Chapter 1: The Axial Age as cultural transformation

A dream of social order

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Ken Baskin, Dmitri Bondarenko

Introduction

[With the] new theory and practice of battle . . . it was no longer killing in the service of the ancestors, but rather the organization of control of men in the service of the territorial prince that gave meaning to warfare.1

— Mark Lewis, Sanctioned Violence in Early China

From about 3000 to 1000 BCE, the most developed societies, from Egypt and Mesopotamia to India and China, governed very different cultures with similar social institutions. Agricultural surpluses were collected and distributed by central governments based in their mythological religions. (Greece, as we’ll see, was an exception.) People in these societies believed that their kings had special connections to the gods or ancestors, and the kings were therefore responsible for the rituals that kept society ordered and prosperous. These kings governed by relying on the loyalty of an aristocratic class. War was mostly an exercise in aristocratic honor, a lot like what Homer shows in the iliad.

Throughout this period, the successes of these societies led to major changes:

- Population grew, as the largest cities more than tripled from 4,000 in 3000 BCE to 15,000 in 1200 BCE2(22,34);
- Technology advanced, as the use of iron tools and weapons began to spread about 1200 BCE and horses and wheeled vehicles started being used in war about the same time3;
- Trade between political entities – and the amount of wealth overall – also intensified starting about 1500 BCE4.

By 1200 BCE, this change began to overwhelm many of these societies. In the Eastern Mediterranean area, states from the Aegean through the Fertile Crescent and Egypt had become an interdependent economic system5. Then, a series of shocks, probably including a climate shift and internal rebellions, led to a collapse of this system. As a result, many of the powers in this area – Mycenae in Greece, the Hittites in Turkey, Ugarit in Syria – collapsed. Egypt survived attacks by the “Sea People,” as they called them, populations that may have been migrating from states that had collapsed, but Egypt would never be a world power again6. In China, the Zhou Dynasty would expand through the 10th century BCE, but fall apart in the 9th. Eventually, 170 independent kingdoms emerged7. The successes of these societies had changed their world so much that they needed a new set of social survival strategies.

The Axial Age reconsidered

Karl Jaspers8(1) characterized the period (c. 800-200 BCE) in which those new strategies emerged, as the “Axial Age,” the “axis in world history . . . which has given birth” to everything that followed. Jaspers and his school of thought explains the similar experiences in Greece and Israel, India and China largely in terms of their spiritual transformations. For him, these transformations happened unpredictably in these weakly connected, very different cultures9,10,11,12,13. However, for Jaspers, “The Axial period too ended in failure”14(20), because the teachings of Socrates and Confucius, Jesus and Buddha did not transform humankind.

This book takes the position of another school of thinkers14,15,16. Here, the Axial Age is not just a spiritual event, but a socio-cultural process of transformation. As a result, the experiences of the Greeks, Israelites, Indians and Chinese are individual. Each transformation reflects its society’s history, existing culture, and local events at the time. That’s why Schmuel Eisenstadt calls them “multiple axialities”17. Yet the process is similar in all.

In Greece and Israel, India and China, the old social order, grounded in the old survival strategies, would break down so thoroughly that people in them would have to re-form their societies. New religious approaches were part of that re-fashioning, but so were new approaches to politics, economics and technology. No longer limited by traditional ways of thinking and acting, they could experiment “with new ways to view the human world”18(74). The breakthroughs that resulted from this experimentation would be tested and eventually institutionalized. And, so, these societies’ breakdowns would result in social
breakthroughs\textsuperscript{14}, including the “religions of the book,” bureaucratic empires, and increasingly market-oriented economies.

This axial transformation could only occur where the breakdown was complete enough to free people from their old ways of thinking. For instance, the breakthrough of monotheism helped Israelite — and, later, Christian and Islamic — society to develop new institutions that transformed their social survival strategies. Yet, monotheism appeared in both Persian Zoroastrianism and Egypt’s pharaoh Akhenaton long before it did in Israel\textsuperscript{18}. Persian and Egyptian societies did not break down fully enough for monotheism to transform them. In Greece and Israel, India and China, however, that breakdown was full enough to free people to bring about a thoroughgoing social transformation.

It’s worth emphasizing that this sort of axial transformation was in no way “inevitable.” It was a specific set of adaptations that occurred in only four Eurasian societies. Axial transformations occurred only where increases in population, advances in technology and growing wealth overwhelmed the existing social network and, then, something new evolved.

The key question this book will explore, then, is: How does a society reinvent itself? To explain the dynamics of social reinvention, we want to introduce a concept we call “world stories”\textsuperscript{19}. Any society’s world story provides the storehouse of strategies it can use to thrive as a culture. Egyptian or Greek mythology, the Torah in Israel or the Vedic literature in India, are all examples of world stories.

