological questioning, both in ancient China and Greece. We should be aware that metaphysics as a special discipline was born together with the specific Aristotelian perspective. Aristotle himself understood it as a special type of science that studies “the first causes and principles of things” or “being qua being” (*to on hēi on*). Metaphysics⁴ is not concerned with the different aspects (*to symbebēkos*) of this “being”, understood as an entity (*to on*), but with its substance (*ousia*), explained through its principles, and causes (*archai kai aitiai*):

πανταχοῦ δὲ κυρίως τοῦ πρώτου ἢ ἐπιστήμη, καὶ ἐξ οὗ τὰ ἄλλα ἤρτηται, καὶ δι’ ὃ λέγονται. εἰ οὖν τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία, τῶν οὐσιῶν ἂν δεοί τὰς ἀρχὰς καὶ τὰς αἰτίας ἔχειν τὸν φιλόσοφον (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4, 1003b20).

Now in every case knowledge is principally concerned with that which is primary, i.e. that upon which all other things depend, and from which they get their names. If, then, substance is this primary thing, it is of substances that the philosopher must grasp the first principles and causes (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4, 1003b17–19, tr. Tredennick 1933).

This quote hints but slightly at Aristotle’s specific approach, which is based on a very different kind of questioning: the question here is not “what there is” but rather “what can be correctly known and how.” Such an approach naturally takes “entities” as the point of departure and searches for the underlying stable structures behind them. Thus, the world is ontologically split into two layers: behind the changing and incidental aspects of a thing, there is its substance, or essence, which makes it what it is. This “crack in reality” later developed within the Peripatetic school into a more pronounced dichotomy between two layers of reality: the layer of changing aspects accessible through perception and a deeper layer accessible through thought, one of invisible substance and primary causes. In line with Plato, metaphysics as a primary science became concerned with the realm of eternal validity behind the veil of changing appearances.

The language of being

The conceptual framework of Western philosophy is so deeply rooted in Aristotle’s vocabulary that it is almost impossible to talk philosophy, especially metaphysics,

⁴ More precisely ‘the first philosophy’; the title originally just reflected the ordering of Aristotle’s works (*meta ta physika*).

without talking Aristotle. In the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger encountered this problem when trying to retrace the earliest roots of philosophy – the point where this specific type of questioning gradually emerges from religion, myth, and poetry. In his lectures on the pre-Socratics, he sought to disentangle their thought from the Aristotelian and later Peripatetic interpretation. In discussing the origins of metaphysics, Heidegger observes that metaphysics is concerned with entities as distinct from “being” itself. “Being” is not thematized. Unlike Aristotle, he sees in some of the pre-Socratics (the Milesians, Heraclitus) a stage where entities are not yet conceptualized as distinct from their being and are essentially “one” – not in the monistic sense of ‘one entity’ or ‘one kind of entities’, but as ‘one (way of) being’.⁵ At this stage, the concept of entity is not yet sufficiently stabilized and it blends with being itself. Yet, as Heidegger points out, the truth can arise as *alētheia* (‘non-covered’) only in the uncovering light of being, whereas in the metaphysical realm truth is only accessed as true cognition (*epistēmē*) and true statement.⁶ A discourse immersed in being itself – not yet reduced to an entity – constitutes a different genre that, in my view, may be more relevant for describing the early pre-Socratic and early Chinese cosmological concepts in question.

Oneness or “one being” of the cosmos in the Milesians

When referring to his Milesian predecessors of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, Aristotle reports that they posit “one” as the principle and origin of all things – in his interpretation, this “one” (water, *aēr*, *apeiron*) is *archē*, or a primary cause, and within Aristotle’s distinction of four types of causes, it is the material one. The “one” from which everything arises is therefore interpreted as *primary matter*, or *hylē*. As we can see, for Aristotle such cosmology is incomplete because it lacks an explanation of movement and force behind the process of the generation of all things.

If we now look at Anaximander’s and Anaximenes’s cosmologies through Heidegger’s eyes, we may find a different “one”: a “one” that is neither thing, nor entity, nor its material cause. The following fragment from Simplicius is probably the most direct testimony about Anaximander’s “one”, or *apeiron*:

λέγει δ’ αὐτήν [ἀρχὴν] μήτε ὕδωρ μήτε ἄλλο τι τῶν καλουμένων εἶναι στοιχείων, ἀλλ’ ἐτέραν τινὰ φύσιν ἄπειρον, ἐξ ἧς ἅπαντας γίνεσθαι τοὺς οὐρανούς καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς κόσμους· (B 1) ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστι τοῖς οὐσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν, ποιητικωτέροις οὕτως ὀνόμασιν αὐτὰ λέγων (Anaximander, fr. A9/B1 – Simplicius, In *Physica* 24, 13, DK 12a9).

