In traditional Chinese philosophy, epistemology was not an explicitly developed discipline, even if Chinese philosophers since ancient times were interested in problems related to human knowledge and developed some implicit theories of knowledge. Traditionally, there was no technical Chinese term equivalent to "epistemology" in Western philosophy, for which Chinese now use the terms "zhishilun" and "renshilun" as modern translations.

In contrast, metaphysics has been a central interest of terms "zhishilun" and "renshilun" as modern translations. In traditional Chinese philosophy, epistemology was not an explicitly developed discipline, even if Chinese metaphysics and epistemology.

In the discourse on the Way (daolun), in various forms, has always been an essential constituent of Chinese philosophy. The term "xinger-shangxue," or simply "xingshangxue," now serving as the Chinese translation of the term "metaphysics" in Western philosophy, comes from the great appendix of the Zhouyi (The [Zhou] book of changes, c. 6th –5th century BCE). The discourse on the Way (daolun), in various forms, has always been an essential constituent of Chinese philosophy. The term "xinger-shangxue," or simply "xingshangxue," now serving as the Chinese translation of the term "metaphysics" in Western philosophy, comes from the great appendix of the Zhouyi, where we read, "What is above forms [xing er shang] is the Way [daolun]; what is under forms [xing er xia] is concrete things [qi]" (Kong, juan, p. 158). Knowledge of metaphysical reality, essential to Chinese philosophy, is also a fundamental concern of Chinese theory of knowledge.

The following discussion will first deal with Chinese theories of knowledge, ascending from ordinary knowledge to science to wisdom. All three moments have their metaphysical presuppositions, especially wisdom, which is in essence the knowledge of ultimate reality and thus leads to metaphysics properly speaking.

**KNOWLEDGE**

It is easy to identify some texts in which traditional Chinese philosophers discussed the subject-object structure of knowledge or the knower-known relation in the process of knowing. For example, Xunzi (298–238 BCE) said, “That by which one can know is human nature; that which can be known are the principles of things” (p. 523). Mo Di (fl. 400 BCE) said, “Wisdom (zhi) is the capacity...
… by which, when one knows, one necessarily knows (as with eyesight)” (p. 212), and “Wisdom, by means of the capacity to know when in contact with things, enables one to describe it, like the seen” (p. 212). Unlike in Western epistemology, where the relation between subject and object or knower and known plays an essential role, in Chinese philosophy, this is only instrumental to a deeper dynamic process in which the individual attains knowledge of external things and cognitively appropriates objects in the world for building a meaningful life.

Chinese philosophers distinguished different types of knowledge, such as the Mohists' distinction between knowledge by hearsay, knowledge by explanation, and knowledge by personal experience, and Mencius's distinction between knowledge by the senses and knowledge by thinking. But more important is the Chinese concern with how to prepare the mind to know external things as they are, without bias. This can be seen in the Huanglao Daoist ideas of emptying (xu), unifying (yi), and quieting (jing) the mind. These notions were later developed by Xunzi as a way to attain the great clear enlightened state of mind (da qingming). Xunzi can be seen as the greatest theorist of knowledge in Chinese philosophy. The last master thinker in the Jixia Academy (374–221 BCE), Xunzi developed his epistemological thinking as theoretical support for scholarly argumentation in the academy, which consisted of different competing schools.

In the manner of an intellectualist, Xunzi emphasized humans' cognitive ability to discern right and wrong, which he termed “discernment” (bian). When expressed in discourse, this ability is displayed in what he called “discerning discourse” or “argumentation” (bian-shuo). Xunzi conceived of the Way as the ultimate standard for discerning right and wrong, which included classes (lei), coherence (tong), and distinctions (fen) as subcriteria. Since things exist in different classes or categories (lei), their corresponding names should also be divided similarly or differently, as the case may be. The function of discourse is to make proper distinctions and classifications (fen) among things and names. Finally, all classifications and distinctions in discourse should be composed into a coherent system (tong).