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In this book, we use the word “story” in a very specific way. To create a story, the storyteller chooses the most important details of an experience, puts them in order, and gives them a point of view\textsuperscript{20}. While people usually think of stories as fictions — a play by Shakespeare, a novel by Dostoyevsky, a film by Hitchcock, or what you tell your spouse when he/she “can’t handle the truth” — more and more research over the last 25 years suggests that telling stories, to ourselves as well as others, is essential to being human.

In neurobiology, for example, researchers discovered a part of the brain that turns a person’s experience into stories. Without that person being conscious of the process, this “interpreter module”\textsuperscript{21} weaves together sense impressions and memories into a coherent story so that she can figure out what’s happening. In fact, coherence is so important that the brain will “confabulate” — make up details — to fill in things that she doesn’t know. Once the brain creates the story, she can decide how to respond to the situation.

Storytelling, then, is the way human beings explain events around them so that they can act on and learn from them. In this way, every person forms a story about the world that is reflected in his or her personality. Every family, organization, religion, profession and state develops a story about how people within it should act toward others in and outside the group.

Research in cultural anthropology further suggests that storytelling began with our evolutionary ancestor, Homo Erectus, about 1.8 million years ago\textsuperscript{22}. While this early storytellers used mime, gesture and dance, rather than language, their stories enabled them to, communicate and teach each other. In fact, their storytelling helped them spread from Africa to Ice Age Europe, tropical India, and even Australia. By 50,000 years ago, our Homo Sapiens ancestors had developed the ability to tell stories with language. With it, they spread across the globe and came to dominate environments from the Arctic Circle to the Amazonian jungles.

Merlin Donald\textsuperscript{22} even speculates that storytelling had become such a powerful survival strategy that language evolved in order to tell better stories. Stories in language made it possible for our hunter-gatherer ancestors to remember large amounts of information, including events beyond their lifetimes. It enabled them to draw each other detailed verbal pictures about the movement of animals they hunted or hostile bands. It gave them a way to teach tool making and discuss innovation. It enabled them to create meaning and build order in a chaotic world. It made it possible for them to recreate their social worlds so that they could survive as hunter-gatherers, farmers, city dwellers, and world travelers.

In the end, telling stories with symbolic language may well have been one of the most important advantages human beings had in outlasting their Neanderthal cousins, whose less sophisticated language limited their ability to communicate\textsuperscript{18}.

However, because storytelling is such a powerful survival strategy, people often come to believe that their stories are the reality they created those stories to explain. If the world changes, people often experience only what was included in their old stories and fail to behave appropriately. So, 17th century Chinese quite accurately thought their seafaring Western visitors were barbarians. What this story hid was that by the 19th century, those barbarians would become capable of inflicting the “hundred years of humiliation” on China. Unless people realize that they experience stories that explain the world, rather than the world itself, those stories can end up being as self-destructive as they once were essential for survival.

— On stories

Perhaps the most powerful single such story is a society’s world story. That power lies in the way they answer some of the most fundamental questions of human life, including:
What is the origin of human beings, and what do they owe the invisible forces that created and maintain them?
What does it mean to be members of the group in which one forms an identity, and how should members treat other members and outsiders?
How should people manage the communities in which they live?
And perhaps most crucial, in a world where fear and pain are unavoidable, why should anyone choose to live, rather than die?

In answering these questions, world stories present the model for how people in a culture survive and thrive. This model both limits what people who accept any such story can do and think and offers a platform for experimentation. World stories do not, however, determine what people will do. Rather, they act as storehouses of possibilities that people can put in action. With this shared set of stories about how to live in their societies, people can create a social framework for discussing what is happening around them and how to respond. They can then take action on events, and see how effectively their world stories let them deal with the events. If their actions are not successful, people can amend their stories. In this way, world stories provide the model for cultural learning.

Historians have often treated world stories as “religious” or “philosophical.” This book treats them differently. For us, the issues labeled “spiritual,” “economic,” “political,” and “technological,” are thoroughly interlaced.

While each axial experience was unique, all four followed a common pattern in which their world stories evolve. That pattern includes six phases, which occurred more or less consecutively:

1. Political fragmentation;
2. Social experiments grounded in foundational stories – a vision of cultural success based on its society’s old world story;
3. Intensification of warfare;
4. Appearance of a new world story;
5. Developing commentary of that story, so that the society can amend its approach to unexpected challenges, and;
6. Emergence of empire.

In a short book like this, we can only follow this pattern in two cases. We chose the Greek and Chinese axial experiences for two reasons. First, as Alan Watts notes, they are the most different of the “high cultures.” If the Greek and Chinese axial experiences follow a similar path, that path should offer a valid model of axial transformation. Second, historians know the most about the Greek and Chinese experiences. (Readers interested in learning more may want to look at the Israelt experience, and for the Indian experience.)

**Initial conditions**

It should not be surprising that Greek and Chinese cultures are so different. After all, people in them had to adapt to very different geographic, social, and economic conditions.

