

The Hundred Schools of Thought in Pre-Qin Period and the Early Academic Prosperity in the Central Plains

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The Hundred Schools of Thought in the Pre-Qin period represents the first large-scale academic prosperity in the history of Chinese thought. It took place in the Central Plains region during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770–221 BC). At that time, various schools of thought engaged in intense debates in philosophy, politics, ethics, and other fields, forming a diverse system of ideas. Confucianism, represented by Confucius and Mencius, advocated "benevolent governance" and "rites"; Taoism, represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, promoted "the way of nature" and reflected on the alienation of civilization; Mohism championed "universal love" and "opposition to offensive warfare"; and Legalism, represented by Shang Yang and Han Fei, emphasized institutional innovation and centralized power. Military Strategists, Yin-Yang School, Logicians, and other schools also showcased their strengths, creating a "harmony in diversity" intellectual ecosystem. The emergence of academic institutions such as the Jixia Academy facilitated the institutionalization of intellectual exchanges. The contention of the Hundred Schools in the Central Plains not only promoted the spread of ideas but also provided theoretical resources for the unification of China under the Qin and Han dynasties. It shaped the inclusive nature of Chinese culture, and its legacy continues to influence the spiritual structure of East Asian civilization to this day.

Keywords: Pre-Qin; Hundred Schools of Thought; Central Plains; Academic Prosperity; Thought and Culture

Introduction: The Intellectual Code of Pre-Qin Academic Prosperity and Its Contemporary Implications

The Pre-Qin period (770–221 BC) is the "Axial Age" in the history of Chinese thought. The academic boom of the Hundred Schools of Thought not only laid the spiritual foundation for Chinese civilization but also had a profound impact on the history of East Asian and global thought. This period of academic prosperity, centered in the Central Plains and symbolized by the Jixia Academy, formed a pluralistic and competitive intellectual landscape of Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, Legalism, Logicians, and other schools. Its historical significance lies not only in the originality of the thought systems but also in the interaction and integration among the schools. For example, Xunzi's "combination of rites and law" represents a comprehensive innovation, and the Huang-Lao school's reconciliation of Taoism and Legalism provided paradigms for subsequent political systems, ethical norms, and cultural inheritance. In the long river of human civilization, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in China presented a unique intellectual spectacle. The collapse of the Zhou royal house, like the key to Pandora's box, released an unprecedented burst of intellectual energy. Over more than five hundred years, the Hundred Schools of Thought engaged in a fierce intellectual competition in the

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cradle of civilization along the Yellow River. The density and depth of their intellectual exchanges are unparalleled in the history of world civilizations. This period, known as the "Axial Age," not only shaped the basic character of Chinese civilization but also provided Eastern wisdom for dealing with civilizational conflicts.

This study aims to reconstruct the dynamic picture of Pre-Qin academia and provide intellectual resources for contemporary cultural innovation and governance practices.

Fission and Rebirth: The Historical Soil of Pre-Qin Academic Prosperity

The disintegration of the feudal system in the Zhou dynasty was like a precise social experiment. The collapse of the ritual and music system released tremendous social energy. The widespread use of iron tools spurred an agricultural revolution, the rise of urban civilization gave birth to the scholar class, and the needs of the warring states stimulated intellectual innovation. In this transformative era, where "high banks become valleys and deep valleys become hills," the intellectual class broke through the shackles of "officialdom-based learning" and initiated private teaching. Confucius taught under the apricot altar, Mozi gathered crowds for lectures, and the Jixia Academy hosted a hundred schools of thought. The democratization of knowledge spread, providing a broad stage for intellectual collisions. The integration of regional cultures catalyzed the evolution of thought. The land of Qi and Lu gave birth to Confucian benevolent governance, the Chu mountains and rivers nurtured Taoist mysticism, and the plains of the Three Jins gave rise to Legalist reforms. Diverse civilizations interwove and collided on the Central Plains. The warring states' monarchs, in their quest for wealth and military strength, competed to attract talents, forming a unique political ecology where "those who obtain scholars prosper." This competitive talent market provided the impetus for intellectual innovation, creating a virtuous interaction between academic exploration and political practice (Guo 1954).

