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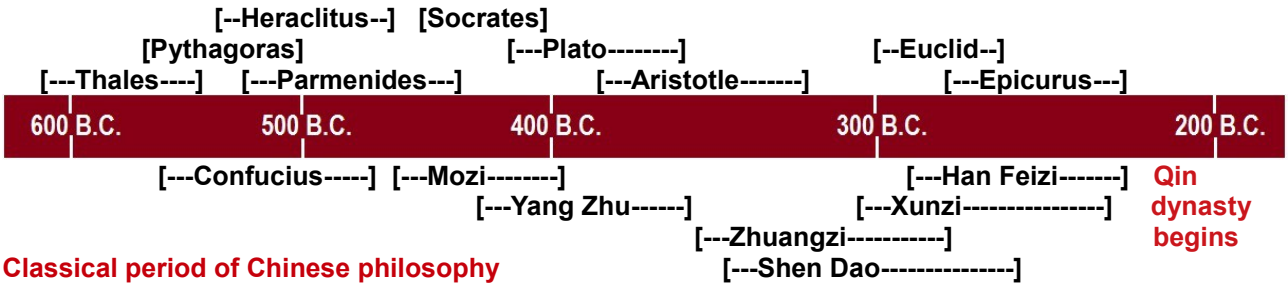
1.7 Introduction to ancient China: history, geography, comparison with the West

By an amazing coincidence, the **Greek** classical period coincides almost perfectly with the **Chinese** classical period. See the following timeline.

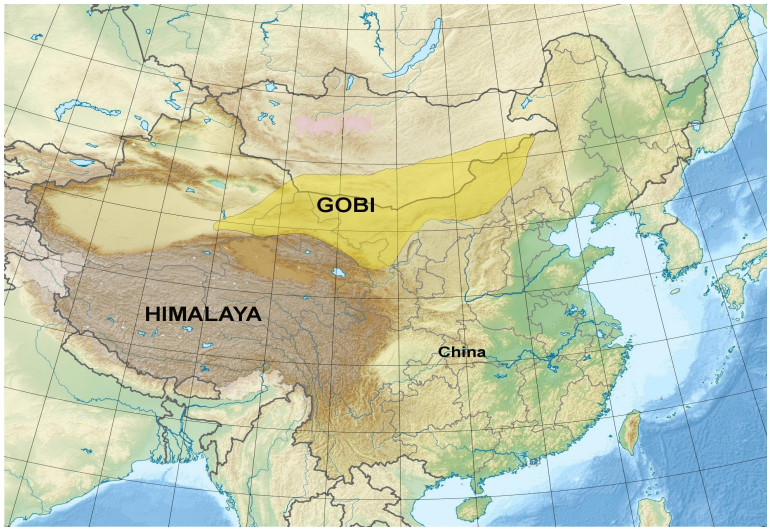
Classical period of Greek philosophy



Classical period of Chinese philosophy

Language

Despite this amazing historical coincidence, China had very little **linguistic** exchange with the West until its Buddhist period. The Phoenicians, relatives of the Greeks, invented an **alphabet.** The idea spread throughout the Middle-east and South Asia. But the spread stopped at the imposing barriers of the Himalayan Mountains and the Takla-makan and Gobi deserts. **China had developed its own writing system**, with a rich literature of philosophy, poetry and culture. The differences in **language** between the two civilizations help explain many different **philosophical** directions taken in the Chinese and the Western traditions.



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Geography

Both the **Chinese** and the **Mesopotamian** civilizations began in **river valleys**, and both had **flood myths**. But the myths are rather different. The Chinese flood myths don't involve a boat floating for 40 days, a God, and the flooding of the entire world. It involves the flooding of the **rivers**, and **Sage kings** who tamed the rivers, especially the Yellow River, which is about 30% silt and floods routinely. So controlling these floods and turning that area between all the rivers into a fertile, agricultural civilization, was one of the task of those culture creating Sage kings.

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Because the Greeks had all the Greek islands, and were on a long narrow peninsula going out into the Mediterranean Sea, they did a lot of **sea-faring**. So the importance of the **sky** for the Greeks had much to do with **seafaring navigation** (which may have fueled their focus on geometry).

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For the Chinese, the **sky** was also important, but it was important for **agricultural** reasons, for the timing of when to plant, and when to harvest, for anticipating the floods – basically, for dealing with the **powers of nature** that control food and well-being.