Greece is a land of islands and a small mainland of mountain chains that act as natural barriers. As a result, human communities, even cities, tended to develop as relatively small and politically independent. Moreover, the land was not nearly as rich as that in Mesopotamia, Egypt, or China. Agriculture was largely limited to grapes (wine) and olives (oil), with barley as the only viable grain. To support larger populations, the Greeks had to focus on commerce, and its cities became a nexus for trade between Europe, the Middle East, and Egypt. Greece also became a crossroad for invasions and migrations, including those of the Indo-Europeans, c. 2000 BCE, and of the Sea People, c. 1200 BCE. The combination of their history of invasions and the constant change of an economy based on trade made the creation of order extremely important. Socially, the transformation of chaos to order was ritualized in the agon, the formal contest, which appears in events from the Olympics to Plato’s dialogues.
Chinese culture, on the other hand, emerged in a geographically isolated society of farmers. Theirs was a world of familiar faces and routines, tied to the soil and the rituals with which they strove to maintain order. In this world, kinship was the key to survival not merely in their daily life, but in the ancestor worship by which “ancestral spirits” helped maintain “the ritual order.” As a result, “the unit of [social] isolation [was] not the individual, but the group,” and the village was the basic social unit. Most people lived their lives in one village; so harmony, through submission to authority, was central. In addition, social order depended on people managing their personal networks, as it appears to have been in tribal societies. Law would only become an issue when people were unable to manage those networks. Where the Greeks adopted the agon as the ritual for creating order, the Chinese preferred harmony and submission to authority, in rituals of ancestor worship, family life, and kingship.

Yet, in spite of these differences between Greek and Chinese cultures, the dynamics of their axial experiences are remarkably similar. Let us now look at the six phases of their experiences, first the Greek version, then the Chinese.

**Fragmentation**

The Greek political centers, especially Mycenae, flourished in the 14th and early 13th centuries BCE, prospering from their trade with powers such as Egypt and Ugarit, in today’s Syria. However, by 1200 BCE, a series of factors, from over-population to a breakdown in trade, overwhelmed the Greek social system. The “essentially artificial way of life [of the Mycenaens] … was unable to take the strain.” Following this breakdown, a dark age spread through much of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In China, the Zhou Dynasty overthrew the Shang c. 1040 BCE. The Zhou expanded their empire, as a succession of kings sent about 200 members of their lineage line to rule domains in their name. Much of that time was peaceful, as Chinese armies stopped fighting Chinese armies. However, as trade and wealth increased, and the loyalty of those lords decreased through much of the 9th century BCE, the power of the central government drained into local power centers.

In both cases, the result was political fragmentation. By about 700 BCE, Greece included several hundred poleis, city-governed political units; several hundred others resulted from colonizing Asia Minor and the Mediterranean through the 6th century BCE. In China, estimated population grew from about 13.5 million in 800,000 c. 800 BCE to about 10 million c. 400 BCE. In China, estimated population grew from about 800,000 c. 800 BCE to about 10 million c. 400 BCE. In China, estimated population grew from about 13.5 million in 2200 BCE to about 30-40 million in 221 BCE.

In both, the pre-axial society, whose order depended on aristocrats’ loyalty to the king’s lineage, could no longer manage their increasing complexity. That complexity can be measured in several ways:

- While there are no population estimates for Greece during the dark ages, its estimated population grew from about 800,000 c. 800 BCE to about 10 million c. 400 BCE. In China, estimated population grew from about 13.5 million in 2200 BCE to about 30-40 million in 221 BCE.
- Wealth increased, as cultural centers in Mesopotamia and Egypt, India and China, discovered each other, starting about 1500 BCE. This trade led to an inter-state commerce, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean; it increased desire for prestige possessions among an expanding elite; and it created the need for more craftspersons and merchants, and;
- Technological innovations in writing and manufacture, metallurgy and warfare, enhanced societies’ ability to support larger populations. As a result, war became more destructive, and the ability to spread and innovate with new ideas accelerated.

These developments formed a self-reinforcing cycle that would further increase social complexity through the Axial Age.

The concept of social complexity is central to this book. Traditionally, social historians and anthropologists considered it a matter of structure. The more levels of socio-political integration a culture has, the more complex it is. More recent work views social complexity as a dynamic of cultural evolution. This book focuses mostly on a dynamic understanding. Social complexity increases in response to: increasing population and role diversity in it, advances in knowledge and technology, growth in trade and wealth, and the difficulty of governing larger populations. Because these forces tend to drive each other, social complexity generally increases. That increase has been historically likely but not necessary, occurring in the interplay of factors that drive both stability and change. For example, a high level of social complexity in Europe during the Roman Empire was followed by a lower level in the Medieval period.
Two technologies proved especially important. First, Indo-European herders in the Caucasus began experimenting with iron as early as 2500 BCE, introducing it into the Middle East through trade. Iron was more plentiful and eventually became cheaper than bronze. So, it would be possible to produce highly effective tools that were affordable for larger groups of people. In addition, the Chinese could feed armies of several hundred thousand soldiers in the Axial Age because iron plows increased agricultural productivity. In combination with spoked-wheel chariots and curved compound bows (c. 1000 BCE), iron metallurgy made it possible to transform war from a ritualized battle for honor among aristocrats to a massive exercise in political domination.

