

# The Chinese Philosophical Tradition

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IF by "philosophical tradition" is meant a sustained tradition of reasoned thinking free of all dogmatic assumptions, not tied to any body of canonical literature, and not necessarily involving the thinker in any existential commitment, we must say that in China there is no such tradition. For, like some religions, Confucianism looks back to a "golden age", produced spokesmen for the "truth" during those periods of Chinese history in which social anarchy and injustice were rife, and possesses a body of literature, both classical and canonical, which has functioned as a foundation upon which all thought, if it was to be judged orthodox, had to be built. Nor could a Confucianist shut himself off from humanity in order to pursue his thinking, or divorce his own speculations from his private and social behaviour. In fact it is noteworthy that those Confucianists whose thought proved most enduring and who contributed most to the forming of opinion in the nation were precisely those who were simultaneously engaged in social activity, whether governmental or pedagogical.

There is a sense, then, in which we can say that the Chinese tradition has a more "theological" than "philosophical" character about it. Nevertheless, I shall make use of the word "philosophy" in this article.

Broadly speaking, the Confucian story can be divided into five creative periods. The first, of course, is dominated by Confucius (557-479 B.C.), although Mencius (371-289 B.C.) and Hsun Tzu (335-286 B.C.) are far more systematic in their presentations of what they believe the Confucian position to be. It must, however, be borne in mind that during this formative period Confucianism was only one among what the Chinese came to call the Hundred Schools; and, moreover, it was not Confucianism which was adopted by the first empire (221-206 B.C.) as its working philosophy but Legalism, which unblushingly made man subservient to the state, glorified war, and by legal means enforced the Taoist ideal of natural simplicity, thus deliberately discouraging education among the masses.

The two works which traditionally embody the central teachings of Confucius are the *Analects* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The first is a collection of short and trenchant comments attributed to Confucius, as well as to some of his leading disciples, and compiled by his followers not long after his death. The second is a chronicle of events purporting to have taken place in court circles in Confucius' home state, the State of Lu, and covering the period 722-481 B.C. Scholars are in some doubt as to the extent to which this work was either composed or edited by Confucius, but the traditional Confucian position is that the work comes from the hand of Confucius, that it was composed specifically as a text-book for the purpose of instructing rulers in the art of statecraft, and to help them see the moral principles underlying social phenomena.

The *Analects* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are believed to be complementary because they each emphasise one of the two terms which lie at the heart of Confucian teaching, namely, Humanity and Righteousness. The first term receives its emphasis in the *Analects*, whereas the second is believed to be expounded primarily in the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

Humanity (also translated "benevolence", "goodness", "love") tends, in the *Analects*, to be viewed mainly in terms of its social implications. In one passage, for example, when asked about Humanity, Confucius replies "Love men." Elsewhere, when a disciple seeks for a clearer definition of the term, Confucius says: "To be able to practise five virtues everywhere in the world constitutes Humanity." Asked what these five virtues are, Confucius replies: "Courtesy, magnanimity, good faith, diligence and kindness. He who is courteous is not humiliated, he who is magnanimous wins the multitude, he who is of good faith is trusted by the people, he who is diligent attains his objective, and he who is kind can get service from the people." Other passages, however, give the impression that this quality of true humanity, though never remote from man is, nevertheless, seldom attainable in all its fullness, for it is a sublime and transcendental quality which, if fully realised in an individual, would elevate him to the level of a Divine Sage capable of ruling mankind, not by law, but by the sheer force of his perfected character.

Now, although the term Righteousness does not figure very largely in the *Analects*, the traditional Confucian position is, as we have seen, that Confucius devoted his edition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to an exposition of this notion; but, as with his doctrine of Humanity, he is concerned more with its application in historical and concrete situations than with its metaphysical implications. Thus, he is said to have employed cryptic terminology in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* for the parcelling out of praise or blame to rulers and ministers who figure in the records. Mencius, speaking of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* says: "Again the world fell into decay, and principles faded away. Perverse speakings and oppressive deeds waxed rife again. There were instances of ministers who murdered their sovereigns and of sons who murdered their fathers. Confucius was afraid, and made the *Spring and Autumn*. What the *Spring and Autumn* contains are matters proper to the sovereign. On this account Confucius said, Yes! It is the *Spring and Autumn* which will make men know me, and it is the *Spring and Autumn* which will make men condemn me."