He [Anaximander] says that it [*archē*] is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other boundless nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them. And the source of coming-to-be for existing things is that into which destruction, too, happens **according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to**

⁵ Cf. Heidegger 1967.

⁶ Cf. Heidegger 1931.

each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time, as he describes it in these rather poetical terms (Anaximander, fr. B1 – Simplicius, In Physica 24, 13 (DK 12a9), tr. Kirk 1957: 105).

Anaximander's *apeiron*, presented by Simplicius as *archē*, is often translated as “infinite” or “boundless”.⁷ Tradition sees this fragment as the first example of “conceptual abstraction, in essence metaphysical,” (Havelock 1983: 53) or even as the first occurrence of the concept of infinity (Nietzsche, Diels). Sometimes it is read as “infinite space”.⁸ Yet the use of the word in Anaximander's time was much closer to ‘boundless’, ‘lacking boundaries’, ‘undefined’, or even ‘wrapped up in itself in a way that no end can be reached’. When we look at the above example, this ‘boundless nature’ is something from which all things, being defined and possessing boundaries, arise and into which they perish when these boundaries dissolve. Their complementarity and mutual interdependence is evoked through the image of penalty and retribution. The “one” or “boundless” is the guarantee of justice, in the sense that everything arising from it as definite is indebted to the rest of the whole and will eventually repay this debt by returning to it. Behind this principle of justice is the idea that all phenomena are essentially “one being”, their existence is interconnected, and the being of any one of them is indebted to the being of the others.

Anything that becomes defined within the undefined “one” necessarily brings about its opposite. For every A, there is a non-A. These two are complementary and inseparable, being essentially “one”. Anaximander's cosmology contains examples of such interacting opposites:

ἐνούσας γὰρ τὰς ἐναντιότητας ἐν τῷ ὑποκειμένῳ, ἀπείρω ὄντι σώματι, ἐκκρίνεσθαι φησιν Ἀναξίμανδρος, (...). ἐναντιότητες δέ εἰσι θερμὸν ψυχρὸν ξηρὸν ὑγρὸν καὶ τὰ ἄλλα (Anaximander, frag. A 9/2 – Simplicius, In Physica 150, 22–24).

Anaximander says that the opposites are within the substance that is a boundless body, and that they separate from it. (...) The opposites are hot, cold, dry, wet, and other.⁹

A distinctive feature of Ionian cosmologies, present also in Anaximander, is perpetual motion. Change and motion are seen as fundamental characteristics of the world as accessed through our everyday experience.

οὗτος μὲν οὖν ἀρχὴν καὶ στοιχεῖον εἶρηκεν τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἀπειρον, πρῶτος τοῦνομα καλέσας τῆς ἀρχῆς. πρὸς δὲ τούτῳ κίνησιν αἰδίδιον εἶναι, ἐν ἣι συμβαίνειν γίνεσθαι τοὺς οὐρανοὺς (A 11 – Hippolytos, *Refutatio* I, 6, 1–7, tr. Kirk 1957: 105).

He [Anaximander] said that the principle and element of existing things was the *apeiron*, being the first to use this name for *archē*. In addition to this he said that motion was eternal, in which it results that the heavens come into being.

⁷ Contrary to the traditional view that Anaximander uses the nominalized form *to apeiron*, Couprie and Kočandrlje argue that this nominalization appeared only with Aristotle and his followers, and that *apeiron* should be understood as an adjective, i.e., as “undefined/boundless X”; cf. Couprie and Kočandrlje 2017.

⁸ Kahn 1994: 223: “The Boundless is in fact what we call infinite space (...) But this space is not as yet thought of in the abstraction from the material which fills it.”

⁹ Any unreferenced translations are my own (shorter excerpts or excerpts where a traditional translation is modified to demonstrate an idea of the text).

For Anaximander, the tension and interaction of opposites is itself the explanation of change and movement. Opposites remain the “one being” of the whole cosmos and, as such, maintain each other in a dynamic equilibrium. Through their interaction, different modes of being arise as distinct – for example, the heavens on one hand and the earth on the other; hot, bright heavenly lights and dark, damp earthly depths, and so forth. However poetic or mythical Anaximander’s cosmology may sound, it in fact leads to very concrete proto-scientific considerations about the nature of the physical world, astronomy, meteorological phenomena, and so forth.

