

The Journal of Positive Psychology

Dedicated to furthering research and promoting good practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpos20>

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To cite this article: Yukun Zhao, Martin Seligman, Kaiping Peng, Leyang Ye, Cheng Liang, Huicong Wang & Haibo Gao (2021): Agency in ancient China, The Journal of Positive Psychology, DOI: [10.1080/17439760.2021.1926533](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.1926533)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2021.1926533>



Published online: 25 Aug 2021.



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Agency in ancient China

Yukun Zhao^a, Martin Seligman^b, Kaiping Peng^c, Leyang Ye^d, Cheng Liang^d, Huicong Wang^d and Haibo Gao^d

^aPositive Psychology Research Center, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China; ^bDepartment of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, United States; ^cDepartment of Psychology, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China; ^dDepartment of Philosophy, Tsinghua University, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT

Seligman (2020) hypothesized that individuals' beliefs in Agency proximally cause progress and innovation. When agency is high, progress occurs, when low, stagnation. This seems to be true in the Greco-Roman epoch and we examined this in ancient China. The Shang (1600–1046 BCE) devoutly followed the arbitrary will of gods and there was little progress. The Zhou (1045–256 BCE) believed more in human agency and this was a time of progress. In the Axial Age (530 BCE–221 BCE), Confucianism emphasized human agency and progress was remarkable. In the first Imperial Age (221 BCE–220 CE), when Legalism dominated, there was massive collective progress, followed by chaos. Eventually a hybrid of Legalism–Confucianism became the dominant ideology. Collective agency and individual agency were well-balanced, and there was considerable progress. We confirmed Seligman's claim for Ancient China, but with the major addition of collective agency.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 March 2021
Accepted 24 April 2021

KEYWORDS

Agency; self-efficacy; optimism; imagination; China; individual

Introduction

Seligman (2020) hypothesized that the psychological state of Agency proximally causes progress in human history, but when Agency is absent, there will be stagnation. He defined agency as 'an individual's belief that he or she can influence the world'. It consists of three components. First, efficacy, an individual's expectation that he or she is capable of achieving his or her goals. Second, optimism, the future-minded belief that one can achieve these goals in the future. Third, imagination, the expectation that one can achieve a broad range of goals well beyond the here and now.

Seligman (2020) analyzed the relationship between agency and progress in the Greco-Roman epoch. In the *Iliad* (800 BCE), humans are largely manipulated by the gods and humans show little agency. Human wishes, actions, and even emotions, are often the result of divine intervention. But in the later poem, *Odyssey*, Odysseus, the protagonist, exhibits considerable agency: he makes decisions, comes up with new ideas, and executes his own plans, rather than being a puppet of the gods. The balance between the agency of the gods and the agency of humans has shifted by the time of the *Odyssey*. In the 6th and 5th century BCE, the great philosophers, from Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, to Epicurus and the Stoics, emphasize individual will, responsibility, and choice. The rise in human agency is accompanied by enormous progress: advances in the arts, science, technology, the

quality of life and political freedom. The early Christian thinkers continued this emphasis on human Agency, until Augustine (354 CE – 430 CE) relegates human agency to God's grace. This ushers in a long period of stagnation in Europe.

Seligman's (2020) theory is unusual in being the study of history from a psychological perspective. More usually, psychologists study how human psychology is shaped by history (Murthukrishna et al., 2020). For example, cultural psychologists examine how societies with different political, economic, and natural settings lead to different mindsets (Murthukrishna et al., 2020), for example, how the church banning cousin marriage in the Middle Ages results in a psychological shift toward trusting strangers. Social psychologists study how people's psychological mechanisms evolve in keeping with social changes (Baumeister, 1987), and on a grand scale, evolutionary psychologists study how the environment shapes human psychology by natural selection (Buss, 1991, 1995). Seligman (2020) points to the reverse direction, that psychological states can cause historical changes, with the example of the mental state of agency causing progress.

Seligman (2020) articulates three criticisms of his claim. First the mere correlation between levels of agency and progress does not demonstrate causation. Second, while Western history might support this claim, how about non-Western cultures? Third, historical

evidence is qualitative, but could the claim be tested by quantitative, lexical methods?

We address the second question by examining the relationship between agency and progress in China from the 16th century, BCE, to the 6th century CE. We chose China because it was very similar to the Greco-Roman world of the same period, yet with vast cultural differences. On one hand, China evolved from a Bronze Age society to an empire, as did ancient Greece to Rome. The philosophical development is similar too. Jaspers (2014) argued that civilizations in China and the Greco-Roman world, as well as Persia and India, experienced parallel developments in philosophy from about the 8th to the 3rd century BCE. He called this period the 'Axial Age', since this was the age when great thinkers laid out the abiding philosophical foundations for their respective civilizations. Before the Axial Age, people hear and submit themselves to the gods (Jaynes, 1992), but in the Axial Age, the gods retreat, and secular philosophy appears.

On the other hand, however, there are huge differences between the contemporaneous Chinese culture and Greco-Roman culture (Denecke, 2014; King & Schilling, 2011). Hofstede (2011) proposed six dimensions for comparing cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, long/short term orientation, and indulgence/restraint. He showed Chinese culture and Western culture are often on opposite ends of these dimensions. For example, Chinese culture has a high power gap between rulers and the people while Western culture has a lower power gap. Moreover, Chinese culture is collective while Western culture is more individualistic. Therefore, not only the relationship between agency and progress might be different, but agency itself might be different in China.

In particular, East Asians and Westerners exhibit fundamental cultural differences in attribution patterns (Morris and Peng, 1994; Choi et al., 1999; Menon et al., 1999; Morris et al., 2001; Zemba et al., 2006). Morris et al. (2001) found that Westerners tend to conceptualize agency as a property of individual persons, while East Asian tend to conceptualize agency in terms of collectives. While they defined 'agency' as the subject to which actions are attributed to, which is different from Seligman's (2020) definition, these researches showed that agency might more collective in East Asian cultures than in Western cultures.

The agency Seligman (2020) described in the Greco-Roman world is individual agency, but there can also be collective agency, which we define as a group's belief that they can influence the world. Like individual agency, it also consists of three components, namely, collective

efficacy, a group's expectation that they are capable of achieving their goals; collective optimism, the future-minded belief of a group of people that they can achieve these goals far in the future; and collective imagination, a group's belief that they can achieve new, creative goals well beyond the here and now.

In this article we lay out a brief analysis of progress and agency in ancient China. As Seligman (2020) did, we also must note that our purpose is to provide an overview of this new topic for psychologists, rather than examining Chinese history or philosophy in the rigorous detail of professional historians or philosophical scholars of ancient China.

The Shang-Zhou transition

The first major change in recorded Chinese history was the toppling of the Shang Dynasty (1600 BCE – 1046 BCE) by the Zhou Dynasty (1045 BCE–256 BCE). Historian Wang (2010) claimed that 'there was no bigger change in Chinese politics and culture than the Shang-Zhou transition' (p. 241). Shang was the dominant state, with millions of people and a fearsome army. However, they sent most of their army to the East to fight the barbarians. Zhou, one of Shang's subordinates in the West of China, with a much smaller population and army, seized the opportunity and, with assistance from allied tribes and some Shang dissenting nobles, raided Shang's capital, killed the Shang king, and founded a new dynasty. Zhou created a new political system and a new culture that largely shaped China for the next three thousand years.