Despite the fact that Confucius is, according to the *Analects*, primarily concerned with man in his social relationships, it must be made quite clear that Confucius never lays stress on man merely as finite man. Always in the background is a dimension to life which is the presupposition underlying all Confucius' teaching. This basic assumption is that there is a transcendent guardian of moral principles known as Heaven who gives meaning and coherence to Confucius' own pronouncements. This Heaven, who over-rules all men, governs life, death, rank and fortune, possesses a will which may be discerned by man, and is man's final court of appeal. Hence his comment: "He who has put himself in the wrong with Heaven has no means of expiation left."

What, then, is man's actual relationship to Heaven? The answer lies in an ode in the *Classic of Odes* (a collection of songs and poems antedating Confucius, and treated with marked respect by him as containing sagely truth). According to this ode,

"Heaven so begat the teeming multitudes that  
For everything there is its principle."

The ode is quoted by Mencius as one which was highly acceptable to Confucius. Thus, when Confucius says in the *Analects*: "Heaven begat the moral character that is in me", it is reasonable to assume that he has this ode in mind.

We may say, then, that Confucius saw man as being derived, in some way or other, from Heaven and that there is, therefore, some degree of consonance between man's nature and that of Heaven. It is precisely this relationship between man and Heaven which makes it possible to learn the will of Heaven, and which makes Divine Sagehood a meaningful goal. In fact we may say that this is why Confucius lays such an emphasis upon man, for he believes that by depending on moral self-cultivation man is capable of uncovering and bringing to light that Heaven-derived character which is inherent in his very being.

But we have to wait until the time of Mencius before all these ideas are put forward in reasonably systematic form. Now, when we examine the *Book of Mencius* we find that not only are the social implications, or outworkings, of Humanity and Righteousness dealt with at some length, but that both terms are clearly transposed to the psychological and metaphysical planes: on to the psychological plane because Mencius insisted that both Humanity and Righteousness are rooted in man's nature as expressed in mind, and are therefore innate qualities to be found in every man; and on to the metaphysical plane because he emphasised that man's nature is derived from Heaven. Since, then, Humanity and Righteousness are components of man's nature, and are Heaven-derived laws of man's being, Mencius considered the full development of these qualities as essential to the life of the true gentleman. Thus he says: "He who perfects his mind knows his nature, and knowing

his nature he knows Heaven." The true gentleman for Mencius, as for Confucius, is no longer the man who is merely born into the aristocratic level of society, but rather the man who permits his true character to flower, and sets out to live by his highest impulses.

Mencius, like other thinkers of his day and like his master before him, went from court to court seeking official employment, hoping thereby to put his teachings into practice. We can imagine, however, the type of reception Mencius received from scheming feudal lords when his answers were of the kind he gave to King Hui of the State of Liang. On that occasion the ruler said: "Venerable Sir, since you have not counted it far to come here, a distance of a thousand *li*, may I presume that you are provided with counsels to profit my kingdom?" Mencius replied: "Why must Your Majesty use that word 'profit'? What I am provided with are counsels to Humanity and Righteousness, and these are my only topics."

It was during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-221 A.D.) that the second important development in the Confucian tradition took place. However, between the period of Mencius and that of the first great Han Confucianist, Tung Chung-shu (179-104 B.C.) considerable changes had taken place both in society and in thought. Under the first empire (221-206 B.C.) Confucian scholars were attacked, and a number of the writings which they cherished as repositories of ancient culture and wisdom were consigned to the flames. It should not surprise us, therefore, that much of the thought and skill of the Han Confucianists was applied to the reconstruction and exegesis of these ancient texts, as well as to a steady attempt to win a hearing and to gain office in the Imperial court. The revival of book-learning eventually led to the canonisation of the Five Classics, and the efforts to gain influence in court circles resulted in a state orthodoxy and an examination system through which each aspirant to the bureaucratic hierarchy was expected to pass. Tung Chung-shu, who was among

the first Confucianists to attain high office, was asked by the emperor to express his views on matters relating to life in general, and to give his considered opinion as to the best way in which the state could be governed. The answers which Tung gives reveal the fact that he still stands within the mainstream of Confucian thought, but that he has also found it necessary to expand his philosophy in order to embrace problems which had been raised through the theorisings of Taoists and other thinkers of his day. Tung's views can be summarised as follows:

Heaven is the father of all things. This is obvious from the fact that Heaven covers and embraces all without exception. Heaven arranged the sun and the moon, the winds and the rain, so that there must be a harmony existing between the phenomena of the atmosphere. Heaven instituted the two great complementary and alternating principles of Yin (cold, dark, feminine) and Yang (heat, light, male) and by means of them established the four seasons. The Sage, imitating Heaven, must also love the people paternally, without prejudice or bias, and he must perform good works and bestow abundance upon the people as does Heaven. The sage governs the people by means of justice and ancient sagely rites, and in this manner imitates the four seasons in government. Tung maintained that it was in and by means of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (one of the Five Classics) that Confucius revealed the ways of Heaven as they are related to human nature and events. He recorded the misdoings of

the feudal states and of their ruling families; he noted down extraordinary occurrences in the skies and in nature, and he brought into full view the fact that everything that man does, both good and evil, is related to the course of Heaven and earth, and that there is a correlation between all these factors. From the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, says Tung, we can see that Heaven warns a prince, by means of disasters and prodigious events, that his state is on the road to ruin. The warning is given in order that corrective measures might be taken. But it all depends on man. Heaven can only act according to Heaven's own nature or Way (i.e. the Way of harmony). Thus the sending of disasters and prodigious events must be seen as essentially a reaction to a disharmonious element which is disturbing the balance and Harmony of Heaven's Way. When a new and successful dynasty arises, it is heralded by happy occurrences from Heaven, for the founder of such a dynasty knows how to put his Heaven-bestowed character into action. He lavishes goodness upon his subjects so that all people fly to him as if he were their own father.

It is interesting to note that Tung explained the Chinese ideograph for "king" in terms of his own philosophy. The three horizontal strokes in the ideograph, he said, represent the three basic given factors in life: Heaven, earth and man. The vertical stroke signifies the sovereign who is the link between the three, and upon whom depends their harmonious relationship.

Equally important with these views of Heaven, man and the state was the articulation of the Chinese view of the place of the Chinese nation in the world, together with its mission vis a vis the rest of mankind. Again, the Classic of scripture which Tung makes use of as the foundation of his theory is the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. In Tung's day the two most important commentaries on this Classic were those of the Kung-yang and Ku-liang schools, and both these schools claimed to derive their understanding of the Classic from disciples close to Confucius. Tung was an adherent of the Kung-yang school, and helped to develop its theories into their current form.

Now, according to the Kung-yang commentators and to Tung, one of the many things that a ruler must learn is the proper relationship existing between different territories. This he can do by discovering from the *Spring and Autumn Annals* what kind of state merits the title "within", and what must be classified as "without". In principle, the Commentary regards Confucius' home state, the State of Lu, as that which is "within", and the other states as those which are "without". Nevertheless, when a passage deals with the relationship between all the Chinese states and the surrounding barbarians, the Chinese states are considered as "within", whereas the barbarians are classified as "without". Further, the closer the period dealt with in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to the time of Confucius, the greater is the area covered by the term "within", until, in the time of Confucius himself, all the states, including former barbarians are regarded as being "within", i.e., as sharing in the Great Unity of Chinese civilization.

According to this line of exegesis, the State of Lu is regarded by Confucius, the "author" of the *Annals*, as an ideal state bearing the torch of civilization, and the true inheritor of the sage kings of the past. Ultimately, there could be no boundaries to this ideal state, for the affection of its sovereign would extend to the whole world and all nations would be treated by him with equal regard. All nations would gladly submit to the sovereign and to the civilizing influence diffused from the centre, and when this happened, the Great Unity would have been achieved.