To judge right from wrong well, one has to keep one’s mind in a great clear enlightened state, attained by making one’s mind empty, one, and still (xu, yi er jing), ideas that Xunzi received and developed from the Daoists, especially (370–290 BCE). Xunzi understood that when the mind is empty, “what has already been stored [in the mind] does not hinder the reception of new knowledge,” that when the mind is one, “the knowledge of particular things does not hinder their unity,” and that when the mind is still, “dreams and noisy fancies do not disorder one’s knowing mind” (Xunzi, p. 510).

According to Xunzi, in the process of knowing and arguing for one’s knowledge, one must, negatively, discard all obscuring factors and, positively, be alert to other, easily neglected aspects of an issue in dispute. Human knowledge is expressed by concepts, which, for Xunzi, are names (ming). Names can be analyzed according to the concepts of intentions and extensions of Western formal logic. With respect to intentions, Xunzi distinguished between names discerning superiority/inferiority and names discerning identity/difference, representing concepts respectively indicating values and facts, for him the former being higher than the latter. With respect to extensions, Xunzi made the distinction between generic names (gongming) and specific names (bieming), analyzable by reference to the relations of “inclusion” and “belonging to” between classes and subclasses. Classes can be seen as the basis of all deductive and inductive reasoning. Since the Way, as the ultimate standard for judging right from wrong, can be classified into different classes (lei), lei is imbued with both logical and ontological meanings.

SCIENCE

Before modern European science emerged in the sixteenth century, Chinese science was much more advanced than European science, as shown by Joseph Needham in Science and Civilization in China. Chinese philosophers were often enthusiastic about and full of scientific knowledge. For example, Zhu Xi (1130–1200), though living in the twelfth century, was well acquainted with different kinds of scientific knowledge, and is therefore a good example to showcase the philosophical import of Chinese science. Zhu Xi can be seen as the great synthesizer of medieval Chinese scientific knowledge and its philosophical foundation, even if he lived earlier than such Western medieval thinkers as Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), Roger Bacon (1210–1292), Albert the Great (1200–1280), St. Bonaventura (1217–1274), and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Zhu Xi’s Wenji (Collected writings) and Yulei (Classified conversations) display his rich knowledge in the domains of calendrical astronomy, botany, music and harmonics, geomancy, medicine, etc. Also, he frequently discussed matters of science with his disciples, sometimes for the sake of scientific knowledge, sometimes to illustrate Chinese classical texts.

Some of Zhu Xi’s observations on natural phenomena are quite interesting and true. For example, he said, “Mountains were formed by the elevation of sea bottom.”
He then proceeded to prove it by pointing to the presence of seashells on top of mountains, saying, "On high mountains there are often seen shells of oyster and shellfish in the rocks. These rocks must have been earth in ancient times, and those shells from oysters and shellfish in the water. The lower becomes the higher, the soft becomes hard. This phenomenon is worthy of pondering upon, for these facts can be verified" (1999, bk. 5, p. 19). In this particular case, Joseph Needham admires Zhu Xi, writing, "Zhu Xi recognized the fact that the mountains had been elevated since the day when the shells of the living animals had been buried in the silt mud of the sea-bottom" (1959, p. 598). Note that Zhu Xi's remarks here concern mountain formation as well as fossils of sea animals. In other areas of science, Zhu Xi also correctly observed that the source of moonlight was the sun, and he correctly explained such phenomena as tides and eclipses of sun and moon.

Even if Zhu Xi was full of natural knowledge and was rational in attitude, he was not satisfied with the technical dimension of scientific knowledge and sought deeper understanding by exhausting the principles of all things and developing a holistic vision of reality. In fact, his interest in knowledge of nature should be understood in his philosophical concepts of *gewu zhizhi* (investigating things to extend knowledge). For Zhu Xi, *li*, meaning principle, reason, or order, could be found in everything and was worthy of investigation. He said, "As high as the Ultimate Infinite, the Great Ultimate, and as low as one herb, one tree, as tiny as one insect, each has its principle. … If we leave one thing uninvestigated, then we lack one principle" (1999, bk. 1, p. 295). The object of Zhu Xi's investigation was the order existing in other things, which presupposed that things and their principles possessed a certain otherness. The attainment of knowledge would include knowledge of other things and knowledge of self, or better said, a detour through the other that leads to a return to oneself, as when one finally achieves sudden penetration into the nature of things and attains transparent self-knowledge. Thus, the investigation of things is a detour in which one first goes outside one's self to the other and by knowing the other, one can finally come back to knowing one's own self.