Eternal Coordinates of the Intellectual Firmament

The thoughts of the Hundred Schools constitute the genetic blueprint of Chinese civilization. Confucianism elevated ethical order to the philosophy of "benevolence," Taoism sought ultimate truth in "the way of nature," Legalism forged political tools of "law, artifice, and power," and Mohism built blueprints for an ideal state with "universal love and opposition to offensive warfare." These thought systems did not exist in isolation but continuously corrected and improved each other through mutual debate. Mencius criticized Yang Zhu, Han Fei interpreted and explained Laozi, and Zhuangzi ridiculed Confucianism and Mohism. This intellectually dynamic interaction formed the unique Chinese tradition of "harmony in diversity." The prosperity of Central Plains academia reshaped the spiritual map of the East Asian civilization circle. The Qin and Han empires injected Confucian ethics into a Legalist framework, forming a governance paradigm of "Confucianism on the outside and Legalism on the inside"; the Huang-Lao school dominated the recuperative policies in the early Western Han Dynasty; Mohist technological thought continued in the "Kao Gong Ji." This hybrid variation of thought genes gave Chinese civilization a strong ability to renew itself, maintaining civilizational continuity through dynastic changes.

Contemporary Echoes of Axial Wisdom

Today's global civilizational conflicts and value clashes are like an amplified version of the "Hundred Schools of Thought." The wisdom of the Pre-Qin scholars in dealing with the coexistence of diverse cultures provides a mirror for global dialogue in the modern era. The Confucian spirit of "harmony in diversity," the Taoist dialectical thinking of "opposites complement each other," and the Legalist consciousness of "timely reform" show surprising foresight in modern issues such as artificial intelligence ethics and ecological crisis response. Digital-age cultural innovation needs the inspiration of axial wisdom. The courage of the Hundred Schools to break conventions, their broad-mindedness in cross-school integration, and their critical spirit in facing reality are important intellectual resources for solving modern dilemmas. When quantum physics encounters Taoist cosmology, and when communitarianism dialogues with Confucian ethics, this cross-temporal intellectual resonance heralds a new creative transformation of Chinese civilization.

The Pre-Qin contention can be seen as an "intellectual laboratory" that proposed wisdom for dealing with complex societies. For example, Mohist "universal love" is strongly associated with contemporary community governance, and Legalist "rule of law" is related to institutional innovation. The Jixia Academy's demonstration of the true spirit of "academic independence" and "freedom of thought" remains at the core of contemporary civilizational dialogue and development. It can be said that the Pre-Qin Hundred Schools of Thought is not only the "spiritual gene bank" of Chinese civilization but also a historical reference for the coexistence of diverse civilizations in the globalized era.

Currently, the civilizational dialogue and value conflicts in the context of globalization give new practical significance to the study of Pre-Qin thought. For example, the inclusiveness of Confucian "harmony in diversity," the Taoist ecological view of "the way of nature," and the Legalist consciousness of "timely reform" all provide historical mirrors for modern social governance and technological ethics. Standing at the crossroads of civilizational dialogue, looking back at the intellectual torch lit by the Pre-Qin scholars on the banks of the Yellow River, we can better understand Fei Xiaotong's deep meaning of "appreciating one's own beauty and others' beauty." The era of the Hundred Schools of Thought teaches us that true civilizational confidence does not lie in adhering to certain dogmas but in maintaining an open and inclusive mind, achieving self-renewal through dialogue. This cultural gene is the ultimate code for the Chinese civilization to remain vibrant after five thousand years of vicissitudes.

The Development of Early Academic Thought in the Central Plains*Between Witchcraft and Historiography: The Origins of Central Plains Academic Thought and the Axial Breakthrough*

At the time of the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasties, the inscriptions on bronze vessels often contained the words "rites and war." These two words not only reveal the core propositions of early civilization but also hint at the deep-seated genes of Central Plains academic thought. When we look beyond the splendid picture of the Hundred Schools of Thought, in the cracks of oracle bones

and the taotie patterns on bronze vessels, we can catch a glimpse of the initial stirrings of Chinese academia.