Moreover, the whole process of generating differences from differences, down to the level of the subtlest phenomena, is not situated in the remote mythical past but is ongoing and continues to repeat itself. The movement of the opposites is as eternal as the rest of the undivided whole. The undivided whole, being essentially at rest and without change, is paradoxically a source and guarantee of the perpetual movement of the opposites. That is why the “one/boundless” can be characterized as “everlasting and unageing” (*aidion kai agērō*)¹⁰ and surely has divine connotations, as observed by Aristotle:

καὶ τοῦτ' εἶναι τὸ θεῖον· ἀθάνατον γὰρ καὶ ἀνώλεθρον, ὡς φησὶν ὁ Ἀναξίμανδρος καὶ οἱ πλείστοι τῶν φυσιολόγων (Anaximander, fr. B 3 – Aristotle, *Physics Book III*, 4; 203b13). Further they identify it with the Divine, for it is **'deathless and imperishable'** as Anaximander says, with the majority of the physicists.

In the case of Anaximenes, the candidate for the “one” would be *aēr*. The situation is a bit different here: *aēr* is the term otherwise used for air as one of the elements, or more correctly, as one of the “simplest bodies” (*hapla sōmata*) of which the world is composed. Yet Anaximenes seems to use it differently, in a way that preserves characteristics similar to *apeiron*: it is all-encompassing and nothing is outside of it; it is boundless and undefined, and from it all things arise; and its “oneness” is what holds the cosmos together ontologically:

Ἀναξίμενης δὲ Εὐρυστράτου Μιλήσιος, ἑταῖρος γεγωνῶς Ἀναξίμανδρου, μίαν μὲν καὶ αὐτὸς τὴν ὑποκειμένην φύσιν καὶ ἄπειρόν φησιν ὡσπερ ἐκεῖνος, οὐκ ἀόριστον δὲ ὡσπερ ἐκεῖνος, ἀλλὰ ὠρισμένην,¹¹ ἀέρα λέγων αὐτήν· διαφέρειν δὲ μανότητι καὶ πυκνότητι κατὰ τὰς οὐσίας. καὶ ἀραιούμενον μὲν πῦρ γίνεσθαι, πυκνούμενον δὲ ἄνεμον, εἶτα νέφος, ἔτι δὲ μᾶλλον ὕδωρ, εἶτα γῆν, εἶτα λίθους, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα ἐκ τούτων. κίνησιν δὲ καὶ οὗτος αἰδίον ποιεῖ, δι' ἣν καὶ τὴν μεταβολὴν γίνεσθαι (Anaximenes, frag. A5/1 = Simplicius, In *Physica* 24, 26, tr. Kirk 1957: 144).

Anaximenes, son of Eurystratus, of Miletus, a companion of Anaximander, also says that the underlying nature is one and infinite like him, but not undefined as Anaximander said but definite, for he identifies it as air; and it differs in its substantial nature by rarity and density. Being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these. He, too, makes motion eternal, and says that change, also, comes about through it.

¹⁰ Anaximander, fr. B 2 – Hippolytos, *Refutatio* I, 6, 1.

¹¹ In this fragment, the description of *aēr* as definite has to be attributed to Simplicius’s (Theophrastus’s) reading – he would regard *aēr* not as *apeiron* but as one of the *hapla sōmata* and therefore defined; yet in the same fragment, the other *sōmata* are explained as variations of *aēr*.

Compared to Anaximander, the focus may be shifted from the “stabilizing role” of the “one” to the “mobilizing role”: at the same time, *aēr*, as all-encompassing, is itself the energy and vehicle of change and movement. It also guarantees the temporal stability of phenomena, in the same way as the soul (*pneuma*) is believed to preserve the unity of a human being. Different stages of being derive from it through rarefaction and condensation (*manotēs*, *pyknotēs*).

Oneness in recently excavated cosmological texts

If we now use this interpretive key to read the early cosmological texts, specifically in the *Tàiyī shēng shuǐ* 太一生水, we can observe a comparable dynamics of opposites arising from the “one”, or *tàiyī* 太一:

太一生水, 水反輔太一, 是以成天。天反輔太一, 是以成地。天地[復相輔]也, 是以成神明。神明復相輔也, 是以成陰陽。陰陽復相輔也, 是以成四時。四時復[相]輔也, 是以成滄熱。滄熱復相輔也, 是以成濕燥。濕燥復相輔也, 成歲而止。

The great one gives birth to the water. The water returns and assists the great one, thereby completing the heavens. The heavens return and assist the great one, thereby completing the earth. The heavens and the earth [again assist each other], thereby completing the spiritual and numinous. The spiritual and numinous again assist each other, thereby completing yin and yang. Yin and yang again assist each other, thereby completing the four seasons. The four seasons again assist each other, thereby completing the cold and the hot. The cold and the hot again assist each other, thereby completing the wet and the dry. The wet and the dry again assist each other, completing the yearly cycle, and that is where it stops.