So much for the Zhu Xi example. What is to be said about the epistemological specificity of Chinese science in comparison with European modern science? Generally speaking, Western modern science was historically grounded in the Greek heritage of *theoría*, the disinterested pursuit of truth and sheer intellectual curiosity. Aristotle said in his *Metaphysics* that science began in a way of life that included leisure (*rhaiostónē*) and recreation (*dissógiē*), such as the Egyptian priests enjoyed who discovered geometry. They did not need to care about daily necessities of life and could wonder about the causes of things and seek knowledge for its own sake. The result of their wonder was theories, whose meaning, according to Aristotle, was determined, in one sense, by practice, "not in virtue of being able to act, but of having the theory for themselves and knowing the causes" (*Metaphysics* 981b 6–7), and, in another sense, with respect to universal objects, seen by Aristotle as the first characteristic of science (*Metaphysics*, 982a 3–10, 20–23).

In contrast, Chinese science in general began as a concern leading not to universal theorization but to universal praxis. It was because of his concern with the destiny of the individual and society that Chinese began to philosophize. The great appendix of the *Zhouti* asserts that the study of changes began with concern and anxiety over natural calamity, not in leisure and recreation. It also suggests that the practical intention of Chinese science was to serve as guidance for a universal praxis. Nevertheless, both modern European science and traditional Chinese science are concerned with the universal, or better, the universalizable, character of science, the one more with universal theories, the other more with universal praxis, yet both of them criticize and seek to transcend particular interests, with a view to attaining universality.

Because of its pragmatic concern, Chinese traditional science, in thinking about the secrets of nature, tends to use concrete images and construct concrete models for understanding natural phenomena. These images or models came directly from an intuitive or speculative vision of reality. Models in traditional Chinese science were based on analogies, that is, they were concrete models of images or small-scale models that combined the functions of explanation and pragmatic operation. For example, the construction of astronomic clepsydras (water clocks), very important in Chinese astronomy and hydraulics, expressed the genius of traditional Chinese science. Here were models that linked the movements of the heavens with the more visible movement of water or other fluid to create a visible image. In modern terms, the Chinese way of thinking in science is more analogous in form, giving birth to images and icons, which provide a more intuitive grasp of a situation in action. By contrast, the construction of models in modern European science is guided by theories presentable in mathematic form. Such models serve to mediate between mathematical theories and concrete empirical data. Modern European science, as exemplified by Newton's physics and Leibniz's...
mathesis universalis (a universal science modeled on mathematics), is akin to the digital way of thinking and provides a more structured and lucidly conceptualizable understanding.

The special features of traditional Chinese science in comparison with modern European science concerning the epistemic structures involved in the process of constructing scientific knowledge are these: First, on the rational side, modern European science, in constructing theories, uses logically and mathematically structured languages to formulate theories of local validity, that is, with explanatory and predictive power in a particular domain of phenomena. In comparison, Chinese traditional science did not utilize logico-mathematical structures in its theory formation. Chinese never pondered about the structure of language to the point of elaborating a logic system for the formulation and control of scientific discourse. Mathematics, although highly developed, was used only for describing and organizing data, not for formulating theories. Chinese quasi-scientific theories, lacking logical and mathematical structure, were principally presented through intuition and speculative imagination. They might have the advantage of offering insight into the totality of life and environment and giving a reasonable interpretation of them, but these “theories” somehow lacked the rigor of structural organization and logical formulation.

Second, on the empirical side, modern European science is characterized by well-controlled systematic experimentation, which, by elaborating on the sensible data and our perception of them, keeps in touch with the real world, but in an artificial, technically controlled way. In contrast, the empirical data in traditional Chinese sciences were gathered through detailed but passive observations, with or without the assistance of instruments. Traditional Chinese science seldom tried any systematically organized experimentation to exercise active artificial control over human perception of natural objects.

