The imperial beginnings of China tell a story not just of concrete changes in state structure, policy, and military power but also of important developments in ideology. Well before the First Emperor of the Qin proclaimed sovereignty over a unified empire in 221 BCE, the concept that all should be united under a single great cosmic authority had clearly begun to take root in religious and intellectual circles as well as in political discourse. Alongside this focus on a unified authority that extends beyond and helps shape individual behaviors, a widespread debate on universal human nature (xing 性) began to locate cosmic authority and power in all humans from birth, helping usher in movements that viewed the individual body as a key source of empowerment. This book introduces the development of early Chinese beliefs that link universal, cosmic authority to the individual in new and interesting ways, indeed in ways that might sometimes be referred to as individualistic. In addition, this book also illustrates how such ideological and religious beliefs developed alongside and potentially helped contribute to larger sociopolitical changes of the time, such as the centralization of political authority and the growth in social mobility of the shi (士 educated elite) class.

Much twentieth-century scholarship on early Chinese thought and religions focuses on single authors—the “great men” of ancient China—and on certain aspects of their philosophies. While the writings I examine are most certainly worthy of deep philosophical analysis, it is important to approach them not just as philosophical texts but as historical artifacts as well. Indeed, I hope to show that these texts can provide us with valuable insights into the changing religious, philosophical, and sociopolitical discourses of the period. This is possible, especially since “religion,” “philosophy,” and “politics” were not separate categories of intellectual inquiry in ancient China. The intellectuals who composed and compiled such texts would have been deeply involved for their livelihoods in seeking (or rejecting) official appointment through their ability to discuss and provide
solutions to certain religious and philosophical problems, as well as political conditions and state affairs. I therefore aim to move beyond what we can know about a single author and his “philosophical” work to a discussion of how the ideas and political-religious beliefs represented in various authors’ works changed from period to period and fit into the general political and social climate of the times.3

The ancient sources to be examined in this book are representations of specific modes of culture and systems of knowledge embedded within contemporary social institutions and political agendas. By asking how certain ideas connect groups of authors from roughly the same epoch to each other, I abandon a singular focus on the transmission of ideas strictly according to distinct “schools” of thought and focus instead on thematic continuities and discontinuities during certain increments of time.4 This approach allows me to illustrate how diverse intellectual lineages influenced each other, shared or did not share certain basic orientations, and were similarly implicated in the broader intellectual, religious, social, and political world of a particular era: the Warring States (453–221 BCE) and early imperial periods (221–~100 BCE).5

Starting with the writings of the early Mohists (fourth century BCE), I analyze many of the major writings through the early second century BCE such as those of Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Han Feizi, as well as anonymous authors of both received and excavated texts. I show how changing notions of human agency affected prevailing attitudes toward the self as individual. In particular, I demonstrate the onset of ideals that stress the power and authority of the individual, either as a conformist agent in relationship to a larger, cosmic whole, or as an individualistic agent endowed with inalienable cosmic powers and authorities. I then go on to show how distinctly internal (individualistic), external (institutionalized), or mixed (syncretic) approaches to self-cultivation and state control emerged in response to such ideals. As I explore the nature of early Chinese individualism and the various theories for and against it, I also reveal the ways in which authors innovatively adapted new theories on individual power to the needs of the burgeoning imperial state at the end of the Warring States and in the Qin and early Han empires.

**Approaches to the Study of Individualism in China**

In past studies that examine the role of the individual in China, scholars have framed questions and established values in such a way that China comes out lacking in comparison to the “West.”6 Max Weber was perhaps one of the
most influential thinkers to embrace this biased approach. In his book on the religions of China, Weber wields evidence from Chinese culture and history to prove his point about the “non-existence of modern capitalism in China.”7 Weber’s chief arguments for such a point are grounded in his view that the cultures of Northern Europe and China each defined individual motivation and personal ideals differently. For Weber, the Puritan individual acted according to a “supramundane orientation,” which derived from the Puritan rational ethic. This supramundane religiosity shaped individuals so that they looked favorably upon the acquisition of material wealth (for the purposes of storing up for the hereafter), and this attitude served to drive the growth of modern capitalism.8 The Chinese people, on the other hand, lacked a transcendent, divine orientation that cast the individual and his or her strivings beyond this world. According to Weber, then, the Chinese lacked a sense of individual autonomy from mundane powers and concerns that the Puritans possessed, so that the Chinese, unlike the Puritans, were not inclined to engage in activities conducive to modern capitalism.9