Despite the eventual eclipse of some of Tung Chung-shu's theories, it is at least interesting to note that as recently as the 1880s the doctrine of the Great Unity was again brought forward by the eminent politician and reformer K'ang Yu-wei.

With the collapse of the Han dynasty, Confucianism ceased to dominate the minds of many or China's thinkers, and interest was shifted to ways of thought more directly related to Taoism and, as more and more texts were translated from Sanskrit into Chinese, to Buddhism. However, despite the fact that by T'ang times (618-906 A.D.) China appeared to be largely captive to the Buddhist faith, Confucianism persisted as an undercurrent, providing a sense of continuity with the past and acting as a guide for ordinary family and social relationships.

Confucianism entered its third important phase of development with the establishment of the Sung dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), Chu Hsi (1130-1200 A.D.), its greatest exponent during this period, whilst still accepting the "scriptural" statement that "Heaven . . . begat the teeming multitudes . . ." no longer views Heaven in theistic terms. Instead, he lays emphasis on the Supreme Ultimate, a term derived from the *Classic of Changes*. According to Chu Hsi, this Supreme Ultimate is the governing principle of Heaven, earth and all phenomena; but, although for argument's sake he is willing to say that prior to the existence of Heaven and earth this principle was assuredly present, and although he insisted on a metaphysical interpretation of the Supreme Ultimate, nevertheless, it is clear that for Chu Hsi, this governing principle has only a logical priority over the material-energy which it informs.

The Supreme Ultimate resides fully in all aspects of phenomena; and differences between things and among persons are seen to be due to the "fineness" or "coarseness" of the matter through which the Supreme Ultimate expresses itself. In speaking of man and his physical endowments Chu Hsi says that there are differences of "darkness and clarity, pureness and turbidity. Those who are endowed with pure and clear material-energy are the sages, whereas those who receive the dark and turbid are the stupid - this is man's material nature . . . When Mencius said that man's nature was good he was speaking of it only in terms of its original source. He did not go on to speak of physical nature. His concern was with the nature of Heaven and earth, that is to say, the principle of Heaven and earth with which man is endowed, and which is therefore completely good." Man's nature (i.e. his Supreme Ultimate), says Chu Hsi, is like a precious jewel which has fallen into muddy water. There is nothing wrong with the jewel, but its illustrious quality cannot be seen. When the water has been stilled, however, and the mud clears, the precious jewel shines in all its purity. Now, what keeps the waters muddied for man is the running of his emotions to excess so that he is plagued by desires. But if, says Chu Hsi, a man gains understanding and can still his desires, then he will attain a clarity of character which will permit his true nature to shine forth. Understanding, Chu Hsi maintained, could only be gained through as broad an education as possible.

Running parallel with Chu Hsi's philosophy in Sung times, was that of Lu Hsiang-shan who, although employing much the same vocabulary as Chu Hsi, represented a more "idealistic" wing of thought. As he put it: "The universe is my mind and my mind is the universe." For Lu an unending scholarly study of phenomena and their underlying principles was a waste of time. What he sought was illumination of the mind: an experience which would confirm once and for all the essential unity of the principle governing his mind with that which lay behind phenomena in all their variety.

The Ch'ing dynasty (1644-1911 A.D.), at least in its early years, saw a rejection of these mystical and metaphysical tendencies and a return to the spirit of the Han textual critics. To these Ch'ing Confucianists we owe a great debt of gratitude for their systematic scholarship in the field of literature; but there may be more than a grain of truth in the judgement passed on them by T'ang Chun-yi, a writer of the present day who is in the forefront of Confucian thinking outside mainland China. He says: "By doing away with metaphysics and the host of theoretical problems arising from the Philosophy of Principle put forward by the Confucianists of the Sung and Ming dynasties, the Ch'ing Confucianists brought philosophy closer to common sense. But if we take an overall view of the spirit of culture, we find that those who limit themselves to a phenomenological, pragmatic and naturalistic view of the universe, always manifest a spiritual decline."

(Some quotations included in this article are based on translations made by James Legge, Arthur Waley, and the contributors to *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Adjustments made for the purpose of this article are the responsibility of the author.)

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