The other key technology was writing. Writing systems that could effectively communicate spoken language emerged in Mesopotamia, and a little later, Egypt, toward the end of the 4th century BCE, about the time the first states arose. By the middle of the 2nd century BCE, writing had spread throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. The origins of Chinese writing are more mysterious, but the system seems to have developed fully by the middle of the 2nd century BCE. Before the Axial Age, writing remained almost entirely “sectorial” – that is, it was used among a small minority of educated elites, in specific sectors of society. In this way, writing was mostly used for social control, whether among the priests who managed agricultural surpluses or the scribes who served the bureaucracy. During the Axial Age, however, writing would become the way to communicate culture, from ancient classics to the most recent ideas. With the text in front of them, people could now examine their thought and that of others. This move toward self-reflection is one of the most important innovations of the Axial Age. Writing would also make it possible to accumulate and study much greater bodies of knowledge.

The political fragmentation in Greece and China accelerated the advances in both technology and social innovation. As the many political entities fought for leadership, people in them could try out a wide variety of new ideas, spurred by their competition. What provided the unity that held them together was the foundational stories they held in common.

Foundational stories articulate group identity as “remembered past,” mixing myth and history. This vision of the past created both a template for action and cultural unity in the midst of their political fragmentation. The threat of chaos dominates these stories in both Greece and China.

In Greece that fear appears in Hesiod’s stories of Uranus eating his children or Homer’s account of how Troy was destroyed as the result of a beauty contest. As painful and frightening as chaos may be, it is part of the natural world from which order emerges, a common element of pre-axial world stories. As in Hesiod’s story of the rape of Persephone, an act of violence becomes the basis for the Greek myth of agriculture, the ultimate image of order. Faced with this chaotic and capricious world, Homer weaves a myth of the aristocracies of the small Greek polities as fractious brothers, coming together to protect each other’s honor. So they go to war over Helen and defeat the eastern enemy, Troy. Even though the Trojan War appears to be mythic, its style of war is that of the pre-axial states, bronze-age aristocrats fighting for honor.

These Greek foundational stories reflected the simpler, pre-axial world, but also offered models for axial experiments. For instance, the Greek poleis resembled the small, independent polities of Homer’s epics, united by a common, Hellenistic culture. Yet, the poleis were also axial experiments, with their rejection of the traditional concept of kingship, an attempt at government that substitutes a more formal, participatory decision-making process for that of pre-axial family lineages. These experiments offered many approaches – from the militarist oligarchy of Sparta to the commercially democratic Athenian.

Much of Greece’s Axial Age history seems to act out its foundational stories. Until the Persian Wars at the beginning of the 5th century BCE, the poleis behaved like the fractious pre-axial polities Homer depicted in the Iliad, going to war periodically. Faced with a common enemy from the East, like Troy, they united to defeat the much larger armies of the Persians in 490 and 480 BCE. Having achieved this success, the poleis acted like brothers again, fighting over political and economic control. Without a unifying eastern enemy, their myth of fractious brothers would lead them into the Peloponnesian Wars. It would be in response to the devastation of these wars that Greece’s new world story would appear.

The foundational stories that produced a sense of unity among the Chinese kingdoms looked back to a Zhou golden age of peace and prosperity, depicted in one of China’s foundational texts, the Shujing (Book of Documents). By the time of the Zhou, the High God of the earlier Shang Dynasty (Di) had been translated into the more abstract concept of Heaven, much like Plato’s Realm of Forms, but more imminent within the world of matter. Schwartz calls it an “anthropocosmology in which entities, processes and classes of phenomena found in nature correspond to or ‘go together with’ various entities, processes, and classes of phenomena in the human world.”

This cosmology is very much that of a farmer, constantly attending to the cycles and transformations of nature. In this way, Heaven gives birth to Earth, and the Yijing, the Book of Changes, a foundational text that seems to have been formalized c. 1000 BCE, is a guide to the continually transforming world. Order was Heaven’s gift, and as long as humans followed the Dao, Way of Heaven, order would be the natural result. With divinity dwelling in the world, the mythic actors in China’s foundational stories are not gods, but early “sages.” For example, Yu created order by inventing irrigation and water control after the Great...
Flood of the Yellow River, and the kings Yao and Shu set the example for ordered public rule. Politically, this worldview appears as the “Mandate of Heaven.” When the Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty (c. 1040 BCE), the cultural emphasis on submission to authority demanded a justification. So the Duke of Zhou declared that the Shang had lost the “Mandate of Heaven” because of their wickedness and failure to fulfill their ritual duties. In this way, the foundational stories put responsibility on the king, who, through his proper ritual performance could influence his ancestors to intercede with Heaven to maintain order. For more than two millennia, these ideas were the backbone of Chinese political life.