Aside from making utterly fallacious claims about Chinese views of the individual and his or her proclivities toward capitalistic activities, Weber also makes use of a biased method of inquiry. Weber’s approach defines a problem according to parameters of discourse that are relevant for only one of the two cultures being compared—that of the Puritans in Europe. He uses the other culture, in this case China, to provide a contrastive, negative background—or to demonstrate a lack within those parameters. This is like posing questions such as, “Why did China not develop ‘science’?” or “Why were there no ‘philosophers’ in China?” when both “science” and “philosophy” are defined strictly according to historical developments and categories stemming from either Renaissance or Enlightenment Europe or classical Greece.10 The only way for China to have emerged favorably according to such parameters would be for it to have duplicated Renaissance or Enlightenment Europe or classical Greece, which because of its obviously different history, it did not do. Because Weber seeks out an identical likeness according to the Western model, he fails to achieve a fair or adequate means of comparing China with Europe.

Weber’s approach is characteristic of much of twentieth-century Western scholarship on China.11 Scholars who engage in this comparative method almost invariably end up celebrating one culture by denigrating another—or neglecting serious study of the “secondary” culture altogether. They arrive at their conclusions from a positive examination of one culture according to its own vocabulary alongside a negative and/or superficial examination of the other based on conceptual categories that are by definition foreign
to it. Such a self-centered and self-congratulatory method does not facilitate a deeper understanding of other cultures according to their own cultural contingencies, vocabularies, conceptual frameworks, and historical developments.

Other scholars of the past thirty years have looked into the question of authority associated with the self in China in what Paul Cohen calls more “China-centered” ways. Roger Ames, Henry Rosemont, and W. T. de Bary in particular have contributed much to current understandings of the Confucian self as “person”—which, Ames states, is not associated with “a notion of discrete and isolated ‘self,’” but is “alternatively articulated in a robust sociological language.” Such statements demonstrate that scholars recognize the importance of the self in Confucian traditions as articulated according to its own core emphases and themes. Moreover, the conclusion that the “self” in Confucian thought cannot be understood in terms of a “discrete and isolated ‘self’” is entirely in line with the general sense of “individual” highlighted in this book.

However, as Ames’ citation shows, much of the scholarship concerning the self in early China not only focuses more exclusively on Confucian thought, but it also insists upon translating “self” as “person,” and not “individual.” While such a translation is justified on many counts, it can be understood to suggest that Eastern and Western modes of thought are entirely distinct and non-overlapping and that the notion of the “individual” does not and has never existed in China.

Much scholarship that directly addresses the notion of the “individual” in China still clings to a narrow definition of individualism, leading to an unbalanced presentation and comparison of the changing roles of the individual in both Chinese and Western cultures. For example, Chad Hansen acknowledges the problem by demonstrating that the term “individualism” is culturally defined according to “Western-style individualism.” However, rather than focusing on what “Chinese-style” visions of the individual might entail, and thereby establishing a means of cross-cultural, cross-historical translation, Hansen confines himself to a narrowly conceived definition of individualism. His conclusion, that “[w]e may justifiably generalize that there is no individualism in Chinese philosophy,” leaves the reader with a picture of a conceptual world in China that either lacks its own integrity regarding fundamental issues of human concern, or seems utterly alien from our own so that translation becomes an exercise in futility.

