

Research paths of ancient Chinese logic reexamined

PHILOSOPHY

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After Western logical frameworks were introduced to China in modern times, researchers tended to compare Western and Chinese theories of logical reasoning when examining ancient Chinese logic. This tradition led to an almost obsessive pursuit of similarities between the two logical systems, and major blind spots regarding their differences. Some scholars notably overlooked differences in favor of similarities.

However, philosophical debates in ancient China differed from those in ancient Greece, and ancient Chinese logic, characterized by *ming* (naming) and *bian* (disputation), is not parallel to conventional Western formal logic. Ancient Chinese thoughts boast unique political ethics, thinking patterns, and linguistic philosophies. Researchers have also been reassessing the strategy of placing an undue emphasis on similarities between Chinese and Western logical models, only to go to another extreme, focusing too much on differences, or rejecting comparative studies. However, simplistic research models will reduce the value and significance of ancient Chinese logical systems.

Reflecting on existing studies

As Western logic has spread, developed, and been applied in China, there has been a rise in research focused on ancient Chinese logic using a comparative approach that combines Chinese and Western perspectives. Some scholars have exclusively relied on traditional Western logical frameworks or employed modern deductive systems to interpret ancient Chinese logic.

China and the West differ vastly in terms of language, thinking patterns, and discourse systems. The Western discourse system is based on symbolic language and formal logic, and values deductive analysis and scientific rationality. In contrast, the Chinese discourse system is grounded in pictographs of the Chinese language and places an equal emphasis on formal and non-formal logic. The Chinese thinking pattern stresses synthesis, summarization, and dialectical unity. Therefore, the singular pursuit of similarities between Chinese and Western thoughts can hardly reveal the panorama of ancient Chinese philosophy and logic.

This research phenomenon has also drawn attention from academics specializing in Chinese philosophy and ethics. They argue that it is one-dimensional to attempt to understand and interpret philosophies of the various schools of thought during the Warring States Period (479–221 BCE) only from the perspective of logical reasoning.



Research works on Mozi Photo: Chen Mirong/CSST

The use of a simplistic theoretical model may potentially obscure the rich connotations and multifaceted semantic meaning of classical concepts. Therefore, it is not advisable to blindly adhere to Western formal logic when attempting to interpret ideas in classical Chinese texts.

For example, the advocacy for making clear similarities and differences in Mohism or Moism, a major school of philosophy during the Warring States Period, and the conceptualization of *lei* (class) in *Master Lu's Spring and Autumn Annals*, an encyclopedic Chinese classic compiled at the end of the Warring States era under the patronage of Qin-Dynasty (221–207 BCE) Chancellor Lyu Buwei, bear resemblances to Western logical insights. However, it is difficult to get a glimpse into the distinctive features of ancient Chinese intellectual culture, particularly its political-ethical implications and moral standards, or associate these with concrete historical situations, contexts, and the practical occasions when ancient Chinese logic was applied, by explaining classical Chinese thoughts through the lens of Western logic.

Scientific comparative studies need to seek similarities from differences and vice versa. During comparative research on logical systems, the focus on similarities or differences should be determined by specific research objects and purposes. Researchers should not merely refer to the theoretical framework of Western logic. Instead, attention should be paid to classical Chinese texts themselves, and research should start from the historical and cultural background of ancient Chinese society, as well as Chinese ancestors' understanding and argumentation practices, thereby uncovering the unique characteristics of ancient Chinese logic as much as possible.

Classical Chinese texts essential

Classical Chinese texts are voluminous and profound, posing great challenges to researchers. Current research mainly sheds light on texts

with outstanding logical insights, yet is mostly fragmented and unsystematic. It's hard to make out a clear approach for comparative studies which can connect logical insights from different periods, schools, and figures in ancient China, or clarify the inheritance and evolution of a logical thought, as well as its realistic significance, from the breadth of history.

In addition, when studying ancient Chinese logic's characteristics through classical texts, researchers are inclined to reject China-West comparative studies, or seek differences only, which is also unfavorable to comprehensively understanding the value and meaning of ancient Chinese logic. It is essential to map the commonalities and consistencies between Chinese and Western logic, while figuring out their unique features, in order to realize communication, dialogue, and complementation between the two logical systems. This comparative approach calls for greater attention to intellectual origins and historical contexts of ancient Chinese logic's formation and development.