The Development of Early Academic thought in the Central Plains Knowledge Embryos in Theocratic Order

First, the embryonic knowledge in the theocratic order. The divinatory inscriptions on the oracle bones of the Yin ruins were the passwords for shamans to communicate with the divine. The divination practice of the Shang kings, who obtained the will of heaven by burning turtle shells, may seem like a primitive religious ritual, but in fact, it constructed the earliest symbolic system and logical thinking. The arrangement of ritual vessels in sacrifices, the astronomical knowledge in star observation, and the creation of writing in oracle bone inscriptions all grew quietly under the shelter of theocracy. When the Duke of Zhou established rites and music, he transformed this theocratic thinking into a moral mandate of heaven. The Nine Categories system in the "Book of Documents - Hong Fan" is a clear example of the systematization of this knowledge.

Second, the knowledge monopoly of the royal officials. The Western Zhou dynasty established the system of "learning in the officialdom," creating a unique academic ecosystem. The group of historians in the Grand Historian's office monopolized the inheritance of astronomy, calendars, institutions, poetry, and music, forming the "Six Arts" educational system. The "Zhou Li" records that "the Baoshi taught the sons of the state with the Six Arts," which in fact encoded knowledge as a tool to maintain the feudal order (Gu 1982). The inscriptions on bronze ritual vessels, the odes in the ancestral temples, and the oaths on the alliance documents all reinforced this symbiotic structure of knowledge and power. This institutional guarantee allowed the classics such as the "Book of Songs" and the "Book of Documents" to be systematically collated, providing the original texts for later academic studies.

Third, the liberation of knowledge amidst the collapse of rites and music. The political upheaval caused by the Eastern Migration of King Ping caused the royal officials' learning to scatter among the common people. The originally secret books of the royal family were dispersed to various states with the exiled nobles, as recorded in history, "The Son of Heaven lost his officials, and learning was among the barbarians." This downward shift of knowledge gave birth to new ways of knowledge production: Confucianism was nurtured in the lands of Zou and Lu through the inheritance of the "Book of Songs" and the "Book of Documents," the Legalists of the Three Jins extracted statecraft from the study of penal names, and Taoism in the Chu region sublimated cosmology from the tradition of shamanism. Although the Hundred Schools of Thought seemed to hold different views, they actually shared the genetic knowledge of the royal officials' learning and completed the key leap from the "tradition of shamans and historians" to "philosophical breakthrough." (Li 2014) From the turtle shells of shamans to the bamboo slips of the Hundred Schools, the academic thought in the Central Plains underwent a thrilling transformation. The contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought was not a thought flower that bloomed out of nowhere, but a towering tree deeply rooted in the soil of the civilization of the Three Dynasties. When Confucius expressed his academic creation with "I transmit but do not create," he revealed the intellectual code of this axial age: the greatest creation often begins with the creative transformation of tradition. This

dialectical movement of knowledge inheritance and innovation has forged the unique academic character of Chinese civilization.

The Shift of Academic Focus and the Awakening of the Intellectual Class

In the smoke of the Eastern Migration of the Zhou royal house, the elegant music of bronze chime bells was gradually replaced by the clanging of iron tools. When the order of "learning in the officialdom" collapsed along with the system of rites and music, the chain of knowledge inheritance broke into countless stars, and the Central Plains witnessed a great migration of academic focus that shocked the ages.

First, the disintegration of the royal officials' learning and the downward shift of knowledge. The Western Zhou established the system of "hereditary scholars," which solidified knowledge of astronomy, calendars, and rituals in hereditary official positions. However, after the Eastern Migration of King Ping, the decline of the royal house triggered the dramatic change of "The Son of Heaven lost his officials, and learning was among the barbarians" (Zuo Zhuan - Duke Zhao, Year 17). The description by Guan Shefu of Chu that "the officials of heaven, earth, spirits, people, and all things" scattered among the feudal lords was actually a portrayal of the structural disintegration of the intellectual class. The trend of "valuing the worthy" caused by the struggle for hegemony among the feudal lords made the classical books of the "Book of Songs" and the "Book of Documents," which were originally confined to the ancestral temples, flow into the marketplace. For example, when Shuxiang of Jin visited Lu to observe the books, and when Zichan of Zheng cast the penal code on a tripod, these all signified the transfer of the monopoly of knowledge.