Some philosophers do, however, include the “individual” as a worthy arena of discussion. Irene Bloom speaks of the merits of “individuals” when discussing a religious change in early China “from prognostication to
‘virtue,’ from external controls and influences over human affairs to self-control and ‘moral force’ on the part of living individuals.” While she does not go so far as to discuss “individualism” in such a context, Bloom outlines an interesting development concerning an “inward-turn” that seems to justify the use of the term “individual.”

In the same volume as Hansen’s article on individualism, Yü Ying-shih argues along very different lines. He at once acknowledges the European provenance of the concept of individualism while attempting to show that certain types of individualism, defined differently from the kind embodied in Weber’s Puritan ethic, appeared at various points throughout Chinese history. By tweaking the definition of individualism a bit, he shows us that one can arrive at interesting examples of it in China’s past. But this approach, while significantly more revealing about China than Hansen’s or Weber’s, still attaches itself to the solipsistic approach to individualism that it is trying to overcome. This is because the historical and intellectual moment that Yü highlights, that of the so-called Neo-Daoist movement in medieval China, constitutes an extraordinary and uncommon moment in the general history of China. The fact that Yü felt compelled to point to the phenomenon in China that most closely resembles a European and American definition of individualism suggests that his very choice of topic is still constrained by an earlier, unbalanced manner of framing the debate on individualism in China.

Michael Nylan pursues another approach in arguing—essentially contra Yü—that the label “individualism” is not appropriate even for medieval times. Nylan’s analysis of later Han and Wei-Jin intellectual and political practices sheds detailed light upon the contingencies and factors associated not with “individualism,” but with what she calls “studied ‘unconventional’ behavior designed to establish group identity.” Her analysis is potently China-centered, and her arguments against calling such a trend “individualistic” are well worth considering. However, such arguments primarily rely on a comparison of the Chinese situation with a single definition—deemed “basic”—drawn from Western contexts (deriving from Alexis de Tocqueville). Not interested in redefining “individualism” for the Chinese case, Nylan assumes a fundamental contradiction between Western “individualism” and certain Wei-Jin phenomena, such as a “heightened emphasis on family interests,” a lack of “emphasis on maximum responsibility,” or the absence of a belief in “the natural equality” of all individuals. By maintaining a strict definition of “individualism” that only appears to fit the Western model in which it arose, Nylan strikes down potentially meaningful comparisons with relative ease. While she offers an interesting account
of Han and Wei-Jin intellectual trends, she does not delve beyond casual comparisons.

Certainly, one of the fundamental tasks of the scholar of a different culture or time period is to analyze and thereby translate what is unknown by highlighting its similarities with and differences from what is already known. Methodological orientations that stress only a lack of something do not always provide balanced, convincing arguments that help us learn more about others as they existed from within their own cultural contexts. They stress difference at the cost of similarity. Often, they imply that such difference is bad, as it is associated with what is inferior, less sophisticated, less enlightened, or even stunted in development. Similarly, analyses that emphasize Chinese difference do not pursue the comparison such that so-called “foreign” terms like “individualism” might make sense within the context of Chinese views on the self.

As suggested so far, I do not believe we can completely throw out the term “individual” with reference to early Chinese concepts of self. This is especially apparent when we wish to talk about a particular emphasis on the self in early Chinese thought that goes beyond the “irreducibly interpersonally” self of Confucianism, as Ames describes so thoroughly in his work.24 As we will see, the type of self as “individual” outlined in this book implies a certain type of agency, authority, and power accorded to one’s person, in and of itself. Because the term “individualism” in English better conjures up such characteristics, I contend that “individualism” is a good fit and is clearly preferable over the less familiar term “personalism” in such cases.25 As a consequence, I necessarily speak of “self” as “individual” rather than “person,” and analyze “self” in a slightly different light than that of the bulk of scholarship on this topic.