During the special historical period marked by the "contention of a hundred schools of thought," the realistic appeal of putting an end to social unrest and saving the people from suffering played the dominant and driving role in disputations and the clash of ideas among the myriad schools. When comparing ancient Chinese logical rules like naming, *ci* (phrasing), *shuo* (explaining/demonstrating), and disputation, with Western formal logic, concrete situations in which ancient Chinese logic was formed, applied, and developed are often ignored, as are the full range of political and ethical views held by the philosophical schools, and the Chinese nation's distinctive mindset. These gaps in research make it difficult to uncover the unique landscape of ancient Chinese logic.

Mohism as practical pathway

Ancient Chinese logic is not water without a source. It has not been left in oblivion as related schools

of thought declined. Instead, the knowledge has been refined and passed down today. The hundred schools of thought not only influenced each other, but also carried forward the intellectual accomplishments of Chinese ancestors.

Mohist logic, for example, was not only subject to Confucianism, Taoism, and other schools, but has more remote intellectual origins if traced back earlier. The forms of expression and argumentation, and logic applied in such classical texts as the *Book of Poetry*, *Book of History*, *Book of Changes*, and *Book of Rites* inspired Mohism a great deal. The argumentative atmosphere of the time also fueled the finalization of ancient Chinese logic represented by Mohism and affected the way the various schools thought. Thanks to disputations and clashes of different logical models among the schools, ancient Chinese logic was inherited by new generations of scholars and further developed, fostering the underlying logic of Chinese civilization's discourse system.

The underlying logic of Chinese civilization's discourse system includes logical rules that should be followed in expression, explanation, and argumentation, standards of right/true and wrong/false, and the applied logic of political ethics. These criteria have something in common with Western logic, but deep down they embody universal political-ethical propositions and moral codes informed by ancient Chinese philosophy.

For example, we can never thoroughly comprehend the concept of *zhen* (true or right) in Mohism if we don't understand its philosophical notion of *limin* (to benefit the people). There is a famous deductive statement in the school's canon *Mozi*, "a thief is a man," but "killing thieves is not killing men." This approach to reasoning through *mou* (parallelizing or sentence comparison) presents the circumstance of being "thus, yet not so," the type of cases with a true premise yet a false conclusion. *Jian'ai* (universal love or impartiality), a central belief of

Mohism, aims at mutual benefits among all people under heaven. Thieves harm the interests of the state and the people, so caring for thieves is not caring for men. Here the Mohists regard universal love as a way to "create benefits for the world and eliminate its calamities."

Mohism contributes to the underlying logic of Chinese civilization's discourse system from three dimensions: formal effectiveness of reasoning and argumentation (morphology), criteria for telling from right/true and wrong/false (semantics), and the applied logic of political ethics (pragmatics).

For another instance, if we know that Mohism contains "the law of contradiction" and the "law of the excluded middle," which distinguish right/true from wrong/false, as well as the rational pursuit of truth, and the mainstream dialectics of traditional Chinese philosophy, we will understand why the Mohists believed that either side of a dispute will be right or wrong, and disputation should aim to tell right from wrong and identify similarities and differences. They also hold that every coin has two sides, so it is important to be impartial.

Therefore, underlying the discourse system of Chinese civilization there is the logical rule of "either this or that" and the dialectical understanding of "both this and that." Research from the perspective of constructing a discourse system will make it easier for us to see how truthful, indigenous, and practical ancient Chinese logic is. Meanwhile, we can also retain the Chinese-Western comparative approach, injecting the power of diversity into the creative transformation and innovative development of ancient Chinese logic in the new era.

In conclusion, ancient Chinese logic is a theoretical system of expression, explanation, and deduction, but formal logic and deductive analysis alone cannot reveal its essence. Ancient Chinese logic, represented by Mohism, not only has logical rules which ensure the formal effectiveness of reasoning and argumentation, but also consists of semantic and pragmatic elements, that integrate morality-based political ethics.

The ultimate aim of thought and theory is to address specific political-ethical problems of different eras with logic as an instrument. As said in *Mozi*, disputation is to "make clear the distinction between so and not-so; investigate the rules of order and chaos; locate benefit and harm, and resolve doubts," thus settling complex, major issues in social governance. This also highlights ancient Chinese logic's contemporary relevance through creative transformation and innovative development in the new era.

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