Second, the rise of the scholar class and the private educational ecosystem. The iron revolution, which gave birth to new production relations, dismantled the established order of "commerce and industry feeding on officialdom." A large number of displaced royal officials became wandering scholars, and commoner's children changed their fate through knowledge. As recorded in "Guanzi - Xiao Kuang," the bloodline barrier of "the son of a scholar is always a scholar" had already loosened. The trend of "nurturing scholars" among the feudal lords prevailed, and the Jixia Academy in Qi "opened broad avenues and honored them with high gates and large houses" (Records of the Grand Historian - Mencius and Xunzi). This trend of knowledge marketization turned the ideal of "those who excel in learning shall serve the government" into a realistic path. The trajectory of wandering scholars traveling among the states objectively constituted a cross-border intellectual network.

Third, Confucius' founding and the revolutionary academic paradigm. In 522 BC, Confucius' declaration of "education for all without discrimination" broke the educational privilege of "the noble and wandering sons of the state learn" (Rites of Zhou - Minister of Land). His teaching practice, which used the "Six Arts" as textbooks and aimed at personality cultivation, created a new paradigm for knowledge production: compiling the "Spring and Autumn Annals" to pioneer the tradition of private historiography, editing the "Book of Songs" to construct a cultural classic system, and the collective mourning of his disciples for "three years of mourning" formed the embryo of an academic community. This pioneering act of injecting moral ideals into knowledge transmission made Confucian private schools a cradle for hatching bureaucratic scholars and provided an organizational paradigm for the Mohist "Grand Master" system and the Legalist "law, artifice, and power" theory (Lü 2009).

The Fission of Ideas in Diverse Collisions

The rise of private schools gave birth to "free discussions among scholars," which built an intellectual laboratory in the gaps between the standing states. The debates between Confucianism and Mohism in the Song state gave birth to the sprouts of logic, the "discussions on Huang-Lao" at the Jixia Academy nurtured a systematic theory of governance, and the political discussion trend in the local schools of Zheng state foreshadowed the emergence of a public discourse space. Different schools formed intellectual competition through "leading their followers and debating their talks" (Xunzi - Proper Discussion), and completed the tempering of theory in mutual attacks. This free debating academic ecosystem made the Central Plains bloom with brilliant wisdom amidst the iron and blood conquests.

When the masters carried their disciples and traveled among the states, what they carried on their backs were not only bamboo slips and classics, but also the spiritual genes of the entire civilization. The wave of knowledge democratization triggered by the rise of private schools not only reshaped the intellectual pattern of Chinese civilization, but also, in the process of "the art of the way was split for the world," laid a deep ideological foundation for the unified civilization of the Qin and Han dynasties and beyond. This academic revolution, which began with educational reform, proves that true intellectual prosperity is always rooted in an open and fluid knowledge ecosystem.

The Major Schools of Thought and Their Ideological Characteristics during the Hundred Schools of Thought

Confucian School

Confucius, the founder of the Confucian school, was born between 551 and 479 BC. He came from a declining noble family and showed a strong interest in ancient rituals from a young age. In his youth, Confucius was diligent and eager to learn, having sought teachings on rites from Laozi and learned to play the zither from Shi Xiang. During his political career in the State of Lu, he advocated for strengthening the monarch's power and weakening the influence of the nobility. However, due to resistance, he eventually left Lu and embarked on a 13-year journey visiting various states. In his later years, Confucius returned to Lu, dedicating himself to education and cultural heritage. He compiled and edited the Six Classics: the "Book of Poetry," "Book of Documents," "Book of Rites," "Book of Music," "I Ching" (Book of Changes), and "Spring and Autumn Annals." The core of Confucius's thought is "benevolence" (ren) and "rites" (li). "Benevolence" emphasizes mutual respect and care among people, such as the principle "Do not do unto others what you do not want done to yourself." "Rites" focus on social order and institutions to maintain harmony and stability. He also introduced the concept of the "gentleman," emphasizing personal cultivation and moral character, believing that a gentleman should possess virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and faithfulness. Confucius had many disciples, among whom 72 were particularly distinguished. They inherited and spread his teachings. For example, Yan Hui was known for his moral integrity, Zeng Shen for his filial piety, Zi Lu for his bravery, and Zi Gong for his eloquence and business acumen.