This book therefore takes a different approach from much of the pre-existing scholarship on the self or on the topic of “individualism.” I follow upon Yü’s model but take it one step further, allowing room for the texts themselves to help shape the very definition of individualism that I will use. Rather than constrain myself to narrow definitions that will bind me exclusively to one or another cultural context, I invoke the concept of individualism at its broadest level to encompass two key criteria: (1) a belief that individuals possess any number of positive prerogatives or powers in the world by virtue of their existence as individuals, and (2) a belief that individuals can achieve their ideals through the use of their own autonomous, or self-inspired, authority of some kind. These two criteria are not unrelated to current American conceptions of individualism and might be said to satisfy at a minimal level what it means to be an individual in American culture.26
They may thus serve as a general foundation or touchstone of similarity for more culturally specific notions of individualism that emerge out of the Chinese context.

The reader might object that the very invocation of the terms “individual” and “individualism” suggests an argument for the ultimate similarity or sameness of the Chinese tradition with that of the modern West. I contend, however, that it does not. Rather than argue for sameness, I propose that we change our typical conceptions of Enlightenment “individualism” to accommodate processes and clusters of concepts that are mostly foreign to it, but similar only in a most general way. By this, I refer to the fact that in cultures of ancient China and modern America alike, authors generally address issues related to individual empowerment, authority, control, creativity, and self-determination, yet they do not necessarily package these crucial aspects of individualism in the same way.27 Focusing on what is unique about early Chinese thinking on these topics gives us a means of understanding particular “Chinese” discussions of and respect for the self, rather than giving us a chance to dismiss the Chinese belief system as purely conformist and devoid of interest in the self and its powers of control.

Historical Background: A Growing Awareness of Individual Agency

Changing conceptions of authority and the individual in Warring States China were deeply intertwined with large-scale sociopolitical developments that date from the Warring States period to the period of the first unified empires of the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (202 BCE–220 CE). The two most important sociopolitical developments connected to the ideological changes this book traces are the rise of meritocratic practices and ideals—during which the older, zong-fa 宗法 kinship polity (or “kin-based order”) of the Zhou began to disintegrate—and the crafting of an increasingly centralized, bureaucratic political structure—out of which the notion of a universal empire emerged.28 Admittedly, one can construe these two developments as merely different aspects of the same transformation: the replacement of the early Zhou system of royal and kinship-based authority with a more centralized, bureaucratic order.29

In the Warring States period, a new method of state administration was being developed and adopted by many states of the interstate sphere. This method relied increasingly on bureaucratic and meritocratic rather than kinship-based determinations of power and spheres of authority. One main aim of this method was to centralize the state by creating and increasing the number of administrative units or commanderies and districts (jun 郡 and
xian 郡) over which the central regime had direct control. In addition, centralizing states, unlike their predecessors of the Spring and Autumn period, opened up many positions, including some of their highest governmental positions, to a new class of men who had not previously been part of the ruling class or the hereditary aristocracy. They did this by introducing meritocratic practices, allowing men who had hailed from a group of lower-level court functionaries and retainers, the shi 翰 stratum, or educated elite stratum of society, to become more socially mobile than before. Once they became more socially mobile, such people (many of the authors whose writings we will examine in this book stem from this group) were apt to think of themselves as agents with increasing amounts of control over their own lives and futures.

As the Warring States period progressed, members of the shi 翰 stratum became more physically mobile as well as socially mobile. As “merchants of ideas” rather than lifelong and loyal supporters of regionally centered aristocratic lineages, shi men of a variety of religious, political, and cultural interests traveled from state to state to sell their ideas and expertise to rulers. Even Confucius seems to have participated in this marketing aspiration, as he is cited to have proclaimed that he would rather sell a valuable piece of jade (symbolizing the value of the gentleman and his attainment) than store it away in a box for safekeeping. By the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, aspiring officials, political advisors, and so-called “persuaders” (shui zhe 說者) would seek employment irrespective of state affiliation. And likewise, courts and rulers would compete for the best statesmen from a pool of men extending well beyond their own borders. The notion that individuals could decisively affect the general state of order and well-being of a state through official appointment, as well as the idea that they could gain significant personal and material benefits by using their rhetorical abilities and intellectual expertise to gain the ear of an important leader, no doubt contributed to an increased sense of individual agency and control in this period.