Third, in modern European science, there is conscious checking of the correspondence between the rational side and the empirical side to combine them into a coherent whole so as to serve the objective of explaining and controlling the world. The rational side of science builds up a theoretical vision of the world, while the empirical side relates this vision to the scientist’s sensible construction and controlled experience of the world. Philosophical reflection, in checking the correspondence between these two aspects, assures us of their coherence and unity. In contrast, traditional Chinese science did not conceive of any interactive relation such as deduction/falsification or induction/verification or tests/confirmation to relate empirical knowledge and its intelligible ground of unity. Although Chinese traditional science did have its visions of proper science and knowledge in general, it did not have modern European science’s epistemological reflection and philosophy of science—disciplines that check the nature of and correspondence between empirical and rational constructs.

Still, there is unity in traditional Chinese science. Confucius (551–479 BCE) said that there is a unity binding, or a guiding thread penetrating, all his knowledge. Confucius thus seemed to affirm the complementary interaction between empirical data and thinking. He said, “He who learns without thought is confused. He who thinks without learning is in danger” (Analects 2.15). These words remind one of Kant’s proposition that sensibility without concepts is blind, whereas concepts without sensibility are void. But we should be clear that the mode of unity in traditional Chinese science was a kind of mental integration with ultimate reality through ethical praxis. Here praxis or practical action was not the technical application of theories to control concrete natural or social phenomena. Rather, it was an active process of realizing what is proper in the life of the individual and society. Science and technology are not to be ignored, but must be reconsidered in the context of this ethical praxis.

From the analysis above, it becomes clear that traditional Chinese science should be characterized as reasonable, and not rational in the sense of modern Western science. To be rational, one has to control the gathering of empirical data through systematic experimentation, to formulate theories in logico-mathematical language, and to check the relation of empirical data and theories through philosophical reflection. By contrast, to be reasonable, one has to find meaning for human life with reference to the totality of existence. Chinese philosophy, in its quest for what is reasonable, was caught in the tension between reference to the totality of human existence and reference to the totality of all existence. Confucianism insists on referring to the totality of human existence, whereas Daoism seeks to escape from the all too human tendencies of humanist philosophy and to refer rather to the totality of all existence, as expressed by the concept of the Way (dao). Daoist philosophy, as a philosophy anchored in the Way and the totality of all existence, and Confucianism, as a philosophy anchored in the totality of human existence, exemplify two complementary aspects of Chinese reasonableness.
Wisdom

Wisdom is the common concern of Chinese epistemology and metaphysics. Ultimately speaking, in all Chinese philosophical traditions, wisdom is what one’s knowledge should finally achieve, and wisdom in some sense always refers to what is really real, to ultimate reality. In ancient China, the same ideogram (zhì) was used for both knowledge and wisdom, but later a radical was added to the character to differentiate wisdom (zhì) from knowledge (also zhì). The modern term for wisdom is zhīhùi. Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, while using zhīhùi, prefers the term banruo, a Chinese phonetic translation of the Sanskrit *prajñā*. When Xuanzang (596–664) set up a system of regulations for his translation project, he showed a particular respect for the term banruo in his “five categories of terms not to be translated” (wu bù fān), while the Chinese term zhīhùi appeared for him to be superficial. Nevertheless, the term zhīhùi was also often used in Chinese Buddhism to express the idea of wisdom.

In Confucianism, wisdom means three things. First, wisdom means accumulating knowledge under a unifying thread or penetrating unity, as Confucius said. In this sense, knowledge comes from investigating the natures or principles of things so as to be able to unfold them according to their natures, instead of imposing theories upon them or exploiting their energy for human short-term interests. Second, wisdom means achieving total self-understanding. For Wang Yangming (1472–1529), this entails achieving one’s inborn knowledge, completely developing one’s true nature, and arriving at one’s full potential of the moral knowledge proper to humans. Finally, wisdom means awareness of one’s own destiny or heavenly mandate. Confucius took his understanding of his heavenly mandate, at age fifty, as a crucial point of his life. Also, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (c. 5th century BCE) says, “Wishing to know man, he must not fail to know Heaven” (Chan, p. 105).