During the Pre-Qin period, the Confucian school gradually took shape and

developed. Confucius founded Confucianism, which was further developed by Mencius and Xunzi. Mencius proposed the "doctrine of the goodness of human nature," emphasizing benevolent governance and people-oriented thinking. In contrast, Xunzi advocated the "doctrine of the badness of human nature," emphasizing the combined use of rites and laws. After the Han Dynasty, Confucianism became the official ideology. Dong Zhongshu put forward the theories of "correspondence between heaven and humanity" and "the divine right of kings," closely integrating Confucianism with political power. During the Song Dynasty, Confucianism evolved into Neo-Confucianism, with Zhu Xi becoming its most prominent synthesizer. The reason why the Confucian school became the mainstream ideology is that its emphasis on moral cultivation and social harmony aligned with the feudal rulers' need to maintain social stability and long-term peace. Moreover, Confucianism's emphasis on education and the cultivation of a large number of talents laid the foundation for its dissemination and development. Confucian thought played an important role in maintaining social order. By emphasizing the norms of "rites," it clarified social hierarchy and interpersonal relationships, making society run more orderly. In regulating interpersonal relationships, the concept of "benevolence" promoted harmonious coexistence among people. Confucian thought also valued cultural heritage; for example, the Six Classics compiled by Confucius became important classics for cultural education in later generations.

Mohist School

Mozi (c. 468–376 BC), the founder of the Mohist school, came from the lower strata of laborers and had a deep understanding of the suffering of the common people. His ideological origins differed from those of Confucianism. He criticized the elaborate rituals of Confucianism and advocated pragmatism. The core ideas of Mohism include "universal love," "opposition to offensive warfare," "elevation of the worthy," and "frugality." "Universal love" advocates loving all people without distinction, in contrast to the Confucian idea of love based on closeness and distance. "Opposition to offensive warfare" opposes unjust wars and advocates peaceful coexistence. "Elevation of the worthy" advocates appointing capable and virtuous people to govern the state. "Frugality" emphasizes the conservation of resources and opposes extravagance and waste. Mohist thought paid close attention to and criticized social realities. Mozi opposed the frequent wars of his time and advocated peaceful coexistence, which had significant practical significance for society at that time. Mohism had a wide influence in society, with many followers forming an organized group. There were clear similarities and differences between Mohism and Confucianism in terms of ideological concepts and social propositions. The similarity lies in their focus on social realities and attempts to improve society through morality and institutions. The difference is that Confucianism emphasizes hierarchical order and rituals, while Mohism advocates equality and pragmatism. The main reasons for the decline of Mohism in later generations are that its ideas were overly idealistic and difficult to fully implement in the complex social reality. Moreover, as Confucianism became the official ideology, the influence of Mohism gradually weakened (Chen 2003).

Taoist School

Laozi is the founder of the Taoist school. His work, the "Tao Te Ching" (also known as the "Laozi"), is the classic of Taoism. Laozi introduced the concept of the "Tao," considering it the origin and ultimate truth of the universe. He also advocated "governing by doing nothing that goes against nature," believing that by following natural laws without excessive intervention, society would naturally achieve harmony. Zhuangzi inherited and developed Laozi's ideas. His work, the "Zhuangzi," further elaborates on Taoist philosophy. Zhuangzi proposed the "doctrine of the equality of things," arguing that all things are equal without absolute distinctions of high and low, noble and base. He also emphasized "free and easy wandering," pursuing spiritual freedom and liberation. Taoist thought has a unique understanding of the universe, nature, life, and society. It stresses following nature and not going against natural laws. This philosophy has had a broad influence on later generations in the fields of philosophy, literature, art, and religion. For example, Taoist views of nature have influenced Chinese landscape painting and poetry creation. The Taoist concept of "doing nothing that goes against nature" also provided a governance philosophy for later politicians (Hu 2011).

Legalist School

The Legalist school emerged during the Warring States period, with representative figures such as Shang Yang and Han Fei. Legalists advocated governing the country by law, emphasizing the authority and strict enforcement of laws. Shang Yang implemented reforms in the State of Qin, which rapidly strengthened the state. Han Fei further developed Legalist thought, proposing the governance concept of combining "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy." Legalist thought played an important role in the reforms and self-strengthening of various states during the Warring States period. It broke the traditional constraints of rites and established a social order based on law. However, Legalist thought, with its overemphasis on severe punishments and neglect of moral education, has been subject to criticism in later generations (Wang 2010).