In general, the most important differences between the Shang culture and the Zhou culture can be summarized as demythologization, rationalization, and moralization. These differences are reflected in the new mindset of the Zhou people. As Confucius said in *On Propriety, social and individual behavior* (2017 p. 295):

'The people of Yin¹ (Shang) respected the spirits and served them, spirits were more than ceremony, and punishment more than reward. The people of Zhou respected ceremony and liked to give favors to the others, respected the spirits with respectful distance from them, were close to the people, treated them honestly, and used rank as reward and punishment, affection without dignify.'

The Zhou people demythologized the Shang ghosts and gods. The Shang people worshipped gods nearly blindly, while the Zhou people followed the gods through rituals. The Zhou people still worshipped gods, but they were more distant from their gods and more attentive to human affairs.

In addition to the classical texts, the oracle bone scripts that have been unearthed provide strong

evidence of this. Puett (2001) examined oracle inscriptions from the Shang dynasty that describe how the Shang peoples performed divinations to obtain the views of the God (called *Di* by the Shang people, which means the ultimate commander in Chinese) about the construction of a city (p. 27):

Divining: 'The king will make a settlement, [for if he does] Di will approve.'

Crackmaking on renzi [day 49], Zheng divining: 'We will make a settlement. [for if we do] Di will not oppose.' Approved. Third month.

Crackmaking on xinmao [day 28], Que divining: 'Jifang Fou will build a wall, [for if he does] it will not be cursed. There will be no harm.'

According to Puett (2001, p. 27), 'the main concern of the inscriptions is the potential conflict between the actions of humans and the actions of the divine.' The tension between human and the God here focuses on the human attempt to judge the will of the God through divination, and thus to predict the feasibility of human action. The Shang people's acts of divination reflect a weak human position before the God. Humans needed the support of external gods and humans lacked sufficient agency of their own to carry out their goals.

The dependence of the Shang people on the God is also reflected in the fact that they would change their original plans and actions when the divination results were inauspicious or when the God intended to inflict punishment. For example:

Divining: 'This spring the king will not ally with Wang Cheng to attack Xia Wei [for if he does] the upper and lower [divine powers] will not approve. It will not be we who will be receiving the divine assistance.' (Puett, 2001, p. 26)

These passages show that the Shang people's actions were quite dependent on divination. As long as the relationship between gods and humans remains one of domination and dependence, it is difficult for humans to have much agency.

However, in the Zhou Dynasty, the relationship between humans and gods undergoes major changes, the most prominent of which was the change in the nature of 'gods' themselves. In contrast to the Shang gods who were more like the nature gods of primitive religions, the Zhou gods were less mysterious and more like humans. This new concept of gods is reflected in *Shangshu* (2011), an ancient Chinese classic which likely records the thoughts and speeches of the Zhou people:

'Heaven compassionates the people. What the people desire, Heaven will be found to give effect to.' (p. 288)

'Heaven loves the people.' (p. 290)

'Heaven sees as my people see; Heaven hears as my people hear.' (p. 292)

'The ancients have said, 'He who soothes us is our sovereign; he who oppresses us is our enemy.' (p. 296)

All of these texts embody the unique religious concept of the Zhou people as 'the unity of heaven and people'. Chen (2017, p. 214) described this concept as 'the "people's opinion" version of divine destiny'. He pointed out that 'in such a pantheistic structure of people's opinion, the will of the gods was no longer inscrutable as in the Shang dynasty. Instead it became the ultimate supporter and representative of the will of the people projected from the human society.' (p. 214) By uniting the people's opinion in real life with the will of the God, the image of the God lost its original elusive mysticism and gained a stronger connection to the human world. At the same time, the character of the God changed from the moody, unpredictable behavior of the Shang dynasty to the moral laws and norms of the human world. So, the religious view of the Zhou people was greatly demythologized and humanized compared to that of the Shang people.

The Zhou people were also more moral and humane than the Shang people. For example, the Zhou buried remains reflect much less brutality than the Shang. According to Hu and Hu (2003), 'from King Pan Geng to King Xin who lost the dynasty, in this 12 kings and 273 years (1395 BC ~ 1123 BC) of the flourishing slavery society, there were 13,052 recorded human sacrifices, in addition to 1,145 records without an exact number of sacrifices. Even if all these records only counted as one person each, at least there were 14,197 people sacrificed.'

It was precisely because the Shang gods were unpredictable and arbitrary that Shang people resorted to rituals, divination, and mass sacrifices. In contrast, sacrifices were very rare in the Zhou Dynasty, as their gods were more akin to human morality and so there was no urgent need to please them. From the archaeological findings, in the few excavated sites that found any human sacrifices, none exceeded two people. Even Zuo (2011), the ancient Chinese history book with well-documented records of human sacrifices, reports only three cases of human sacrifices during the Spring and Autumn Period (771 BCE – 476 BCE).

Abandoning homicidal sacrifices by the Zhou can be regarded as a manifestation of greater humaneness. It was closely related to the 'people's opinion' religious view of the Zhou dynasty, which emphasized the unity of gods with the people, respect for virtues of the people, and the protection of the people.

In sum, the balance between the gods' agency and human agency tilts markedly toward the human in the transition from the Shang to the Zhou people. First, the Zhou people had higher levels of efficacy. From

a supplicant, trembling posture under the rule of the arbitrary gods during the Shang Dynasty, humans become actors whose opinions were manifested by the gods' will during the Zhou Dynasty. We note that the 'people' in ancient Chinese politics were more collectivistic than the individualistic subjects in the Homeric poems. Since the Zhou tribe was actually much smaller and weaker than the Shang tribe when they tried to topple the Shang dynasty, the Zhou regime emphasized the power of people, as a collective. The *people* is a political entity playing a key role in the Zhou dynasty. The Zhou dynasty also used the collective concept of 'the people' as a means to derive the political ideal of 'virtue' to ensure the legitimacy of its rule. As the *Classic of Poetry* (2011), the collections of poetry of the Zhou people, says:

"Heaven, in giving birth to the multitudes of the people, To every faculty and relationship annexed its law. The people possess this normal nature,

And they [consequently] love its normal virtue." (p. 541)

This shows that the Zhou believe that the people as a whole could have their own rules and will. Theirs is the prototype of collective agency.

Secondly, the Zhou people had higher *optimism*. The Shang people, being under the dominant rule of the gods at all times, looked to the attitude of capricious gods before taking action. In this context, the Shang people's view of the future was pessimistic and passive. The Zhou people combined the ethics of this world with the will of gods. They got rid of the one-way relationship between gods and humans, and they moved to a worldview in which gods were largely bound by human ethics and human well-being. What the Zhou people really worshipped were moral laws, rather than the power of unpredictable and arbitrary gods.