Many famous statesmen and a range of diverse experts competed to achieve merit and high positions in society. Great political and military reformers such as Wu Qi, Li Kui, Shen Buhai, and Shang Yang were among the most famous men who served as aides to courts outside of their home court in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Other intellectuals as well, such as Confucius, Mozi, and Mencius, were known to have served or given advice to rulers of different states, while still others such as Xunzi and the men at the Ji Xia Academy in the state of Qi, and Xunzi’s disciples Li Si and Han Feizi, tried to connect themselves to various courts as more permanent advisors or members of an elite, scholarly institution patronized by
the state. As commodities of value in an increasingly fluid and competitive market, the shi sought and gained employment in a broadened network of courts, and so their personal expertise, talents, and achievements were up for sale in a way they had never been before in the history of China.

Other changes during the Warring States period helped contribute to the growth of the centralized state, an increase in social mobility, and ultimately an increased sense of personal agency on the part of individuals. One of the most significant social changes was the administrative dissolution of the lineage, which was replaced, first in the state of Qin, with the delineation of nuclear families. This had the result of placing the head of each household within an institutional, administrative framework of direct responsibility toward the centralized state. In addition, agricultural production was heightened by the use of iron technologies throughout the East Asian mainland. Iron dramatically altered military technology, which helped centralizing states engage in new types and scales of warfare. Some states were able to expand military service and incorporate diverse peasant populations into an army-based political body, with the result that peoples of different lineages and types came into more frequent contact with each other. Social mobility was increased through military meritocracies, such as the type employed in the state of Qin since Shang Yang’s time (middle of the fourth century BCE), which gave commoners and men of lower ranks greater opportunities for political advancement and leadership. All these factors helped create a society in which persons of greater social variety could appear as important actors in society and politics of the day. In short, increased interactions among peoples and the expanded horizons and needs of the bureaucratized, centralized state allowed more types of people, and greater numbers of them than ever before, to demonstrate agency in the world.

Texts dating from the fourth century BCE provide us with manifest proof of a growing intellectual interest in new ideas on human agency. Intellectuals began concerning themselves with the limits and possibilities of human achievement and control in the world—a world in which the intellectual’s own sense of agency and efficacy was probably growing in tandem with the rise in social mobility. Perhaps as a function of rhetorical competition, perhaps through a need to render coherent many divergent ways of thinking, or perhaps, as this book emphasizes, because of the demands of increasingly centralized states, intellectuals began presenting their claims about human agency and potential in terms of universal, cosmic agencies that could unify all individuals and things in the cosmos according to a correlated and systematic network of relationships. Their texts shed light on
a widespread debate that addresses human powers in general, universalized terms. Through such debates, intellectuals cast their net more broadly so as to empower, at least in theory, individuals who in previous times might not have been considered relevant to their discussions on the cosmos, society, and the self. These changes in ideological scope mark the genesis of individualistic movements that apply (at least in theory) not just to an elite few but to all individuals universally.

Explanation of Key Concepts

*Modes of Human Agency: Conformity and Individual Agency*

The central component of individualism in early China, I contend, is individual agency. Throughout this book, I refer to the concept of agency to discuss the power, authority, and potential associated with and attributed to individuals. I distinguish these three aspects of agency from each other in the following manner: one has the power to do something if one can do it; one has the authority to do something if one is authorized or allowed to do it; and one has the potential to do something if it is conceivable that one will attain in the future both the power and authority to do it. Agency connects to all these concepts insofar as it involves action in ways that imply access to certain types of power, authority, and potential. By referring to two different types of agency, as defined below, I provide an interpretive tool for understanding how early Chinese thinkers conceptualized the relationship between the self and idealized—often cosmic, or divine—sources of power and authority in the world.