Other Schools

In addition to Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, and Legalism, other schools such as the School of Names, the Yin-Yang School, the Diplomatists, and the Eclectics also emerged during the Pre-Qin period. The School of Names focused on debating issues of names and realities, with Gongsun Long as a representative figure. The Yin-Yang School centered on the theory of yin and yang and the Five Elements, with Zou Yan as a representative. The Diplomatists advocated diplomatic strategies of vertical and horizontal alliances, with Su Qin and Zhang Yi as representatives. The Eclectics were inclusive, integrating ideas from various schools. Although these schools had different academic statuses during the Pre-Qin period, they all contributed to the contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought. They enriched the intellectual culture of the time and promoted academic prosperity.

In summary, the Confucian, Mohist, Taoist, Legalist, and other schools each had their own characteristics during the Pre-Qin period, together forming a rich and diverse system of ancient Chinese thought and culture. The ideas of these schools

played important roles in society at that time and had profound influences on later generations in terms of culture, politics, and society in China.

The Intrinsic Connection between the Hundred Schools of Thought and the Early Academic Prosperity in the Central Plains

Intellectual Collision and Academic Innovation

During the Pre-Qin period, the contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought represented a significant transformation in the realm of intellectual culture. The various schools engaged in mutual criticism, debate, and mutual learning and borrowing, and this intellectual collision greatly stimulated the vitality of academic innovation and promoted the deepening and development of academic thought.

Take the Confucian and Mohist schools as an example. Mozi criticized the Confucian "rites," arguing that they were too complicated and wasteful of resources, while Confucianism emphasized the importance of "rites" in maintaining social order. This mutual criticism prompted both sides to constantly reflect on and adjust their views, driving the deepening of thought. Mohism's ideas of "universal love" and "opposition to offensive warfare" were gradually refined through debates with Confucianism, forming a unique theoretical system. In response to Mohist criticism, Confucianism further developed the concept of "benevolence," emphasizing the combination of "benevolence" and "rites."

Legalism also absorbed elements from other schools during intellectual exchanges. For example, in the Jixia Academy, Legalists interacted with the Huang-Lao school and absorbed the Taoist idea of "the Way gives birth to law," forming their unique governance concept that combines "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy." This intellectual collision not only enriched the theoretical system of Legalism but also laid the foundation for the rule-of-law thought in later generations.

These new ideas had a profound impact on society at that time. For example, Mohism's idea of "opposition to offensive warfare" to some extent curbed the frequent occurrence of wars and brought relative peace to society. Legalism's concept of combining "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy" provided theoretical support for the reforms and self-strengthening of various states during the Warring States period, promoting social progress (Mu 1985).

Academic Exchange and Cultural Dissemination

During the Pre-Qin period, the Central Plains region served as a center for cultural exchange, facilitating academic interaction and the spread of culture among various schools. Convenient transportation and frequent population movement provided favorable conditions for academic exchange. For example, the Jixia Academy, as an important platform for academic exchange at that time, attracted numerous scholars, forming a hub of intellectual interaction.

In the Jixia Academy, scholars from various schools exchanged ideas and debated, promoting the dissemination and integration of academic thought. The ideas of the Huang-Lao school, Guanzi school, Confucianism, Legalism, and others collided here, creating a diverse intellectual and cultural atmosphere. This academic exchange not only propelled the early academic prosperity of the Central Plains but also allowed the

intellectual ideas of the region to spread to surrounding areas through various channels.

The academic ideas of the Central Plains were disseminated to surrounding regions through scholars' travels and lectures, playing an important role in the formation and development of the Huaxia cultural sphere. For example, after Confucianism was formed in the Central Plains, it gradually spread to neighboring states through the travels and teachings of Confucius and his disciples, eventually becoming an important part of Huaxia culture (Yang 2003).

Academic Atmosphere and the Emergence of Talents

During the Pre-Qin period, the relaxed and free academic atmosphere of the Central Plains provided favorable conditions for the growth of talents. The emphasis on and recruitment of talents by the various feudal states, such as the prevailing trend of "nurturing scholars," attracted numerous scholars to the Central Plains, leading to a surge of talented individuals.