This shown by the fact that the Zhou people sometimes made decisions against the divination results. According to the Western Han dynasty scholar Liu (1987), when the Zhou army set out to attack the Shang capital, there were many obstacles, such as inauspicious divinations as well as continuous rain, which predicted that things would not go well. Jiang Ziya, the chief advisor of the Zhou king, argued that the materials which were used to divine had no life so that their results were not credible. The king heeded his advice and persisted in the battle against the Shang army, which was eventually won. This displayed the triumph of human agency over the gods' will, and in the context of the very founding of Zhou Dynasty.

The Zhou people's optimistic vision of the future made them more likely to engage in exploration, such as their territorial expansion into the dangerous Eastern fronts. This was so even in the early days of the dynasty

when the new king was still very young, and his reign severely challenged. A major rebellion occurred at Yin, the old capital of Shang. After the rebellion was put down, the Zhou people nevertheless persisted in sending out the members of the royal family to set up colonies in the Eastern front. They were optimistic that these colonies would become satellite states of the Zhou dynasty and support each other to make the Zhou people's rule strong and long-lasting. The Duke of Zhou, who was the oldest uncle of the very young king and the actual ruler at the time, sent his youngest brother Fung to rule the rebellious Yin area. Shangshu (2011) recorded how the Duke of Zhou and the Zhou king encouraged Fung:

'Yes, it is yours, O little one, – it is your business to enlarge the royal influence, and harmoniously to protect this people of Yin. Thus, also shall you assist the king, consolidating the appointment of Heaven, and renovating this people.' (p. 387)

The king thus says, "Go, Fung. Do not disregard the statutes you should reverence; hearken to what I have told you: so, with the people of Yin you will enjoy your dignity, and hand it down to your posterity." (p. 398)

Having just ended the great rebellion, the Duke of Zhou was still optimistic about the future possibility of ruling the Yin people, as is shown by his instructing Fung to protect the Yin people in order to create an eternal political foundation. He did not view all the Yin survivors as potential rebels, and as shown by history, this trust and optimism were proven correct.

In addition to efficacy and optimism, the Zhou people demonstrated imagination. They created a political system that was fundamentally different from that of the Shang dynasty. Wang (2010) pointed out that the Zhou dynasty invented a new relationship between the king and his vassals:

'Before Shang, the distinction between the king and the dukes, the ruler and ministers has not been settled. ... Until Shang was beaten, and dozens of old states were destroyed, the new states are Zhou's successors, brothers, nephews and uncles. All in all, they are the ministers of Zhou. And Lu, Wei, Jin, Qi – these four states, become the big states in the East for they are the closest relatives of the royal family. ... By this way, the king becomes the sovereign of dukes rather than the eldest brother of them. This point is shown in mourning apparel in which dukes obey the same rules in their relationship between them and the king as the son does in their relationship between him and his father or the ministers do in their relationship between them and their rulers. The distinctions between dukes and the king were first settled in this way. The scale of the unification of the early Zhou dynasty is to be perfected by this great system.' (p. 245)

In Wang's (2010) view, this innovative patriarchal system of feudalism was the fundamental reason that the Zhou dynasty was able to rule a much larger territory than the Shang dynasty. Furthermore, the Zhou people intentionally tied the political system to morality, i.e., the system itself had an intrinsic moral foundation and moral ideals:

'All the above systems are derived from the two meanings which are respect and affection; yet respect, affection, and virtue, which are the three general meanings of ruling the world. . . . There are systems and ceremonies to rule the king, vassals, ministers, doctors, scholars, so that there is kindness to each other, there is righteousness to each other. In this way, the country's foundation is built, and the scourge of contention disappears. The people's quest is no bigger than this. . . . The king, vassals, ministers, doctors, and scholars were the examples of the people; the system and ceremony were the instruments of morality. This is the essence of the Zhou people's governance.' (p. 247)

The essence of Zhou governance was a moral community of unity, harmony, order, and stability. Compared with the blood-thirsty slave system of the Shang Dynasty, this innovative political system was undoubtedly of positive significance and if anything is political progress, this surely was.

In short, the Zhou people showed higher levels of efficacy, optimism, and imagination than the Shang people. Accordingly, the Zhou dynasty, as hypothesized, also experienced great progress other than just political progress. In technology, the Zhou calendar was better and more advanced than the Shang calendars (Fan, 2000). This marked progress in astronomy, which was crucial to the agricultural economy. Lee (2002) claimed that the Zhou people were the first in the world to produce astronomical catalogues.

Their economic progress was also notable, in that the production system gradually changed from slavery to a feudal system, marked by the emergence of small farmers. The establishment of the feudal system was epoch-making in agricultural production and economic development, a prototype of the modern state – the co-existence and co-prosperity of the tenant and lord of the manor, which allowed local politics to be stable and harmonious (Hou, 2008). The alignment of economic interests between the two main social forces in the Zhou society – lord and tenant farmers – strongly contributed to the growth of socio-economic development.

In summary the higher level of agency of the Zhou people enabled them to overthrow the rule of the Shang dynasty and to make significant progress in politics, in religious and philosophical thinking, in the economy, and in technology. This is probably why the Shang-Zhou transition is regarded as the most momentous change

in Chinese history (Wang, 2010), and this increase in Agency made the eight hundred years of the Zhou dynasty the most long-lasting dynasty in Chinese history.

The Eastern Zhou epoch (770 BCE – 256 BCE)

The Zhou dynasty can be divided into two periods: The Western Zhou period (1045 BCE – 771 BCE) followed by the Eastern Zhou period (770 BCE – 256 BCE). In the Western Zhou period, the political system ran effectively as designed, so that the king commanded his vassals, and the vassals commanded their subordinates. But gradually the power balance shifted towards the vassals. In 771 BCE, rebellious vassals joined forces with barbarian tribes to sack the capital city. They killed the king and looted the capital area. The destruction was so severe that the succeeding king had to re-establish the capital in a city more than 300 kilometers east of the old capital city. Therefore, starting from this year, until the replacement of the Zhou dynasty by the Qin dynasty, this period is called the Eastern Zhou period.

The Eastern Zhou period further divides into two periods: The Spring and Autumn period (771 BCE – 476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475 BCE – 221 BCE). The former is named after *the Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle edited by Confucius that recorded the history of this period. During the Spring and Autumn period, the vassals lost most of their reverence and loyalty to the royal sovereign. The political system collapsed. The vassal states waged wars against each other. When it came to the Warring States period, there were only seven major vassal states left. They completely renounced the authority of the Zhou king and crowned themselves as kings too. The wars between these kingdoms became much more intense and violent. Eventually the kingdom of Qin became the strongest kingdom, eliminated all other kingdoms and reunited China in 221 BCE.

Despite the chaos and cruelty during the Eastern Zhou period, it is widely considered the most important period in Chinese philosophy. According to the *Book of Han*, there were 189 schools of thought that appeared in this period. Among the most influential were Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism. These schools laid out the foundations of Chinese philosophy for the following 2,000 years. Jaspers (2014) considers it to be the Axial Age of China, and we now examine the four major schools from the perspective of agency.