In Daoism, Laozi, despite its critical and negative attitude toward instrumental knowledge and calculation, as shown in its negative use of the term “knowledge,” nevertheless uses the term ming, defined as enlightened knowledge of the constant law of nature: “To know harmony is to accord with the constant; to know the constant is wisdom” (chap. 55). According to Daoism, to be wise, which is more than possessing mere intellectual knowledge, is to know the constant laws of nature, and from there, to be one with the Way and thereby to live a life of freedom, understood not as merely making free choices or arriving at autonomous decisions, but rather as complying with the spontaneous rhythms of nature.

In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, the Chinese term banruo is taken to mean only perfect wisdom. This is a development of the Indian tradition, where the term *prajñā* means knowledge as well as wisdom, perfect wisdom as well as imperfect wisdom. In Chinese Buddhism, wisdom means attaining enlightenment, a state in which one understands that all is empty and thus seeks to rid oneself of original ignorance. The term zhīhùi (wisdom) was used to translate *prajñā*, especially in Weishi’s (for example, in Xuanzang’s *Cheng Weishi Lun*, 659 CE) concept of transforming consciousness into wisdom (*zhuan shi de zhi* or *zhuan shi cheng zhi*). For the Weishi School, more Indian than Chinese, wisdom arises from Alaya consciousness (Alya vijñāna). But for the Sanlun School, wisdom means realizing the ultimate emptiness of the world. In Chan (Zen) Buddhism, wisdom is the immediate self-realization of Buddhahood in the details of everyday life.

In his *Banruo wuzhi lun* (Wisdom as nonknowing), Sengzhao (383–414) distinguished wisdom from common knowledge. For him, knowledge is epistemologically structured by the relation of the knowing subject and known object, and therefore is relative and limited to a particular object. The content of knowledge is expressed in logical propositions that should be free of logical contradiction. In contrast, wisdom is all-knowing and comprehends all things, including itself. Therefore, it lacks subject-object structure and is not limited and relative to any particular object. Its self-awareness results from its own crystal-clear mirroring and not from any self-reflection or intuition. For Sengzhao, wisdom was a mysterious function of a mind characterized by emptiness, and emptiness he identified with ultimate reality, which belongs to the ontology and therefore is beyond all logical considerations, including the principle of noncontradiction. For Sengzhao, wisdom was absolutely pure and was beyond all sorts of delusions arising from relative knowledge.

Jizang (549–623) developed a typology of three types of wisdom. First was ultimate wisdom (*shixiang banruo*), which penetrates into ultimate reality, or the emptiness of all things. This is the ultimate ground of the other types of wisdom. Second was illumining wisdom (*zhengguan banruo*), which throws light upon the ultimate reality in all its different facets and manifestations. In this application of ultimate wisdom in meditating on the essence of each and every thing, one comes to see that each of them is empty. Third was linguistic wisdom (*wenzi banruo*), which enables one to give powerful linguistic expression to the perfect congruence between ultimate reality and its manifestations.
METAPHYSICS AS KNOWLEDGE OF ULTIMATE REALITY

Metaphysics concerns knowledge of ultimate reality. Even if all the schools of Chinese philosophy used “dao” (the Way) as a common term to refer to ultimate reality, there were other terms used in different schools, even different terms used by different philosophers within one school. For example, in Confucianism, different Confucians took the concepts of heaven, humanness, sincerity, and principle or reason as ultimate reality. In the following sections, we will see what different schools took as ultimate reality: heaven, humanness, sincerity, and principle in Confucianism, the Way in Daoism, and emptiness in Buddhism.