As with the Greek experience, Chinese foundational stories also provided the basis for axial experimentation. The approaches to kingship of the Chinese kingdoms were variations on the theme of returning the order—and unity—that had been lost after the Zhou golden age. This movement toward unity was gradual. The “Spring-and-Autumn” period (771-476 BCE) witnessed a constant state of war; one account lists 540 interstate wars and more than 230 civil wars in a single 259-year period. In pre-axial China, warfare had been, as it was in Greece, an aristocratic exercise in honor. With the fragmentation of power centers, however, war became a destructive exercise in political domination.

By the 6th century BCE, iron was being increasingly used in China, at which time the iron plow appears. As a result, agricultural productivity shot up, as did wealth, population, and the ability of the remaining Chinese kingdoms to field massive armies. By the end of the 6th century BCE, warfare and the terror it spread was everywhere; corruption was rampant; and China’s rulers had unquestionably lost the Way of Heaven. By the end of the Spring-and-Autumn period, this warfare had reduced the number of competing states from 170 to seven. The devastation that accompanied it created a nightmare of chaos and drove both a deep sense that something was wrong and the search for how to address it.

To meet the challenge of governing amid such warfare, the great Chinese political experiment would be in bureaucracy. China’s traditional ancestor worship contributed little to a bureaucratic way of thinking. As a result, Chinese bureaucracy did not emerge until other religious cults and practices, such as rituals associated with the Mandate of Heaven, overshadowed ancestor worship in official ideology during the Warring States era. So, while Schwartz describes the Shang Dynasty, preceding the Zhou, as “protobureaucratic,” full bureaucracy would emerge only in the Axial Age, with experiments that would culminate in Legalist theories, as we’ll see. The ancestor cult continued to be important at the family and community levels of Chinese life into the 20th century; however, at the level of the state, the growing bureaucratization of the state would separate people from those in power.

**Intensification of war**

In axial Greece, the Persian invasions of 490 and 480 BCE and then the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BCE) reinforced the fear of chaos expressed in the foundational stories. The invasion of the Persians, vastly wealthier and with far larger armies, must have spread terror throughout the poleis, especially when Athens was burnt in 480 BCE. With the Peloponnesian Wars, the need for a new way of governing human life became unmistakable.

At the beginning of that war, the Athenians chose to draw their outlying population behind the city walls. But in 430 BCE, a plague broke out, leading to widespread terror. In addition, rather than fighting to a resolution, the armies of Athens and Sparta pillaged each other’s territory. The Greek historian Thucydides described the resulting lawlessness: “No fear of god or law of man had a restraining influence. As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshiped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately. As for offenses against human law, no one expected to live long enough to be brought to justice.” The resulting horror reflected not only people’s suffering, but also their inability to derive comfort, or even satisfying explanation from their foundational world story.

Dissatisfaction with the old world story is at the heart of the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, which appeared between the beginning of the Persian Wars in 490 BCE and the end of the Peloponnesian Wars in 404 BCE. These tragedies reflected on how even good people, such as Orestes or Oedipus, become caught in uncontrollable forces, no matter how hard they resist. In this way Greek tragedy could reflect “the political and cultural rise of Athens, its inner corruption, and its disastrous fall . . . during a century of prosperity and war, empire and chaos.”

These texts also reflect Timothy Reiss’ understanding of tragedy, “appearing at certain moments of seemingly abrupt epistemical change . . . making a new class of discourse possible.” Tragedy, then, defines the “moment of rupture,” as people recognize that the old ways do not work and new ways of thinking are needed. This “tragic” process “creates order [from chaos] and makes it possible to ascribe meaning to that order” (author’s italics). It would be the new world story, especially as articulated by Plato and Aristotle, that would address the need for the new way of thinking about the world that Greek tragedy announced.

A similar intensification of war dominated China’s Warring States period (403-221 BCE). What characterized the seven remaining kingdoms was “the unquestioned supremacy of a single, cosmically potent autocrat who ruled as the image of Heaven on earth, and the reconstitution of the public order around this figure through new forms of interpersonal ties and the extension of military service to the entire population of the state.” Warfare became the extension of the will of a single commander. Such commanders were supported by a growing literature of military science, for which Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* was
only the best-known example. Over this period, advances in technology, such as the crossbow, continued to intensify warfare. By 300 BCE, even Mencius (c. 372-289 BCE), the Chinese thinker most convinced of the goodness of people, recognized that 

The Chinese axial period did not produce an explicit tragic literature, as in Greece. Still, a similar tragic awareness of the need for a different way of running society emerged in the flowering of philosophic thought with the "shih," wandering scholars. These "schools" reflected various currents of thought, responding to the chaos of their time, and many of them contain elements of the tragic insight, the desire for a lost order that would make the new world story necessary.