1. Confucianism

Confucianism was founded by Confucius (551 BCE – 479 BCE). It advocates benevolence, righteousness, loyalty, forgiveness, practice of rituals, the 'middle path', and

'virtuous rule' in politics. Though there was already a trend toward humanism during the Zhou period, it was not until Confucianism that the value of humans really came to the fore. Actually, the core idea of Confucianism, 'benevolence', shares the same pronunciation as 'human' (*ren*), and is written as 'two persons' in Chinese. It refers to not only the benevolence between the individuals, but also the benevolence of the ruler and the state to individuals. In other words, benevolence is both the end and the means of the Confucian political philosophy so that interpersonal benevolence can be guaranteed through 'virtuous rule' governance.

Confucius highly valued human agency, as shown in the following three aspects: First, Confucius emphasized the importance of the human world, and furthered the tendency of the Zhou people to respect rituals and to eschew spirits (The Analects, 1963):

'Fan Ch'ih asked about wisdom. Confucius said, "Devote yourself earnestly to the duties due to men, and respect spiritual beings but keep them at a distance. This may be called wisdom."' (p. 30)

'Confucius never discussed strange phenomena, physical exploits, disorder, or spiritual beings.' (p. 32)

'Chi-lu (Tzu-lu) asked about serving the spiritual beings. Confucius said, "If we are not yet able to serve man, how can we serve spiritual beings?" "I venture to ask about death." Confucius said, "If we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?"' (p. 36)

These passages reveal that Confucius acknowledges the existence of ghosts and gods, but people in the present world are more important. The spirits are still deterrent forces to the Confucianists, but their primary concerns are the secular world.

Secondly, Confucius recognizes the importance of individual will, and demands his disciples to build up their own wills:

'Tzu-lu said, "I wish to hear your ambition."² Confucius said, "It is my ambition to comfort the old, to be faithful to friends, and to cherish the young."' (p. 29)

'Confucius said, "The commander of three armies may be taken away, but the will of even a common man may not be taken away from him."' (p. 36)

These passages show that Confucius related a person's will to his personality. He believed that the will is a fundamental part of an individual and cannot be taken away by force. *The Analects* contains many dialogues about individual will. For example, when he inquires about the wishes of his disciples, Tzu-lu wishes to administer a state to make its people courageous and disciplined, Jan Yu wishes to administer that state to make its people prosperous, Kung-hsi Hua wishes to assist in royal rituals, and Tseng Hsi says 'in the late spring, when the spring dress is ready, I would like to

go with five or six grownups and six or seven young boys to bathe in the I River, enjoy the breeze on the Rain Dance Altar, and then return home singing.' (p.37–38) Confucius agrees with Tseng Hsi, but he doesn't force the other disciples to change their wishes, as he believes that each person can choose his own wish.

Thirdly, Confucius is optimistic and imaginative about how a person can achieve his goals: to realize one's wish, one must work on virtue, humanity, and arts:

'Confucius said, "Set your will on the Way. Have a firm grasp on virtue. Rely on humanity. Find recreation in the arts."' (p. 31)

In fact, much of his teachings are focused on the so-called 'six arts': rites, music, archery, chariotry, calligraphy, and mathematics. These arts are not abstract aesthetics, but they are practical skills that the students can improve. Confucius is imaginative in that he created this systematic method that every common man can use to improve himself, and he is optimistic that this method could lead one to fulfillment. The Confucian concept of fulfillment, moreover, is about a person improving himself toward the moral ideal and toward more contribution to the community.

Confucius, furthermore, expands the moral requirement from individuals to the government. He believes that it is better to govern a state with morality:

Confucius said, "A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it."' (p. 22)

*Confucius said, "Lead the people with governmental measures and regulate them by law and punishment, and they will avoid wrongdoing but will have no sense of honor and shame. Lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (*li*), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves right."*' (p. 22)

In Confucius's view, morality and etiquette have an irreplaceable function of edification by political law and punishment. Unlike the deterrent effect of punishment, using morality and etiquette to teach the people, improving their moral levels and maintaining a good social order, will make the people truly love the ruler, follow his orders, and achieve the political goals of the state. Individual morality and collective morality facilitate each other. Therefore, Confucius advocates moral education and practices not only for individuals, but also for the state. As a result, his philosophy leads to higher levels of both individual agency and collective agency.

Mencius (c. 371 BCE – 289 BCE), born about 100 years after Confucius' death, is widely considered as the second most important thinker of Confucianism, after Confucius himself. Mencius believes that human nature is inherently good, and that benevolence, righteousness, propriety,

and wisdom are inherent positive properties of the human heart. Therefore, every person has the potential to possess an ideal character and the virtues, as long as he has the will (The works of Mencius, 1963):

'He who dwells in the wide house of the world, stands in the correct station of the world, walks in the great path of the world; one who practices virtues along with the people when he is successful, and practices the Way alone when he is disappointed; one whose heart cannot be dissipated by the power of wealth and honors, who cannot be influenced by poverty or humble stations, who cannot be subdued by force and might—such a person is a great man.' (p. 72)

'All things are already complete in oneself. There is no greater joy than to examine oneself and be sincere. When in one's conduct one vigorously exercises altruism, humanity is not far to seek, but right by him.' (p. 79)

The path to the 'great man' is not easy one. But Mencius argues that life would be of little meaning if there is no hardship:

'When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, put him to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, so as to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent.' (p. 78)

Mencius believes in a high level of human agency as he believes that each person should exercise his will toward an ideal personality. He fully acknowledges the difficulties of this task, but Mencius is optimistic that eventually every person can achieve this goal with the right motivation and the right methods. And like Confucius, he also expands his theory to the political field, arguing that benevolent governance should be practiced. He proposes that benevolent governance could be achieved by prioritizing the people over the state, using benevolence and righteousness as the guiding principle, and adopting the 'benevolent way' over the 'hegemonial way', and the 'benevolent rule' over the 'tyrannical rule' (The works of Mencius, 1963):

'[In a state] the people are the most important; the spirits of the land and grain (a metaphor of the state) are the next; the ruler is of slight importance.' (p. 81)

'All men have the mind which cannot bear [to see the suffering of] others. The ancient kings had this mind and therefore they had a government that could not bear to see the suffering of the people. When a government that cannot bear to see the suffering of the people is conducted from a mind that cannot bear to see the suffering of others, the government of the empire will be as easy as making something go around in the palm.' (p. 65)

In sum, the Confucian thinkers advocate high levels of human agency. They believe every individual should and

could have their own will. They are optimistic that people could achieve their goals. And they propose practical methods to help people realize their potentials. Importantly, they see this agency not only in the individual, but also in the collective. They believe that individual agency and collective agency stem from the same principle and they facilitate each other.