Standard dictionary entries for the term “agent” often speak of individuals who do not just act but who are motivated to act through either external or internal authorities. One prominent interpretation of the term construes an agent as “one who acts for or in the place of another by authority from him.” This meaning views the agent as a medium of authority who carries out an action commissioned from without. Such a meaning is still widely in use, as can be seen in phrases like “travel agent,” “CIA agent,” “bureaucratic agent,” “real estate agent,” etc.

Another meaning stresses internal sources of authority and active involvement in authorizing or bringing about change. Henry Rosemont puts it: “Human beings do in fact have ends, and are bestowers of value; this is what it means to be an agent, as opposed to an animal or an automaton.” An agent in this sense is often defined as “a person responsible for his acts.” While the meaning of responsibility is difficult and elusive, I
will simply assert here that being responsible for an act is to be accountable or answerable for it. In one sense, a person who is responsible must take possession of or “own up” to his or her acts, referring to the fact that to some extent he or she must identify with or authorize doing it. He or she thus owes an explanation, answer, or account of such an act. This definition of responsibility points to individuals as primary sources or arbiters of authority, as opposed to individuals who serve as instruments of an external command or authority. Agency that is initiated from within the individual and involves individual responsibility thus differs from agency that involves instrumentality or conformity to external authorities. This more individualized agency is what people have in mind when they speak of “free and autonomous agents,” “agents of one’s destiny,” etc.

Contemporary philosophical discourses on action theory define agency in terms of action, and “human agency” as a particular form of action, involvement, or power of involvement in the world. These discourses define agency in fundamental, basic ways; for example, in terms of causation and change, “agents are treated as causes—that is, as initiators of change in the world,” and in terms of a power “to initiate action.” As causes and initiators of change, agents can act in either passive or active ways, as an agent for another or as an agent of one’s own authority. Much of contemporary action theory, however, does not use the term “human agency” to designate passive forms of agency. Concerned primarily with issues of human volition and the role of the will in action, debates mostly revolve around distinguishing “human agency” from passive action of all sorts, whether caused by inanimate objects or passive human beings.

In this study, however, I include both forms of passive and active agencies under the general rubric of agency. I distinguish between the two forms by referring to “conforming agents” as passive agents on the one hand, and “individual agents” as leading, active, or self-determining agents on the other. My primary consideration for distinguishing between these types of agency is the extent to which powers and authorities that motivate behavior are designated as internal or external to the self. Thus, for example, the conforming agent is a person who is authorized by an external source to perform an act and who carries out such an authorization. The individual agent, on the other hand, serves as a source of authority for himself or herself. He or she is autonomous in some matter and relies on his or her own judgment, initiative, and, sometimes, power as a source of authorization for action.

My use of agency in this book thus not only highlights the most primary sense of “agent” as a subject that acts. It underscores the sources of
authority and loci of control for an individual’s actions—or, in other words, it focuses on the motivations for and influences upon an agent’s actions. According to this usage, an agent does not merely act; he or she obtains the authority and sometimes even the power to act either from within or without the individual. So whereas contemporary action theory aims to define the nature of human volition, I follow the cues of ancient Chinese thinkers and aim to identify how sources of authority and power work through and from within agents.52

The two heuristic modes of the conforming agent and the individual agent help elucidate early Chinese discourses on the self because they help to clarify boundaries of authority and power, as well as how each functions in relationship to individuals. Conformity points to the mediation of an authority outside the individual, and thus it points to the individual as an instrument or medium of a higher authority. Individual agency, on the other hand, points to the initiation or creation of authority within the self, and thus it points to the individual as an important source of authority. However, because these two modes do not distinguish between ultimate and proximate sources of authority, it is entirely possible for an individual to act in an ultimately conformist manner even though he or she represents the proximate source of authority over such action. As we will see in the following chapters, many thinkers analyzed in this book at once promote ideals for what might be dubbed “self-determining conformism,” or even “conforming self-determination” precisely because they supported a type of individual agency as defined within an overarching framework of conformism to the cosmos.