Following Anaximander’s example above, a proposed key to interpretation here would be not to regard the stages of cosmological development as entities but rather as modes of being that are in fact “one being” of the undifferentiated whole. The entire system holds together ontologically, guaranteed by “oneness”. The fact that the “one” seems to remain continuously present within the changes supports this reading:

是故, 太一藏於水, 行於時, 周而又[始, 以己為] (slip 6) 萬物母, 一缺一盈, 以己為萬物經。That is why the great one is present in the water, moves with the seasons, returns in circle and [begins anew, making of itself] (slip 6) the mother of all things. Now emptying and now filling, it becomes the warp of all things.

In the *Fán wù liú xíng*, the idea that the “one” is tangibly present and directly accessible in our immediate experience is even more pronounced:

是故一, 咀之有味, 嗅[之有臭], 鼓之有聲, 近之可見, 操之可操。

Therefore, the one can be tasted when chewed; its scent can be perceived when smelled; it makes sound when clapped; it can be seen when approached; it can be managed when an attempt is made to manage it (tr. Chan 2015).

In the TYSS, opposites arise together with boundaries and, within the ‘one’ as a whole, define each other through lack and abundance:

不足於上]者，有餘於下，不足於下者，有餘於上。

That which is deficient above has a surplus below; that which is deficient below has a surplus above (tr. Cook 2012).

In another Warring States-period cosmological text, the *Héng xiān* 恒先, more is said about the undifferentiated state of being, which can be also understood as the “one/boundless”:

恒先無有，樸、靜、虛。樸，大樸。靜，大靜。虛，大虛。自厭不自忍。

At first, there is constancy, there is no defined being. It is simple, still, and empty. Its simplicity is Great Simplicity, its stillness is Great Stillness, its emptiness is Great Emptiness. It fulfils itself without repressing itself.

The undefined “one” is characterized as simple, still, and empty, that is, lacking any prominent feature or definition. Still, this very lack of definition is what makes it great and majestic. The use of *dà* 大 (or *tài* 太 in *tàiyī* 太一) suggests that the “undefined one” has a superior ontological status. Similarly to Anaximander, it can be understood as divine.¹²

As soon as a delimited area (or a limit or a boundary) appears, opposites arise on each side of it, and, being essentially “one”, these opposites define each other. Again, it is not necessary to regard the stages of cosmological sequence as some kind of entities:

域作。有域焉有氣，有氣焉有有，有有焉有始，有始焉有往。

Boundary¹³ arises. Since the boundary is there, there is *qi*. Since *qi* is there, there is something defined. Since something defined is there, there is beginning. Since beginning is there, there is returning.

The image of *qi* 氣, the vehicle of change that perpetuates the movement and interplay of opposites, highlights the dynamics of generation through mutual definition. As such, it is strongly reminiscent of *aēr*, including the evocative image of condensation and rarefaction:

濁氣生地，清氣生天。

Turbid *qi* gives birth to the earth; clear *qi* gives birth to the heavens.

The role of an individual seeking to understand

When we put aside the special interpretive framework that we have used so far, the above cosmological sequences may well be read only as evocative poetic images. Also, their close connection with the mythical and religious context cannot be denied. It is not by accident that we find the few earlier examples of cosmology in mythical and mantic contexts (e.g., the *Zhōuyī*). But what makes these early Warring States texts unique as a genre and brings them closer to their distant pre-Socratic counterparts is the role

¹² References to *tàiyī* 太一 as a deity and an object of worship are well attested. Cf., e.g., Allan 2003.

¹³ *Huò* 或 is frequently read here as *yù* 域 ‘territory, delimited area’; on reading *yù* as ‘boundary’, see Zhū Yuānqīng 2007.

attributed to an individual who seeks to understand and explain the structure of the universe.