II. Taoism

Taoism is a school of thought centered on the doctrine of *Tao* (meaning The Way). It advocates following the natural order and being passive and inactive. It was founded by Lao Tzu (birth and death unknown, perhaps born in 581 BCE or 571 BCE). He put forward a system of thought, taking *Tao* as the origin of all things in the universe and the law of movement and change. He advocates that '*Tao follows nature*'. He dismisses the power of individual will, morality, skills, and the governance of the state. He believes these all harm the individual and the state, since active actions actually cause destruction rather than progress (Tao-Te Ching, 1963):

'Abandon sagacity and discard wisdom; Then the people will benefit a hundredfold. Abandon humanity and discard righteousness; Then the people will return to filial piety and deep love. Abandon skill and discard profit; Then there will be no thieves or robbers. However, these three things are ornament and not adequate. Therefore, let people hold on to these: Manifest plainness, Embrace simplicity, Reduce selfishness, Have few desires.' (p. 149)

Chuang Tzu (399 BCE – 295 BCE) is considered the second most important Taoist philosopher. He emphasizes the unpredictable nature of the *Tao*, believing that all things are relative, and everything is the same, including life and death. Therefore, he advocates a state of doing nothing. For example, he composes a dialogue between Confucius and his student Yen Hui to explain the idea of 'sitting down and forgetting everything' (The works of Chuang Tzu, 1963, p. 201):

"Confucius' face turned pale. He said, 'What do you mean by sitting down and forgetting everything?'

'I cast aside my limbs,' replied Yen Hui, 'discard my intelligence, detach from both body and mind, and become one with Great Universal (Tao). This is called sitting down and forgetting everything.'"

This state of 'sitting and forgetting' dissolves the physical senses and individual perceptions, and so abandons the individual will. The Taoist philosophers regard thinking as superfluous, and advocate not pursuing material desires. As Lao Tzu said:

'I have three treasures. Guard and keep them: The first is deep love. The second is frugality. And the third is not to dare to be ahead of the world.' (p. 171)

Taoism discourages human motivation in all senses, not only at the individual level, but also at the collective level. Taoists believe that proactive human actions can only bring bad consequences to themselves and the community. Therefore, the best strategy for the rulers is 'no action' (Tao-Te Ching, 1963, p. 166):

Therefore, the sage says: I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple.'

In Lao Tzu's language, 'Ruling a big country is like cooking a small fish' (p. 168), the society is as delicate as a small fish, rulers who frequently intervene people's lives would make the society fall apart, like a fish that's overcooked. He said:

'When the government is non-discriminative and dull, the people are contented and generous. When the government is searching and discriminative, the people are disappointed and contentious.' (p. 167)

Lao Tzu believes that high levels of collective agency will lead to high levels of individual agency, and both collective and individual agency are bad:

'They are difficult to rule because their ruler does too many things.' (p. 174)

Therefore, the ideal Taoist world is one in which both the society and the people follow the natural ways to live a comfortable life, without pursuing luxurious or ambitious goals:

'Let there be a small country with few people. Let there be ten times and a hundred times as many utensils but let them not be used. Let the people value their lives highly and not migrate far. Even if there are ships and carriages, none will ride in them. Even if there are armor and weapons, none will display them. Let the people again knot cords and use them (in place of writing).'' (p. 175)

In sum, Taoists discourage innovation in both the individual and the collective sphere, they are pessimistic about actions for both rulers and ordinary people, and they warn against imagination and creativity. The only thing people should do is to follow the 'natural way', which is sometimes as mysterious and unpredictable as gods' will. The level of agency is very low in Taoism.

III. Mohism

The school of Mohism was founded by Mo Tzu (c. 468 BCE – 376 BCE). It was one of the most popular schools during the Warring States period and it has 10 core doctrines: 'Promoting the Worthy', 'Identifying Upward', 'Universal Love', 'Condemning Aggression', 'Moderation

in Use', 'Moderation in Burials', 'Heaven's Intent', 'Understanding Ghosts', 'Condemning Music', and 'Condemning Fatalism'.

Though Mohism emphasizes Heaven's Intent and advocates understanding and respecting ghosts, it does not simply give up efficacy from humans to the spirits. In Mohism, Heaven's Intention and Ghosts' Wills are often synonyms for other core Mohism doctrines (The works of Mo Tzu, 1963):

'Those who obey the will of Heaven love universally and benefit each other, and they will surely obtain rewards. Those who oppose the will of Heaven set themselves apart from each other, hate each other, and injure each other, and will surely incur punishment.' (p. 219)

In general, the trend in the East Zhou period was to pay reverence to the heavens while aligning the will of heaven with the will of the people (Feng & Guo, 2005). Mo Tzu opposes the doctrine of predestination, believing that fatalism undermines individual effort. He argues that fatalism makes individual initiative meaningless and that a belief in fatalism causes people to naturally fall into a negative state:

'If the doctrine of the fatalist is put into practice, the ruler above would not attend to government, and people below would not attend to their work. If the ruler does not attend to government, then law and government will be disorderly. If the people do not attend to their work, wealth and resources will not be adequate The unreasoning adherence to this doctrine is the source of evil ideas and the way of the wicked man.' (p. 225)

What makes Mo Tzu stand out among the East Zhou thinkers is his emphasis on 'universal love'. Unlike Confucian love that is based on the level of closeness of a specific relationship, Mohism 'universal love' requires that all people be loved equally, regardless of affinity. So, confrontation between states, families, and people can all be avoided, and the political ideal of peace can be realized. In particular, Mo Tzu linked 'universal love' and 'mutual benefit' together. Mohism advocates that benefiting people is the form of loving people, and benefiting people is the purpose of loving people, so that universal love will inevitably lead to mutual benefit, and eventually 'generating the great benefit of the world' (p. 127). Mo Tzu believed that universal love was the manifestation of the 'Heaven's Intent', and the goal of the collective will:

'The benevolent always take it as their duty to promote what is beneficial and eliminate what is harmful to people in the world.' (p. 127)

In order to achieve the collective goals, Mo Tzu emphasizes 'Identifying Upward', which required

ideological and political centralization, and the obedience of subordinates to superiors:

'Report to your superior any philanthropic or pernicious act you see or hear of. Trust what your superior trusts; reject what your superior rejects.' (p. 85)

In sum, Mo Tzu promotes agency, but emphasizes collective agency more than individual agency. He honors the gods and spirits, but only uses the 'Heaven's Intention' to encourage people to do the right thing. In fact, by condemning fatalism, he strongly advocates human efficacy. He is optimistic about a human future with universal love and non-aggression. He is imaginative in proposing a brand-new political system that would lead to universal love and mutual benefit of the most people. Furthermore, Mohists made significant contributions to scientific fields like math, optics, and mechanics, as well as to logic and epistemology. However, in order to achieve their grand goals, Mohists put collective agency ahead of individual agency. An ideal Mohist state is organized like a political pyramid, in which subordinates must obey their superior to be efficacious. Mo Tzu believed that, in this way, collective agency could reach its highest point, even though individual agency was somewhat suppressed. While Mo Tzu advocated his theory from a benign standpoint, his view was borrowed by the Legalists to ultimately lead to authoritarianism and tyranny that deprived people of individual agency.