I use the term “individualism” in this book because certain early Chinese views on the sources of human agency can justifiably be linked with key beliefs generally associated with individualism in some Western traditions. Such Western beliefs include the dignity, freedom, authority, and autonomy of the self or individual. Of these beliefs, the notion of autonomy perhaps reigns supreme as a distinguishing aspect of individualism. In contemporary parlance, for example, autonomy is defined against the notion of conformity, and the two describe a subject’s existence either apart from (autonomy) or as a part of (conformity) a given whole. In this book, I juxtapose conformity with individualism, and do not pit “autonomy” and “conformity” against each other.53 Rather, I present conformity as an integral part of the early Chinese understanding of what it means to be a fulfilled, empowered, and authoritative individual—autonomous in a different sense. This differs significantly from some current conceptions of conformity and individualism, and it signifies a crucial distinction between certain reigning
types of individualisms in contemporary Western cultures and those that pervade the history of Chinese culture.

Typically, conformity implies a lack of individual authority over choice and action. It connotes a lack of uniqueness and a lack of distinctiveness, creativity, and free will, therefore also implying a lack of an individualistic spirit. The conforming agent does not have a strong identity or sense of self-determination, insofar as she or he “forms with,” or con-forms to what is dictated or already formed beyond or outside the self. Because of the agent’s perceived lack of initiative and will, he or she appears to be hollow, or devoid of the necessary spirit for self-determination and creativity. Moreover, such a person is not viewed as a free actor who makes autonomous decisions and behaves according to the unique predispositions of the self.

On the other hand, autonomy is frequently associated with an active agency of the self that initiates change. Autonomous agency represents a cornerstone of contemporary American views on freedom and choice. It is described in terms of individuality, or one’s possession of such things as a unique identity, creativity, the personal agency to make decisions, and a free will. Indeed, it points toward many brands of American individualism, since autonomous agents determine their own fate to every extent possible. And, though one might question the soundness of such a belief, the autonomous agent in many discursive models is free from certain external influences.54 This can be seen in the fact that various individualisms of today generally recast the individual as someone with the potential to be separate and different from one’s environment and conventional norms. They empower individuals by emphasizing their ability to make decisions and judgments apart from mundane influences and norms in the world.

Early Chinese forms of individualism do not generally focus on the radical autonomy of the individual, but rather on the holistic integration of the empowered individual with forces and authorities in his or her surroundings (family, society, and cosmos). For early Chinese thinkers, there is no such thing as unfettered autonomy or freedom of will, in line with Kantian notions of the self.55 While such concepts are considered problematic even in some Western traditions, they nonetheless constitute a core strand of thought that continues to inform contemporary concepts of individualism.56 In contrast to such a conceptualization, there exists a relative and relational sort of autonomy in early Chinese contexts, a type of autonomy that grants individuals the freedom to make decisions for themselves and to shape the course of their own lives to the fullest degree that they can and should—all from within a complicated and rich system of interrelationships.57 This type of autonomy, in other words, grants authority to the individual to fulfill his
or her potential as an “integrated individual.” The goal of such an individual is to achieveAuthoritativeness as a person while at the same time conforming to certain types of authority stemming from his or her larger environment.58

To the extent that these early Chinese views of the empowered and authoritative individual carve out a special space for a person’s own autonomy and choice, they should be understood as sharing in some of the most basic ingredients that also make up individualisms in the Western world. Yet the emphasis in the Chinese tradition on the relative autonomy of an individual from within a system of holistic and interconnected processes is quite different from many of the models with which we are most familiar. Rather than view autonomy in relationship to a void (individuals as ex nihilo), individuals emerge authoritative and powerful as part and parcel of an interconnected web of forces. Therefore, a crucial back-and-forth tug between the self and the various influences and authorities surrounding it is woven into the very fabric of what it means to be a fully attained and empowered individual.59