New world stories

In Greece, the new world story was a dream of rational order. It would be negotiated over several hundred years, in several schools of natural philosophy, beginning with the Milesian "physicists" such as Thales (c. 625-547 BCE). These thinkers examined the natural world from a variety of positions. For example:

- Heraclitus (fl. c. 500 BCE) believed the world was in constant flux;
- The Atomists, such as Democritus (c. 470-404 BCE), saw a world of atoms obeying invariable laws of nature, "a lifeless piece of machinery" and;
- Pythagoras (c. 580-500 BCE) conceived of a cosmos ruled by the harmony of numbers.

Other thinkers focused on society. The Sophists, for instance, examined politics and the rhetoric essential to it. One of their most noted thinkers, Protagoras (c. 490-420 BCE), taught his students to question everything, including the gods, and argued that, not those gods, but man should be "the measure of all things." All this thought, rejected, accepted, or modified, would be canonized in the world story largely established in the philosophy of Plato (c. 428-347 BCE) and the practical applications of Aristotle (384-322 BCE).

Plato grew up near Athens during the Peloponnesian Wars, and as a man of about 30 watched the citizens of Athens execute his teacher, Socrates. In many ways, Plato's writings became an attempt to answer the Axial Age version of the world story questions: What is the origin and purpose of human life? How can we be so terrifyingly destructive to each other? And how could the polis best govern itself in order to contain the chaos that such destruction causes?

Plato's answer was that the design of the universe was orderly and rational, even though the universe itself might be messy and chaotic. However, understanding that design would enable some people to govern effectively. Rejecting the pre-axial gods, Plato argued for a creative spirit, the Demiurge (Timaeus), who was benevolent and desired to create order in the world, based on the abstract Forms of things. The true reality of any thing is in the rational, abstract Form from which the Demiurge created it, not the messy, chaotic examples one sees in everyday life.

Thus, in Republic (c. 380 BCE), he writes, "Until the person is able to abstract and define rationally the idea of good ... he knows neither the idea of good nor any other good; he apprehends only a shadow..." This attempt to define the universe as essentially rational is reflected in Plato's emphasis on mathematics as a prerequisite for philosophical study, as well as his enthusiasm for understanding the movement of the planets through mathematics. Change, in Plato's world story, is an illusion. It is in its identities, derived from divine Forms, that things are real.

In this world, where abstract Forms are more real than what humans experience, chaos did not enter as a result of the Demiurge's design, but because of the material with which the Demiurge worked. As Plato details in his Parable of the Cave (Republic), most people live in a world of "shadows," dominated by emotion and appetite, content with the old myths, the unfalsifiable stories of mythology. They are unable to perceive the Forms. To avoid the chaos that Athens had experienced during the Peloponnesian Wars, Plato offered an "alternative basis for Greek culture," replacing Homer's heroic ideal with that of the theos, the philosopher who "loves the spectacle of truth." The theos would allow most citizens to have their myths, but they themselves would live by the rational, "falsifiable" logos -- the stories of logical examination.

Aristotle, born after the Peloponnesian Wars, "was able calmly to look around the new world that Plato had opened up and explore its many possibilities, without rancor." Plato's Demiurge would become Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover," a divinity of pure thought, beyond our world of matter, and the cosmos it created. Below the Moon was our chaotic, ever changing world; above it, the unchanging Heavens, rotating in perfect crystalline spheres. Humans created chaos only because they would not allow the pure intellect of the divine to guide them. Chaos was no longer a part of the natural world, as it had been in pre-
For the Daoists, the overly civilized order of the Confucians had made it impossible for people to behave naturally, in harmony extensively to achieve order in post-axial China. For the Daoists, the overly civilized order of the Confucians had made it impossible for people to behave naturally, in harmony extensively to achieve order in post-axial China. 

One final thinker would complete the Greek world story. Epicurus (341-270 BCE) was born long after both the glories and terrors of the 5th century BCE. Like Plato and Aristotle, he assumed that the world is rationally knowable. As a result, he insisted that nothing should be believed, except that which was tested through direct observation and logical deduction. Contrary to Plato and Aristotle, he was sure that senses, not reason, can help establish truth and lead people to realize what is good and therefore desirable, as well as what is not. For that reason, the task of each person is to maximize happiness and minimize harm to themselves and others. Such a life should be lived without drawing attention to oneself. Living in the Athenian polis in decline, Epicurus, advocated seclusion from political activities. This pulling away from the political life that had been so important in the 5th century BCE, reflected Epicurus’ belief that the gods, unlike those of Homer, had no interest in human beings. Instead, they enjoyed constant bliss in the space between infinite spontaneously developing worlds. For Epicurus, society arose as a contract between people, with the aim of causing no harm to each other. However, they tended to forget that they can change all the laws and customs to serve their mutual benefit.

While this dream of order in the Greek new world story was rational, in China, it was social. Han Dynasty historian Sima Qian (d. 86 BCE) divided the many varieties of Chinese philosophy into six meta-schools. Each of these schools drew deeply on traditional thought, as one might expect in a culture of ancestor worship. Three are critical for understanding the new Chinese world story – Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism. 