ULTIMATE REALITY IN CONFUCIANISM. Generally, the concept of ultimate reality in Confucianism moves from heaven (tiān), a residue from ancient Chinese religious beliefs; to humanness (rén) in Confucius himself; then to sincerity (chéng) in Zì, Confucius’s grandson; and to mind (xīn) or principle (lǐ) in neo-Confucianism. In the prephilosophical tradition, the Shijing (Book of odes) and the Shangshu (Book of documents) used the concept of heaven, imbued with a religious sense, to represent God on High. A residue of this notion could still be found in Confucius when he said, “If heaven wished to destroy this legacy, we latecomers would not have access to it. Since heaven is not going to destroy this culture of ours, what can the people of Kuang do to me?” (Analects 9.7). Confucius also said that he prayed to heaven, yet heaven, though manifesting itself through regular cosmic movement, remained silent, thus maintaining a certain unfathomability. Confucius said, “Does heaven speak? And yet the four seasons turn, and the myriad things are born and grow within it” (Analects 17.19).

Confucius’s proper contribution consisted in proposing the concept of humanness (rén) as a transcendental foundation for ritual (lǐ). Humanness, a transcendental capacity in each person, had an ontological dimension in that it presupposed that all beings are interconnected, and this allows humans to be affected and respond to other people and things. Confucius considered this transcendental capacity of each person to affect and respond to others as the transcendental foundation of ritual. Sometimes humanness was combined with the Way to specify the way of humanness. With this metaphysical move, the concept of rén achieved metaphysical status in neo-Confucians such as Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073) and Zhang Zai (1020–1077), who extended humanness to the whole cosmos (a cosmic humanness), surely a metaphysical concept. Also, Zì (493–406 BEC), Confucius’s grandson, developed Confucius’s idea of ultimate reality in Zhongyang (Doctrine of the Mean) with the concept of sincerity (chéng), which had two levels of meaning: On the psychological level, chéng meant being true to one’s own self; on the metaphysical level, chéng meant the really real, truth, or reality itself.

Under the influence of Tiantai Buddhism and Chan Buddhism, realist neo-Confucians such as Lu Xiangsan (1139–1193) and Wang Yangming took mind imbued with moral values to be ultimate reality. Such a mind was attainable through moral practice and moral effort. They thereby laid the foundation for a kind of moral metaphysics. In affirming that the Great Ultimate is principle or reason (lǐ), the realist neo-Confucian Zhu Xi took principle or reason to be ultimate reality. For Zhu Xi, even if everything has its own principle, by way of metaphysical participation they share their reality with the cosmic principle that ultimately governs the whole world.

ULTIMATE REALITY IN DAOISM. Daoism coherently used “Way” (dao) as a metaphysical concept to denote various levels of metaphysical reality and ultimate reality itself. Etymologically, the ideogram for dao is composed of two elements, the head and the act of walking on a way. Together they mean a way on which one could find direction and a way to some point. Though dao was never limited to the idea of a physical way, this image of a way suggests the meaning of dao: The dao puts everything on its way. In common use, dao also means “to say,” “to speak,” or “to discourse,” such as the second “dao” in the opening of Laozi, which says, “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way” (chap. 1). In Daoism, the function of discourse is always negative. Discourse, once said, must be hushed; words, once written, must be erased. One can never discourse about ultimate reality in any human language. This is quite different from Western philosophy, from the beginning of which emphasis has been on the function of language, of logos, to express reality. Apart from these two levels of meaning, dao in Daoism has three other uses that are more philosophical:

First, it refers to laws of becoming or laws of nature, especially in the term tiān dào (the Way of heaven) or tiān dì zhī dào (the Way of heaven and earth). In Daoism, the laws of nature have two aspects: (1) The structural law says that all things are structurally constituted of different yet complementary elements, such as being and nonbeing, yin and yang, movement and rest, weak and strong, and so on. (2) The dynamic law says that once a state of affairs has developed to the extreme in a process of
change, it will naturally move to its opposite state of affairs.

Second, it refers to the origin giving birth to all things. If all things are regulated by laws of nature, there must be an origin that gave birth to all things, there must be a cosmic law. Normally, the origin gives birth to all things in a process of differentiation and complexification, as indicated by these words in Laozi: “The Way gave birth to one. One gave birth to two. Two gave birth to three. Three gave birth to all things” (chap. 42).