IV. Legalism

Legalism advocates the rule of the people by harsh and strict laws to strengthen the power of the monarchical dictatorship. It gradually becomes the mainstream political philosophy in the late Warring States period, in response to the brutal wars between the states. The state of Qin, which adopts Legalism most thoroughly, also becomes the most fearsome military power. Qin eventually wipes out all the other states and reunites China. Legalism becomes the official ruling ideology of the Qin dynasty that followed (221 BCE – 207 BCE).

Shang Yang (c. 390 BCE – 338 BCE), one of the most prominent Legalists, becomes the most trusted minister of the king of Qin and he successfully transforms the kingdom into a legalism state. He believes that the law is more important than morality (Shang, 2006):

'The benevolent may be benevolent towards others, but cannot cause others to be benevolent; the righteous may love others, but cannot cause others to love.' From this I know that benevolence and righteousness are not sufficient for governing the empire. A sage has a nature that insists on good-faith, and he also has a law (method) by compels the whole empire to have good-faith. What is

called righteousness is when ministers are loyal, sons filial, when there are proper ceremonies between juniors and seniors, and distinctions between men and women, when a hungry man eats, and a dying man lives, not improperly, but only in accordance with righteousness. This, however, is the constant condition, when there is law. A sage-king does not value righteousness, but he values the law. If with the law one sees to it that it is clear, and with commands that they are carried out, then it will be all right.' (p. 267)

Another Legalism master, Han Feizi proposes that 'the law as the teaching' and 'the magistrates as the teachers' (The works of Han Feizi, 2018).

'Therefore, in the state of the enlightened sovereign there is no literature written on bamboo slips, but the law is the only teaching; there are no quoted sayings of the early kings, but the magistrates are the only instructors; there is no fierce swordsmen who are only loyal to their patrons, but slaughter of the enemy of the state is the only courageous deed. Hence, when the people of such a state make a speech, they say nothing that is in contradiction to the law; when they act, it is in some way that will bring useful results; and when they do brave deeds, they do them in the army. Therefore, in times of peace the state is rich, and in times of trouble its armies are strong. These are what are called the resources of the ruler.' (p. 187)

Legalism strongly inhibits individuals from acting on their own. The purpose of 'the law as the teaching' and 'the magistrates as the teachers' is to prevent individuals from acting against the ruler by listening to their own moral codes and their own inner judgments. It requires all people to act in unison with one goal. In a Legalism state, people do not have the right to carry out political actions or choose their own social lives. Their actions are evaluated by the degree to which they can realize social functions, which are the duty of the people (Li, 2008). For example, since manpower is essential for agricultural production and for warfare, private fighting undermines the state, so the law of Qin prohibited private fighting in order to preserve human resources (Xu, 1993).

In sum, Legalism does promote human agency, but only as collective agency, not at all as individual agency. In fact, Legalists see collective agency and individual agency as a zero-sum game. This is in stark contrast to Confucianism which believes that collective agency and individual agency are a positive sum game that facilitates both because they come from the same moral source.

As a result, the states that adopted legalism became stronger military powers, and the state that transformed itself most thoroughly into a legalism state, Qin, became the strongest of all. The collective agency of Qin is extremely high. As a state, it launches numerous wars to eradicate one state after another, and eventually

accomplishes something that no one else ever does in Chinese history: to rule all of China directly. With an unbelievably high level of collective agency, the level of individual agency is abyssmal in Qin. Individuals have to submit to the collective and they cannot make many decisions on their own. Only the collective designs and imagines the future, and individuals should not be creative. The rulers, in charge of the collective agency, were very optimistic about the future. For example, Yin Zheng, the king of Qin who reunites China, called himself Emperor Qin Shi Huang, which means 'The First Emperor of Qin', and commands that the following successors be counted as the second emperor, the third emperor, to the ten thousandth emperor, lasting forever. He believes that his dynasty will be indestructible. But ordinary people are pessimistic about their future. They are enslaved into endless wars, servitude, and torture. Chen Sheng, the leader of the uprising that ultimately overthrows the Qin dynasty, faces execution simply because his mission is delayed by the rain. He says, '*Desertion means death and so does revolt. Since the risk is the same, why not die for our country?*' (Sima, 2017, p. 89) This pessimistic mindset of eventual death is common to the people under the harsh law of Qin. In short, Legalism's high level of collective agency is achieved at the high cost to individual agency.

Progress during the Eastern Zhou (770 BCE – 220 BCE)

In general, most schools of thought during the Eastern Zhou period advocate high levels of human agency, with Taoism as a notable exception. The other mainstream schools, like Confucianism, Mohism, and Legalism, offered different views that all required high levels of human agency to solve the difficult problems in this chaotic time. Wang (1905) named this period as the Agentic Epoch of Chinese philosophy, because it was the most creative, dynamic, and diverse period in Chinese history.

Significant progress in addition to progress in thought – scientific, artistic, political, and quality of life – occurred over this epoch in Chinese history. The Eastern Zhou period was the first peak of China's scientific and technological development. Iron smelting technology brought efficient production tools to agriculture, which greatly accelerated progress in farming and intensive cultivation. With the use of astronomical calendars, water resources and geography, crop varieties and crop yields improved. The social status of craftsmen improved significantly, and their works exhibited highly sophisticated skills.

Much of the Chinese philosophy, literature, and political thoughts can be traced back to this highly creative period. The vassal states actively recruited thinkers, scholars, political advisors, economists, military leaders,

craftsmen, and artists to compete with each other. Private schools sprang up. Cultural exchange and trade were frequent. An intellectual class emerged, breaking the noble class's monopoly on education and culture. Because of all this progress, Jaspers (2014) considered it the Axial Age of China.

The frequent wars caused large scale migration. The development of trade and the opening of many land and water transportation routes increased communication among regions. Many new cities emerged, and existing cities expanded. As the population increased and cities grew, the demand for commodities increased. The use of metal coins increased in the late Spring and Autumn period, indicating the gradual development of commerce and industry (Liang, 2016). Hou (2008) pointed out that the rise of the city and the emergence of the new intellectual and craftsmen class indicated that the status of individuals was increased, thus allowing their creativity to flourish, leading to the technological revolution and political and economic reforms during this period. By hypothesis, the great progress of the Eastern Zhou period certainly correlates with increasing level of human agency and this is consistent with the belief in agency causing progress.

In the early Eastern Zhou period, collective agency is often seen as an extension of individual agency. Schools like Confucianism which advocates individual agency also advocates collective agency, as long as they are both following the same moral principles. Taoism which belittles individual agency also belittles collective agency, both being against 'the natural way.' However, as the wars between the states became more vehement and crueler, many states then turn to legalism which suppresses individual agency to support maximal collective agency. Indeed, the kingdom of Qin which adopts Legalism most thoroughly achieves the highest level of collective agency. Qin founds an unprecedentedly gigantic, powerful, and effective empire. This high level of collective agency seems to have led to a high level of collective progress. However, Qin suppressed individual agency so deeply that the great empire collapsed even faster than it was built.