For Confucians, the ideal social order had already existed in the Zhou’s “universal, all-embracing, ethicopolitical order.” In this golden age, the king carefully fulfilled his ritual duties, behaving with ren, translated “benevolence” or “kindheartedness.” Only by re-establishing that order could chaos be tamed. To do so, Confucius (551-479 BCE) and his followers focused on the need for people to live according to the ritual formulas for their positions. Confucians also emphasized education as a means for both individuals and society at large to understand the Dao, the “Way.” The Confucian Way focused on society, demanding that:

- People observe li, the appropriate ritual behavior, in all actions;
- Relationships exist as a network of dyads – husband/wife, father/son, ruler/minister, for instance – in which the former had both power and the responsibility to take care of the latter, and;
- Those in charge of government know the “proper” way to do all things, as articulated by the ancestors, hence the critical importance of education.

The ideal king would set an example that could be reenacted through the personal networks that flowed from him, throughout government and society, just as village elders had been responsible in China’s traditional farming culture. The king’s example was central. While law was necessary for extreme cases – the Chinese word for law, fa, also means “punishment” – it could not enforce orderly behavior throughout a society so deeply dependent on relationships. As Graham summarizes his thought:

What Confucius dreams of is a society in which civilized behavior will ‘just come naturally’ ... The tao can, in fact, be restored to the world only by the noble man’s sustained conscious efforts, by painstaking self-scrutiny, scrupulous attention to behavior, unflagging devotion to the cultivation of learning, attentive practice of li and conscientious service in government. 

Politically, Confucius viewed the state as a family or clan, and the king as a family or a clan head. These ideas were rooted deeply in the pre-axial popular religious beliefs, especially China’s ancestor cult. While Confucius’s teachings would dominate post-axial Chinese thought, they had little effect in his lifetime. War and chaos continued to intensify, and several responses emerged. Within Confucianism, the increasingly intense warfare set off a debate on the nature of humankind. Mencius (c. 372-289 BCE) held that human nature was essentially good and that force alone was not sufficient to produce order; the good king must win “the hearts of the people by benevolent government.” Still, the chaos of war convinced Mencius that order demanded a single ruler for China. On the other hand, Xunzi (c. 312-230 BCE) held that human nature was evil. The purpose of government, then, was to curb the desires of inferior people and convince them to accept their places. Xunzi’s belief in government-imposed social control would remain central to Confucian thought and be used extensively to achieve order in post-axial China.

For the Daoists, the overly civilized order of the Confucians had made it impossible for people to behave naturally, in harmony...
with the Way and the Heaven-given laws of change. Only when people learned the Dao and acted according to it, would order return. As Bellah notes, in both major Daoist texts, the Zhuangzi (attributed to Zhuangzi, c. 369-286 BCE) and the Daodejing (attributed to Laozi, alternately identified as a contemporary of Confucius and a government official in the first half of the 4th century BCE), “things started out well when humans were merged with nature, but began to go downhill when culture was invented.”

Where Confucius thought of the Dao as Heaven’s plan for the way of man in society, the Daoists seemed to think of it as the flow of the Universe, the “transformation of qi [energy]” (Zhang Zai, as quoted in 62(22)) as the “myriad things” of this world engage in their ongoing process of interacting and affecting each other. From this perspective, events have a rhythm of their own, and the wise person, the “sage,” can use an understanding of that rhythm to achieve his or her ends.

The road to a properly ordered society requires a king depending on a sage who understands the Dao. Such a sage can help the king structure society so that people will effortlessly behave in a way that produces order. This Daoist position relies on a deep, almost mystical connection with the world, rather than the Confucian attempt to control through highly structured relationships. In fact, the Daoist sage must “forget” all the socially imposed “learning” that blocks the ability to perceive the natural flow of the Dao. As a result of this connection to the Dao, the sage exhibits wu-wei, “effortless action.” The sage will therefore behave in ways that both express his or her deepest self and conform to the movement of the Way, where “proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell.”

For the Legalists, the chaos of the Warring States period resulted from the unruliness of human nature. That unruliness could only be tamed with clear, harshly enforced laws. In doing so, two Legalists – Shang Yang (390-338 BCE) and Han Feizi (280-230 BCE) – would be largely responsible for making Qin the Warring States kingdom that would unite China. For Han Feizi, agriculture and warfare were the two legitimate activities in the state, and warfare, “the primary institution used by the rulers of state to organize, rank, and control their subjects.” To translate this policy into social reality, Legalist advisors to the king of Qin:

- Divided the state into counties and the counties into small groups. People could then be punished for the crimes of others in their groups. This division also made it easier to record population and recruit for the army;
- Promoted soldiers through the military hierarchy based on how many enemies they had killed;
- Abolished the aristocracy and freed farmers to buy and sell land;
- Introduced a comprehensive tax system that exempted farmers and clothing makers who exceeded their production targets, and;
- Instituted harsh, but uniform laws that applied to everyone in the state.

All these reforms were to function automatically, rather than at the will of ruler or bureaucrats.