Finally, it refers to ultimate reality. The Way ultimately represents the ever self-manifesting act of existence. If there is an origin giving birth to all things, then before the origin, there must be a self-manifesting act of existence, defined in relation to all things. The self-manifesting act of existence is reality itself, whereas everything we say about the Way is but a constructed reality, which can never be reality itself. One can mention the Way to express something about it, but what is said becomes a constructed reality and not reality itself. To keep one’s mind open to reality itself, all human constructions stand in need of further deconstruction.

Most of the time in traditional Daoism, these three levels of the Way were closely related one another, so closely that they were often mixed up and seldom clearly distinguished in the texts. It is with philosophical effort that they can be analyzed into clearly distinguished aspects of a well-connected whole. This is to say, in traditional Daoism, ultimate reality and its multifaceted manifestations can be logically distinguished but are not ontologically distinct.

ULTIMATE REALITY IN BUDDHISM. Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, like Indian Buddhism, takes emptiness as ultimate reality. Although the Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* has many meanings in the Indian tradition, its Chinese equivalent *kong* has three major philosophical meanings, each with its own focus: First, on the ontological level, emptiness means that all things come and go through interdependent causation and therefore lack any self-nature or substance of their own. Second, on the spiritual level, it means that the spiritual achievement of the sage consists in total freedom, attaching himself neither to being nor to nonbeing, neither to dualism nor to nondualism, not even to any form of spiritual achievement, no matter how high or deep it is. To keep one’s spirit totally free, one must even empty the emptiness. Third, on the linguistic level, emptiness means that all the words we use are artificially constructed, without any fixed correspondence or reference to reality.

Although Indian Buddhism put more emphasis on the ontological and the linguistic senses of emptiness, Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, generally speaking, emphasized mostly the spiritual sense of emptiness. For example, in the *Buzhen kong lun* (On the emptiness of the unreal), Sengzhao, appropriating Daoist philosophy, interpreted emptiness as the spiritual achievement of a sage (though he also gave other meanings to the term “emptiness”). For example, we read, “The sage moves within the thousand transformations but does not change, and travels on ten thousand paths of delusion but always goes through. This is so because he leaves the empty self-nature of things as it is and does not employ the term ‘emptiness’ to make things empty” (Chan 1963, p. 356, with corrections).

The spiritual achievement of a sage, who has no attachment to the realm of either being or nonbeing, not even any attachment to his own spiritual achievement, results from a mysterious function of his mind, which on the one hand is nonsubstantial and empty, yet on the other hand is mysterious in function and self-transcending. Because of this, the Way (emptiness as the ultimate reality) and sagehood are not far away from us and can be realized at the moment of enlightenment. “Things when touched become real. … Man when enlightened becomes mysterious” (Sengzhao, vol. 45, pp. 152–153). The idea of a mysteriously enlightened mind rendering real all things touched by it significantly influenced other Chinese Mahayana schools, especially Tiantai and Chan. In Tiantai and Chan Buddhism, the mind was taken to be ultimate reality.

INBORN KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL METAPHYSICS

Idealist neo-Confucianists, such as Lu Xiangsan and Wang Yangming, considered moral knowledge as inborn and the realization of moral knowledge to be the only access to the really real. They were idealists in the sense that they took mind as the ultimate reality, identifying the human mind and the cosmic mind, which they saw as the ontological source of all values and moral knowledge. For them, knowledge meant mainly moral knowledge and was therefore value-laden. Since moral knowledge comes from the mind, humans must be capable of knowing it before all empirical knowledge. As a kind of innate knowledge, it is to be realized through human moral effort and moral practice, called “realization of innate knowledge” by Wang Yangming. Innate moral knowledge is like a permanent light within everyone, arising before the emotions. The individual realizes it by overcoming
selfish tendencies, and thereby arrives at ultimate reality. Morality was thus considered a pragmatic way to access ultimate reality, and thus had metaphysical import.