The Qin and Han dynasties

The Qin dynasty only lasts 14 years. After 4 years of civil wars, Liu Bang reunites China and founds the Han Dynasty which then lasts for more than four hundred years (202 BCE – 220 CE). During the Qin and Han dynasties, China remains united and peaceful for most of the time. Historian Huang (1997) named Qin and Han

as ‘the First Chinese Empires’ and he argued that the First Empires were unique in Chinese history.

The ruling philosophy of the First Chinese Empires changes with time. The Qin empire was a full-fledged Legalism state. After its collapse and bitter civil wars, the early Han rulers (202 B.C. – 141 B.C.) adopt Taoist political philosophy and its collectively passive posture. During the Emperor Wu of Han’s reign (141 B.C. – 87 B.C.), a hybrid Legalist-Confucian doctrine gradually takes shape and becomes the mainstream ruling philosophy throughout the rest of the Han dynasty, though the balance between Legalism and Confucianism constantly oscillated. The level of agency, the balance between collective agency and individual agency, and social progress differ in these periods as well.

The Qin dynasty

In the Qin dynasty, as discussed in the previous section, legalism suppresses individual agency to maximize collective agency. In its short reign of 14 years, Qin launches numerous massive projects, including:

- connecting the short walls of the north borders of different warring states to form what we know today as the Great Wall;
- building roads that connect the capital with all major areas in China. These roads are often compared to the Roman roads;
- defeating the nomads in north and the barbarians in south, which greatly expands the territory of China;
- building canals in Southern China;
- unifying writing and pronunciation in the Chinese language;
- building grand palaces and the Qin Shi Huang Mausoleum with thousands of terra cotta warriors.

Clearly, the Qin empire must have had high levels of efficacy, optimism, and imagination to undertake these vast projects. However, such collective agency is a dangerous mindset for ordinary individuals, whose best strategy is to just obey the collective unconditionally. But this extreme relationship between collective and individual is unsustainable. The year after Qin Shi Huang’s death, individual agency erupts in uprisings everywhere, and the seemingly almighty and indestructible empire falls in just three years.

Some of the grand Qin projects benefit the people, at least in the collective sense. For example, the Great Wall helps the people in northern China defend themselves against the nomad invasions, the canals in Southern China help improve people’s living standards, and the

network of roads makes transportation and trading easier. However, individual lives are miserable in the Qin dynasty, as the people are de facto slaves of the state. The living standard is low. People are forced to do heavy labor works for no or little pay. The high level of collective agency and low level of individual agency seemed to have led to a high level of collective progress but no individual progress in the Qin dynasty.

The early han dynasty

After the Han dynasty is founded, the rulers learn Qin’s lessons and decide to adopt a completely different political policy, Taoism. Therefore, for about sixty years, the state becomes passive and seldom launches massive projects except for wars against rebellions and invasions. Even for the nomad enemies in the north, Han rulers choose to bribe them with trades, gifts, and marriages to get peace rather than fight them.

Even though Taoism is adopted as the ruling philosophy, the rulers do not impose this on ordinary activities. Various art, music, and literature traditions that were banned in Qin dynasty revive, leading to a renaissance of culture. Private schools emerge, teaching different schools of thoughts. The school that eventually becomes most popular among the people is Confucianism, which, unlike Taoism, advocates human agency.

During this period, taxes are low, and people are seldom drafted to work for the empire. The economy develops quickly, and food is abundant and inexpensive. The law becomes more benevolent: corporal punishment, for example, is banned (and never reinstated for the rest of Chinese history). Population doubles, from 18 million to 36 million. It seems that the low level of collective agency doesn’t necessarily lead to low collective progress. Even with almost no massive collective projects, but with a renewed level of individual agency, there is considerable social progress.

The reign of the Emperor Wu of Han

The Emperor Wu of Han (156 BCE- 87 BCE) rules China for 54 years, a record only broken 1,800 years later. His reign has far-reaching influences. He adopts advice from the Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu to promote Confucianism as the official ideology of the empire. However, the Confucianism they adopt is a hybrid of Confucianism ideology and legalism political operations: ‘Interactions Between Heaven and Mankind’. Dong argues that Humans are duplicates of Heaven (Fung, 1953, p. 30):

‘Heaven has its own feelings of joy or anger, and a mind (which experiences) sadness or pleasure, analogous to

those of man. Thus, if a grouping is made according to kind, Heaven and man are one . . . The duplicate of Heaven lies in man, and man's feelings and nature derive from Heaven.'

Therefore, human actions are the manifestations of heaven's will. For Dong, there is no conflict between human agency and god's agency. They are reflections of each other. The status of mankind is greatly lifted, which justifies humans to be more efficacious, optimistic, and imaginative.

As Fung (1953) pointed out, Dong's theory provides theoretical endorsement for the ruling class. If human actions are reflections of Heaven's will, then the fact that people are ruled by the emperors implies that the emperor rules through the Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, the people should obey the emperors' orders unconditionally, otherwise they would be at odds with Heaven's will.

In contrast to original Confucianism which asks the rulers to be moral examples themselves, Dong advocates regulation of the people by force and laws directly (Pan, 2005):

The ruler above teaches the people below, and the people below obey the ruler above, just as clay is put in a model to be processed by a potter, or as metal is put in a vessel to be cast by a smith.' (p. 1903)

Dong explains that the situation had greatly changed since Confucius's time, hence the original mild, gradual, and benevolent moral leadership has to be replaced by strict, vehement, and utilitarian reforms (Pan, 2005):

The toxic influence left over from the Qin dynasty are like a residual flame that has not been extinguished to this day; it has caused customs to be thin and evil, the people to be fraudulent and obstinate, to resist and revolt, to break the law and rebel against virtue, and to corrupt to such a serious extent. Confucius said, "Rotten wood cannot be carved; Walls of mud cannot be whitewashed." Now after the Han dynasty succeeded the Qin dynasty, the social condition was like rotten wood and mud walls, and although one wanted to govern it well, there was no good way . . . Just like a harp, if the sound is not in harmony, the strings must be broken down and reinstalled before it can be played, if the political situation is bad, the old must be broken and the new established before it can be well governed. If the strings are not changed, they cannot be adjusted even if there are excellent musicians; if politics are not reformed, they cannot be fixed even if there are great sages. Therefore, the reason that the Han administration couldn't practice the benevolent rule as it wished, was that politics should be reformed but have not.' (p. 1905)

Though Dong quotes Confucius and claims that the reforms he proposes are for the ultimate purpose of

'benevolent rule', his theory nevertheless provides for Legalism. Emperor Wu adopts this hybrid Legalism-Confucianism as it serves him well to achieve ambitious goals, while remaining popular among the people because of the Confucianist branding. He exercises Legalism without the burden of the Legalism name whose reputation is notorious after the tyranny of Qin. Wu launches massive projects, including:

- large wars against the northern nomads;
- conquests of South China and parts of Vietnam;
- invasion of the Korean Peninsula;
- forced migration of rich and powerful families to better control them;
- monopoly of salt and iron trades by the state.