For example, the Jixia Academy in the State of Qi, with its orientation of "engaging in discussion without governance," provided a platform for free exchange among scholars. This relaxed and free academic atmosphere attracted many scholars to give lectures and conduct research, creating a prosperous academic scene. In this environment, Xunzi served three times as the head of the Jixia Academy, becoming an authoritative figure in the academic world at that time.

The emergence of prominent scholars in the Central Plains during the Pre-Qin period and their academic achievements played an important role in promoting the early academic prosperity of the region. For example, Confucius founded Confucianism, Mencius developed the Confucian idea of benevolent governance, Mozi established the Mohist school and proposed important ideas such as "universal love" and "opposition to offensive warfare," and Han Fei developed Legalist thought, putting forward the governance concept that combines "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy."

The emergence of these talents not only enriched the academic ideas of the Central Plains but also laid a solid foundation for the academic development of later generations. For example, Xunzi's idea of "emphasizing rites and valuing law" provided a theoretical basis for the later political concept that combines Confucianism and Legalism. Han Fei's Legalist thought also provided important theoretical support for the construction of a rule-of-law society in later generations (Chen 1982).

In summary, there is a close intrinsic connection between the contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought and the early academic prosperity in the Central Plains. Intellectual collision stimulated the vitality of academic innovation, academic exchange promoted the spread of culture, and the relaxed academic atmosphere attracted a large number of talents to the Central Plains. These factors worked together to promote the early academic prosperity of the Central Plains and laid a solid foundation for the academic development of later generations.

The Influence of the Pre-Qin Academic Prosperity on Later Generations

Inheritance and Development of Intellectual Culture

The academic thought of the Pre-Qin period laid a solid foundation for the development of Chinese intellectual culture. The ideas of schools such as Confucianism,

Taoism, and Legalism were continuously inherited and evolved in later generations, integrating into the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture and profoundly influencing the Chinese people's values, ways of thinking, moral standards, and aesthetic tastes.

Confucianism: After becoming the official ideology in the Han Dynasty, Confucian ideas such as "benevolent governance" and "rule by virtue" became important components of subsequent political culture. The values emphasized by Confucianism, such as "benevolence," "honesty," and "propriety," became the core of the Chinese moral code. In the field of literature, the Confucian idea that "literature should convey the Way" influenced the creative direction of later literati, emphasizing the social function and moral edification of literature. In the field of art, the Confucian aesthetic concept of "moderation and harmony" influenced the style of Chinese painting, music, and other art forms.

Taoism: Taoist ideas such as "governing by doing nothing that goes against nature" and "following nature" were also widely disseminated in later generations. Taoist thought had a profound impact on literary creation, with many literati using Taoist ideas to express their longing for freedom and nature. In the field of philosophy, Taoist concepts such as "the Way" and "non-action" became important categories for later philosophical contemplation.

Legalism: The Legalist idea of "rule of law" had an important influence on subsequent political systems. The Legalist concept of combining "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy" in governance provided theoretical support for the construction of a rule-of-law society in later generations. In social governance, Legalist policies such as "emphasizing agriculture over commerce" and "severe punishment" were applied to varying degrees in feudal societies.

Political Systems and Social Governance

The political ideas of the various schools during the Pre-Qin period had a profound influence on China's subsequent political systems and models of social governance. The Confucian ideas of "benevolent governance" and "rule by virtue" were widely applied in later political practices. For example, the Han Dynasty's policy of "dismissing all other schools of thought and exclusively honoring Confucianism" made Confucian thought the mainstream ideology of feudal society, with its principle of "governing the country by virtue" becoming an important governance principle for later rulers.

The Legalist idea of "rule of law" also played an important role in later political practices. Shang Yang's reforms rapidly strengthened the State of Qin, laying the foundation for the unification of the six states by Qin. The Legalist concept of combining "law," "tactics," and "legitimacy" in governance provided theoretical support for the construction of a rule-of-law society in later generations. In feudal societies, the Legalist idea of "severe punishment" was used to maintain social order and national rule.

These ideas collectively shaped the political culture and governance concepts of ancient China, playing an important role in the long-term stability and social stability of feudal society. The Confucian idea of "benevolent governance" emphasized that rulers should govern the country by virtue and pay attention to people's livelihoods, while the Legalist idea of "rule of law" emphasized the authority of the law and strict enforcement to maintain social order.