The *Fán wù liú xíng* 凡物流形 opens with a series of intense questions that have no match in other texts from this period. To cite only a few:

問天孰高，與地孰遠歟？孰為天？孰為地？孰為雷神？孰為帝？土奚得而平？水奚得而清？草木奚得而生？禽獸奚得而鳴？夫雨之至，孰唾津之？夫風之至，孰噓吸而逝之？

One asks of Heaven, what is it that makes it high, and of Earth, what is it that makes it far? What is Heaven made of? What is Earth made of? What is the Spirit of Thunder? What is God? Why is the Earth flat? Why is water clear? Why do grass and the woods grow? Why do the beasts and birds cry? When the rain comes who is spitting? When the wind blows who is inhaling and exhaling? (Tr. Chan 2015)

These intense questions reveal an inquiring mind that seeks new and better answers – not ones imposed on it from a position of authority (from a ruler, priest, or shaman, or through some mythical account), but ones that can be intellectually grasped and accepted or rejected on one's own accord. They attest to a certain stage of intellectual maturity. As Aristotle famously observes, philosophy – desire for knowledge for the sake of knowing – arises precisely with this new type of questioning:

διὰ γὰρ τὸ θαυμάζειν οἱ ἄνθρωποι καὶ νῦν καὶ τὸ πρῶτον ἤρξαντο φιλοσοφεῖν, ἐξ ἀρχῆς μὲν τὰ πρόχειρα τῶν ἀτόπων θαυμάσαντες, εἶτα κατὰ μικρὸν οὕτω προϊόντες [15] καὶ περὶ τῶν μειζόνων διαπορήσαντες, οἷον περὶ τε τῶν τῆς σελήνης παθημάτων καὶ τῶν περὶ τὸν ἥλιον καὶ ἄστρα καὶ περὶ τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως.

It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize; wondering in the first place at obvious perplexities, and then by gradual progression raising questions about the greater matters too, e.g. about the changes of the moon and of the sun, about the stars and about the origin of the universe (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I, 982b11–16, tr. Tredennick 1933).

In this light, the earliest cosmologies can be seen as an attempt to provide new answers to new questions. The overall tone of the texts is exhortative: the reader is challenged to intellectually consider the proposed worldview and encouraged to look for answers within himself:

TYSS: 君子知此之謂[智，不知此之謂之愚]。

A noble man who knows this, is called [wise/knowledgeable. The one who does not know this, is called ignorant].

FWLX: 聞之曰：能察一，則百物不失；如不能察一，則百物具失。如欲察一，仰而視之，俯而揆之，毋遠求度，於身稽之。

I have heard it said: if one is able to examine the oneness, he will not fail in any of the hundred things; if one is not able to examine the oneness, he will fail in them all. If you seek to examine the principle of oneness, look up and you will see it, look down and you will perceive it. Do not go far to seek the guidelines but examine it within yourself.¹⁴

¹⁴ An even stronger exhortation of the reader is to be found in the *Guanzi* chapter 49, *Nèiyè* 內業, dated roughly to the same period as the excavated texts in question: “Can you be ‘one’ with it? Can you rec-

More importantly perhaps, the cosmologies of the TYSS, HX, and FWLX all contain significant passages about names that address their status within the cosmic whole, their generation (related to boundaries between the opposites), and their role in correctly grasping the structure of the cosmos. Naming (language and speech) appears as a key device, thanks to which an individual can assume an active role in universal becoming. But this topic is beyond the scope of this paper and will have to be developed elsewhere.

Conclusion

Euro-American civilization tends to regard conceptual thinking as its own exclusive achievement that sets it apart from other world civilizations. It has developed a particular narrative of the history of thought, one in which the earliest philosophy is viewed as a separate genre breaking away from religious, mythical, and poetic thinking in some distinct form. In searching out the beginnings of “philosophy”, it is common to turn to the earliest Greek thinkers to look for the development of this strain of thought. The thought of Anaximander and Anaximenes, and even more so of Heraclitus, is often misinterpreted as some vague pre-stage of conceptual thinking, evocative maybe, but illogical and inconsistent, full of contradiction and impenetrable images. Yet, if we do not force our idea of philosophical genre onto them and recognize them as representatives of a genre in its own right, with its specific means of expression – not logical but not vague either – we may realize that they introduce a new type of questioning, a new attitude towards the relationship between the individual and the world and its structure.

We have observed that similar characteristics of this genre can be found in certain excavated Warring States texts that are otherwise difficult to categorize and interpret. Despite the huge gap between the two periods and cultural and social contexts, the Warring States thought environment may have seen a similar transition towards greater intellectual maturity and the autonomy of the individual. This autonomy does not consist in liberating an individual from the forces that govern universal becoming of the “one”, but in understanding the universe. In these texts man is no longer victim of unfathomable forces, but through knowledge becomes their partner and, potentially, co-actor.

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ognize auspicious and inauspicious without recurring to divination? Can you stop? Can you cease? Can you stop looking for it in other men and get it from within yourself? Think about it and think about it, and think about it again” (能一乎?能無卜筮而知吉凶乎?能止乎?能已乎?能勿求諸人而得之己乎?思之思之,又重思之)。 Cf. also the *Zhuāngzi*, chapter 23 (Gēngsāng Chū 庚桑楚).

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