The Self as Individual
The concept of the self in Chinese history, like that in other cultures, has always been changing and context-dependent. However, a few fundamental differences between the general orientation toward the self in China and that in many contemporary Western circles are worth mentioning.60 There are two main terms that might be glossed as “self” in Warring States China: shen 身, referring to one’s person, body, or self; and ji 己, referring to the self in a reflexive and emphatic manner as well as to one’s actual person.61 The latter term is straightforward in that it often reflexively points to the self. Otherwise, ji does not denote much more than the person who is speaking, or “person” in a simple sense of the individual human being. On the other hand, the former term, shen, reveals a critical difference between early Chinese and our own views. This is because the term shen connotes the psychophysical aspects of the self as well as certain aspects of personhood. As the body and its attributes are very much a part of what it means to be a person or shen, the term tends to refer to a particular, embodied, and experiential entity. This means that other early Chinese concepts, such as qi (material force 氣) and the various constituents of a person—one’s nature (xing 性), psychology (xin 心, qing 態), spirituality (shen 神), and body (shen 身, xing 形)—are all part of the complicated mixture of “self” that emerges in early China. Of such aspects of the self, this book will focus on the emergence of debates about human nature (xing 性) in particular to mark an “individualistic turn” in Chinese intellectual history.
Western dualistic thinking of the past few centuries, which came to dominate philosophical and scientific circles since Descartes’ time, has traditionally conceived of a self that is disassociated from its psycho-physiological aspects by positing a sharp dichotomy between the mind and body. According to such a tradition, the self was conceptualized in terms of essences or essential characteristics—like that of the “ghost in the machine”—rather than embodied experiences. Such a notion is deeply entangled in the intellectual history of European thought as it was influenced by ancient Greece and Judeo-Christian traditions. These traditions emphasize the existence of absolute truth and essential natures as largely separate, distant, or hidden from the common, everyday experiences of human beings. Such an idea is also expressed very prominently in famous proclamations such as Descartes’ “I think, therefore I am,” which strips the self down to its most mental, essential, and disembodied nature. Commonplace ideas such as getting to know one’s “true self,” or taking time to nourish the true needs of the self, all support this notion that the self is an entity that is fundamentally hidden, mental, and estranged from everyday experience and the appearances of everyday life.

Certainly, there were countermovements within the Western tradition, such as the thought of natural philosophers and scientists, who argued vehemently against the prudence of such dualistic thinking. But in the past few centuries, these movements have been in the minority. Only in the last twenty to thirty years has there been a notable rise in philosophical discussions aimed at combating dualistic thinking by joining philosophical inquiry with certain perceived advances in scientific fields such as evolutionary biology, psychology, and neurology. For this reason, and because I believe that Descartes’ legacy still reigns in much of contemporary, popular conceptions of the self, I use the disembodied self as a foil which might best highlight differences apparent in the intellectual cultures of ancient China.

Free from such a radical dichotomy between truth/essence and appearance, the early Chinese self is not encumbered by a gross split between mind and body, or between “true” nature and experience. Rather, the early Chinese self is more akin to an organism, which both consists in and emerges out of complex processes occurring inside and outside of it, as it interacts with and relates to his or her environment. In such a way, the concept of the self and person is much more integrated than in certain dualistic Western traditions, as it stands in constant and ever-changing relationship to what occurs both within and without.

To the extent that the self is conceived as more physical, embodied, and dynamic than in dualistic Western thought, the early Chinese self necessarily
entails a different definition of the “individual.” While there is no clear term in early Chinese that might translate consistently into “individual,” such a term facilitates discussion of those aspects of the self that emphasize its particularity within a whole. I therefore use the term “individual” to refer to early Chinese notions of self that concern not so much the subjective, psychological sense of self, but the particular qualities of a person that mark him or her as a single entity capable of exerting agency from within a web of human, social, and cosmic relationships. In other words, I refer to the individual not as an atomistic, isolated, and undifferentiated part of a whole, but as a distinct organism that must serve particular functions and fulfill a unique set of relationships in the worlds of which he or she is a part. The “individual” is thus a unique participant in a larger whole—both integral to the processes that define the whole as well as to the change and transformation that stems from itself and its environment.