Educational Philosophy and Talent Cultivation

The rise and development of private schools during the Pre-Qin period had a profound influence on China's subsequent educational system and talent cultivation model. Confucius founded private schools, breaking the monopoly of "learning in the officialdom" and making education accessible to the common people. Confucius's educational philosophy and teaching methods provided important insights and references for later education. His educational ideas such as "education for all without discrimination," "teaching according to students' aptitude," and "never tiring of learning and teaching" became important principles of traditional Chinese education.

The academic debates and exchanges during the Pre-Qin period cultivated the independent thinking and innovative spirit of later scholars. The Jixia Academy, as the center of academic exchange at that time, attracted many scholars to gather and created a free academic atmosphere. This academic atmosphere provided a model for later academic development and promoted the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese education (Han 2010).

The academic prosperity of the Pre-Qin period not only laid the foundation for Chinese intellectual culture but also had a profound influence on subsequent political systems, social governance, and educational philosophy. The inheritance and development of these ideas and concepts in later generations provided a strong impetus for the continuation and development of traditional Chinese culture.

Conclusion

The Pre-Qin period, especially the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, was an extremely active phase in the intellectual and cultural history of China. The academic prosperity of this period is marked by the "contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought," with the Central Plains region being the core area of this intellectual feast. The emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought was closely related to the drastic social transformations of the time. The development of productive forces, changes in social structure, and the turbulent political landscape provided fertile ground for intellectual collisions and innovations. During this period, numerous schools of thought such as Confucianism, Taoism, Mohism, and Legalism emerged. These schools engaged in mutual criticism and debate, as well as borrowing and absorption from one another, which greatly propelled the deepening and development of academic thought.

As the political, economic, and cultural center at that time, the Central Plains region enjoyed convenient transportation and frequent population movement, providing unique conditions for academic exchange. The establishment of academic institutions such as the Jixia Academy offered scholars a platform for free communication, promoting the dissemination and integration of academic ideas. The relaxed and free academic atmosphere, coupled with the emphasis on and recruitment of talents by the various feudal states—such as the prevailing trend of "nurturing scholars"—attracted numerous scholars to the Central Plains, leading to a surge of talented individuals. Renowned scholars such as Confucius, Mozi, Mencius, Xunzi, and Han Feizi emerged during this period. Their ideas and works not only had a profound impact on society at that time but also laid a solid foundation for the academic development of later generations.

There is a close intrinsic connection between the contention of the Hundred

Schools of Thought and the early academic prosperity in the Central Plains. Intellectual collisions stimulated the vitality of academic innovation, academic exchanges promoted the spread of culture, and the relaxed academic atmosphere attracted a large number of talents to the Central Plains. These factors interacted with each other, jointly promoting the early academic prosperity of the Central Plains. The academic development of this period had a profound influence on later generations. The ideas of schools such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism were continuously inherited and evolved in later generations, integrating into the mainstream of traditional Chinese culture and profoundly influencing the Chinese people's values, ways of thinking, moral standards, and aesthetic tastes.

The main ideological characteristics of each school, as well as their status and value in the history of academia, are also very significant. Confucianism emphasizes "benevolence" and "rites," advocates "rule by virtue" and "benevolent governance," and focuses on personal cultivation and social harmony. Its ideas became the mainstream ideology of subsequent feudal societies. Taoism advocates "the way of nature" and "governing by doing nothing that goes against nature," emphasizing following nature and inaction, and its ideas have had a broad influence on philosophy, literature, art, and other fields in later generations. Mohism promotes "universal love," "opposition to offensive warfare," "elevation of the worthy," and "frugality," paying attention to the interests of the lower strata of society, and its ideas had strong practical significance at that time. Legalism advocates "rule of law" and emphasizes the authority and strict enforcement of laws, providing theoretical support for the reforms and self-strengthening of various states during the Warring States period.

However, this study still has some shortcomings. For example, the interactive relationship between the academic thought of the Pre-Qin period and the socio-economic foundation of the time, as well as the ideological origins and the line of transmission of the various schools, could be further explored in greater depth. Future research can focus more on these aspects in the hope of making greater contributions to the inheritance and development of traditional Chinese culture.

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