Inheriting this line of thought, Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), a well-known figure in modern Confucianism, proposed the idea of moral metaphysics (daode de xingshangxue). He distinguished between moral metaphysics and the metaphysics of morals, the latter being a metaphysical study of morality and therefore moral philosophy rather than metaphysics. His idea of moral metaphysics represented an effort to emphasize the role of Confucianism and moral actions in Chinese metaphysical thinking. He also distinguished between the moral metaphysics of Confucianism and the liberation metaphysics (jietuo de xingshangxue) of Daoism and Buddhism. Even for Mou, these three traditions of Chinese philosophy saw the human mind as capable of intellectual intuition (zhi de zhi jue), yet he preferred the Confucian way of attaining ultimate reality through moral practice and moral self-awareness. He thought that humans could achieve intellectual intuition through moral action and realize the noumenon of humanness (ren), which represented for him the ultimate reality or the thing in itself. Sometimes Mou named it “the free infinite mind/heart,” or “the true self,” that, as noumenon, possessed universality, infinity, and creativity, and through a process of self-negation similar to Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s “I” positing a “non-I,” it could unfold itself into a world of phenomena. In Mou’s philosophy, intellectual intuition is an act of self-awareness of the free infinite mind, which replaced the concept of a personal God in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

Mou’s moral metaphysics, by making Confucianism a kind of metaphysics, and thus making Confucian moral praxis an instrument for attaining ultimate reality, neglected the proper value and practical methods of Confucian moral praxis. Also, he considered morality a matter of finding one’s true self, without relation to others, and thus without a proper ethical dimension. In this way, Confucianism lends its own weak points to a grand metaphysical system modeled after European philosophy. Also, by positing such an exclusively moral metaphysics, Mou neglected other metaphysical experiences, such as those in encounters with nature, in artistic creativity, in religious piety, and in historical encounters—all so rich in metaphysical implications in traditional Chinese culture. In his absolute idealism, Mou blurred and even confused the distinction between reality itself and constructed reality.

**METAPHORICAL METAPHYSICS**

Chinese philosophical traditions such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all hold that ultimate reality, whatever its name, always has an unfathomable dimension and therefore is hidden from all human constructions and human languages. For this reason, the terms Chinese philosophers use to indicate ultimate reality—terms such as tian (heaven), ren (humanness), cheng (sincerity), dao (the Way), the mind, principles, emptiness, etc.—are used metaphorically rather than descriptively or ostensively. They express ideas about ultimate reality with a certain tangible image of it, which is to say that they are in some sense image-ideas, instead of pure ideas. Chinese philosophers, when grasping ultimate reality with enlightening insight, tend to form original image-ideas, something between a pure idea and an iconic image, thereby retaining the holistic character of the manifestation and the intuitive nature of the perception. This idea-image evokes the richness of ultimate reality without exhausting it, and therefore has the status of a metaphor.

This basic characteristic of Chinese metaphysics provides foundations for Chinese artistic, moral, and scientific practices and historical actions. Artistic creativity, by imagination and poetic transformation, renders this idea-image into a concrete iconic image and thereby materializes it. In moral and ethical reasoning, practical reason brings the idea-image to bear on an ethical situation, leading one to intervene and thereby take moral responsibility. In science, natural philosophers built models with reference to image-ideas, creating analogical images of reality so as to grasp natural processes in an organic and holistic way. In the historical arena, one can discern, by referring to idea-images, traces of notions of ultimate reality in the historical events and actions taken by historical agents. In this sense, Chinese art, ethics, science, and history are imbued with metaphysical significance.

Generally speaking, metaphor allows us to see one thing as something else. In other words, metaphor has an “as-structure,” a term first used by Martin Heidegger to characterize interpretation. In the Chinese tradition, metaphysics or discourse on the Way is already a metaphorical interpretation of ultimate reality. Compared with the original manifestation of ultimate reality, various ways of realizing idea-images also possess an as-structure, in the sense that they allow us to see ultimate reality as idea-images, the later thereby serving a certain metaphorical function. In this sense, Chinese metaphysics can be characterized as a kind of metaphorical metaphysics. Viewing it in this way, one can achieve a true understanding of the spirit of Chinese philosophy.