Legalist bureaucracy functioned “much closer in conception to Weber’s modern ideal-type than to a notion of patrimonial bureaucracy.” It relied on competitive tests to grant positions, rather than personal influence, and rewarded ministers who exceeded their objectives. As a result, Han Feizi helped create a state, driven almost mechanically, “by reliance on the negative and positive incentives of a universal, objective, and impersonal system of penal laws and rewards.” Han Feizi developed this bureaucracy when he served the king of Qin, who would become the First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang. At some point, however, the king became suspicious of him and had him commit suicide in 230 BCE. In spite of that, Han Feizhi’s principles formed the bedrock ideology of the Qin Dynasty, implemented by his successor Li Si (c. 280-208 BCE).

As a result of the ardor with which the First Emperor applied that ideology, his memory is both loved and regretted. Not only did he unify a state weary of war and develop a program of road and waterway building. Legalism’s insistence on standards also led him to develop a uniform written language that enabled people with China’s many dialects to communicate, as well as uniform standards for roads, weights, and currency. On the other hand, because he relied on Legalist advice, he is also remembered for burying 460 scholars alive and for the book burning beginning in 213 BCE, as well as for exorbitant taxation. Legalism thus developed a bad reputation and appears to have been ignored in China’s commentary period. Still, its principles became deeply woven into the Chinese conception of government, down through the Communism of Mao.

**Commentary on the world story**

Assmann describes the period of commentary as “an indispensable accompaniment to the cultural transformation … keeping those texts alive by bridging the ever widening gap between them and the changing reality of life.” During the Greek and Chinese commentary periods, Alexander the Great spread Hellenism; Rome rose in the West; and the Qin united China at the end of the Axial Age. During this period, which continued to develop the new world stories long after the “end” of the Axial Age in 200 BCE, population and wealth increased, and technology accelerated. Commentary on the new world story would enable people to make adjustments to the ways of governing and behaving in their increasingly complex societies.

In Greece, this commentary would play itself out, first of all, in the philosophy of thinkers such as the Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans,
and Neo-Platonists in the Hellenistic period. It would also develop in early scientific thinkers, mostly located in Alexandria, including:

- Eratosthenes, who drew the first map of the known world on a grid of latitude and longitude;
- Aristarchus, who used geometry to estimate the size of the Earth by comparing its movements to those of the Sun and Moon, and;
- Ptolemy, whose mapping of the movements of the planets with epicycles was accepted until the Renaissance, along with his speculations on optics, geography and musical theory.

Later, as Rome embraced Christianity, Fathers of the Church, such as Augustine and Origen, would further comment on this world story, drawing especially on concepts such as a soul separate from the body, the divinity as an Unmoved Mover, and the emphasis on moral distinctions. Many of these assumptions would be integrated into the world story of the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and then that of Western culture.

The Chinese commentary period seems to have been underway by the beginning of the 4th century BCE. Throughout it, Chinese thinkers of all schools would borrow from each other extensively. Han Feizi, for example, was a student of the Confucian Xunzi, borrowing his belief that human beings were essentially evil; he also borrowed from Daoist Laozi’s ideas about the Way and wu-wei, to provide a metaphysical justification for his emphasis on punishment. Throughout the subsequent millennium and a half, this discourse, largely between Confucians, Daoists, and, later, Buddhists, would continue, as different dynasties employed ministers of different beliefs. Finally, a mature form of Neo-Confucianism took form in the 13th century CE.

**Empire emerges**

In both Greece and China, the Axial Age concluded with empire building, which would lead to the conquests of Alexander, Rome in the early post-axial period, and the Qin and, then, the Han dynasties in China. A similar period of empires would emerge in India. It seems that the great social lesson of these axial experiences was that the more complex societies that had evolved required a single steady hand to wring order from the chaos. This common end point is particularly provocative given the vast differences in the world stories of Greece and China. While the Chinese story, from its foundational roots in the Confucian Warring States period, seems to have been underway by the beginning of the 4th century BCE. Throughout it, Chinese thinkers of all schools would borrow from each other extensively. Han Feizi, for example, was a student of the Confucian Xunzi, borrowing his belief that human beings were essentially evil; he also borrowed from Daoist Laozi’s ideas about the Way and wu-wei, to provide a metaphysical justification for his emphasis on punishment. Throughout the subsequent millennium and a half, this discourse, largely between Confucians, Daoists, and, later, Buddhists, would continue, as different dynasties employed ministers of different beliefs. Finally, a mature form of Neo-Confucianism took form in the 13th century CE.

In any case, without a more detailed examination of all four examples of the Axial Age transformation, any conclusions can only be tentative. What seems clear, however, is that the self-reinforcing cycle of increased population, advancing knowledge and technology, and more trade and wealth drove both the Greeks and Chinese to a survival strategy that included bureaucratic empire. And the really provocative question is how much we have to learn about Modernity when we treat it as a second axial age, to which we now turn.

**References**