As during the Qin dynasty, the territory of Han expands greatly during Emperor Wu's reign, but the lives of ordinary people become much more miserable. They are frequently drafted to work for the emperor's massive projects, and they are sometimes forced to migrate to another place. Justice is very harsh. As recorded by Pan (2005), there are more than ten thousand people executed each year, and many are wrongly accused. Many people flee from this cruel governance, and many others take up arms to rebel. Farmlands are left uncultivated and the population drops by 4 million during Emperor Wu's reign.

While history seemed to be following the same trajectory of Qin more than a century later leading to further chaos and destruction, Emperor Wu now tilts the balance of Legalism-Confucianism to become more Confucian during his last years. He issues a 'Repenting Edict', in which he regrets his former policies, and stops the harsh laws and harsh political practices. After his death, his successors follow this Confucian policy. The hybrid Legalism-Confucianism continues to be the official ruling philosophy of the Han emperors, but they are seldom as legalistic as Emperor Wu. Their well-maintained balance between Legalism and Confucianism also leads to a balance between collective agency and individual agency.

Consistent with this philosophy, there is remarkable progress in the subsequent Han periods. Many important technological innovations emerge, including sophisticated ceramics, metallurgy, papermaking, and the waterwheel. In mathematics, textbooks like *The Arithmetical Classic of the Gnomon and the Circular Paths of Heaven* and *Nine Chapters on the Mathematical Art* are compiled, which includes partial proof of the Pythagorean Theorem. A mathematician, Zhang Heng, also approximates the value of pi, the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. Transportation is made

easier, and the Silk Road now extends from China to Rome. Trades flourishes along the Silk Road, as well as inside China. The Economy booms. Population increases from 32 million by the end of the Emperor Wu's time to 56 million by the end of the Han dynasty.

In sum, the history of the Qin and Han Dynasties suggests that not only the level of agency, but only the type of agency matters for progress. With high levels of collective agency and low levels of individual agency, there is chaos or even destruction rather than progress. When there is a balance between collective agency and individual agency so that both are reasonably high progress occurs.

Discussion

We reviewed the history of ancient China from 1600 BCE to 220 CE in order to examine the relationship between belief in human agency and progress. We found, consistent with Seligman's (2020) hypothesis, that higher levels of the belief in agency are linked to progress. During the Shang period, (1600– 1050 BCE) there was little belief in human agency and there was little progress. Their successors, the Zhou people (beginning in 1046 BCE) possessed higher beliefs in agency than the Shang people, and there was considerable progress. In the Eastern Zhou period (771– 256 BCE), many different schools appear. Most advocate high levels of agency, and this period is considered the golden age of China, and it is an age of progress. In the Qin (221– 206 BCE) and Han Dynasties (206 BCE – 220 CE), when both collective and individual agency are both high, there is much progress.

We also found that the type of agency and its balance matters as much as the level of agency. The history of late Warring States period (475– 221 BCE), the Qin dynasty (221– 206 BCE), and Emperor Wu of Han's reign (141– 87 BCE), except for his repentant end (90– 87 BCE), all show that when the level of collective agency is high, but the level of individual agency is low, there could be tremendous collective accomplishments, but at the cost very low quality of life for ordinary people. Too much collective agency was unsustainable and eventually collective agency had to be checked by individual agency.

On the other hand, the history of the early Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) shows that a low level of collective agency combined with belief in a high level of individual agency works well, resulting in progress in the individual level. There are not many collective accomplishments, but collapse is avoided.

Here is the apparent relation of agency to progress over the 2000 years history of ancient China: When the belief in individual agency is high, there is progress, no

matter what the level of collective agency is. When the level of belief in collective agency is high as well, there is progress at both collective and individual level. When the level of collective agency is low, there is still be progress, slow but steady. But when the belief in individual agency is low and when the level of collective agency is also low, there is stagnation. When the level of collective agency is high, but individual agency is crushingly low, there is initial massive collective success rapidly followed by chaos and destruction.

This article contributes to the theory of Agency and progress in two ways. First, it provides evidence in ancient Chinese history that supports the correlation of belief in agency with progress, suggesting that the major theoretical claim about agency and progress is not limited to the West. Second, there are cultural differences when applying the theory to Chinese culture, specifically about the influence of beliefs in collective versus individual agency and their relation to progress.

There are serious limitations to our work.

First, we see a correlation between high levels of belief in agency and high levels of progress in China, but we cannot infer causation. We cannot discern whether the belief in agency causes progress, or progress causes increased belief in agency, or if some third variable, such as better nutrition or more freedom, causes both. Or, as seems likely, the causation is reciprocal, with beliefs causing progress and progress causing belief change.

Second the historical epoch we examined is from the 16th century BCE to the 3rd century CE, parallel to the Greco-Roman epoch that Seligman (2000) examined. Both epochs surround the 'axial age' of these cultures. But we do not know if this theory of Agency holds for other epochs.

Third, we treat collectivism and individualism as a simple dichotomy. There are, however, periods and societies in which individuals willingly choose to be more collective, and societies in which people choose individualism willingly (Kagitcibasi, 2005). And there are periods, as we saw with the Qin dynasty and Emperor Wu, where collectivism is coerced, and individual agency is crushed. This implies another major factor: individual autonomy versus collective coercion. When individuals choose to pursue collective goals together, we suggest there will be progress. If collective goals are forced to the extent of crushing individual agency, there will be eventual collapse.

Future research will help to fill these gaps. We need similar analyses in other cultures, such as the Islamic world and the Buddhist world, as well as for other periods in Chinese history. Another important direction is the quantitative examination of the relationship

between agency and progress. Maymin and Seligman (under review) calculated the frequencies of agency words in the Bible, and found that there were more human agency-related words in the later books of the Old Testament than in the earlier books of the Old Testament, and more in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. The quantitative analysis of ancient Chinese texts is very difficult, but we encourage the attempt.

Finally, disentangling cause from correlation in history is difficult, but not completely impossible. Baumard's (2019) work on the Industrial revolution provides an example of such disentangling. Baumard asks if wealth itself might be sufficient to have caused the industrial revolution at the turn of the 18th century and in England. But the Dutch were as affluent, and the industrial revolution did not occur there. By eliminating multiple confounds, correlation in history moves slightly toward causation. Temporal sequence also helps disentangle correlation from cause. So, for example, in McClelland's (1961) classic work on the achieving society, he attempted to predict England's prosperity from achievement words in English literature. He reported that a steep rise in achievement words preceded increases in economic indicators by several decades (p.132–145).

In conclusion, we found that the belief in human agency in ancient Chinese philosophical and religious thought co-occurred with progress. This coheres with parallel findings from Greco-Roman and Biblical history and it suggests a new approach to history in which psychological states, such as agency, cause major historical events.

Notes

1. Yin was the capital city of the Shang dynasty, so it's often used as another name for 'Shang'.
2. The original Chinese character corresponding to the word 'ambition' here is *zhi*, which literally means 'will'.

Disclosure of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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