

REVIEW ARTICLE

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HUMANIST THOUGHT IN CONFUCIAN LITERATURE

Confucian humanist thought takes as its pivot human life, both in its spirituality and in its love for everything that is. It consists in the perfecting of self and of everything existent, always following the laws of life, in order to arrive, through beneficent knowledge, at perfect union. Since it contemplates man in his relationship with other men, with Heaven, with everything that is, from the vantage points of economics, politics, society, morality, virtue, arts and letters, philosophy, in order to attain the diverse degrees of natural knowledge, there is nothing that it cannot encompass within itself. The general structure of the whole of Confucian humanist thought tends to the traditional objective, which consists in the benevolent appraisal of the aspirations of people in conformity with the creative principle that the heavens embrace everything and that everything emanates from their generously protective climate.

Primitive men lived in the natural simplicity of the heavens and of the earth; in direct contact with animals and plants, their daily life was everywhere subject to the influence of the revolution of the stars and of the

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climate. That is why they regarded Heaven with hope and desire, praying that it might deign to probe the feelings of all beings. Men of successive generations continued this tradition, which had penetrated deeply into their customs. Primitive men believed that man could, through human thought, penetrate the thought of Heaven, and that through human feelings men could penetrate the feelings of everything that is and thus cause Heaven (spirit) and all being to contribute to the improvement of men. Hence the legend that it is this great preoccupation with human affairs which constitutes the basis of human nature; hence, also, this supreme love for Heaven and earth (creators) and the affectionate interest in everything that is (creatures).

Then, with the celestial path shedding light on the human path, and beginning with natural differences (all beings ascend together and do not harm one another), little by little one arrives at human society, in which everyone conforms to reason without recriminations. Thus, by wishing to attain the essence of eternal life, one achieves understanding of the meaning of humanity. Man's virtue stems from the virtue of Heaven which increases naturally (virtue embraces the terrestrial globe, grace touches animals and plants) in order to form the sublime essence. The greatest virtue of Heaven and of earth is to give life. It follows that the principle of relations between married couples is to be found again in the relations between Heaven and earth.

The *I Ching* (Classic of Changes), beginning with the general and uninterrupted interpretation of celestial and human thought, observes the changes that occur in Heaven, on earth, and in the Yin and Yang principles.

The *Li Chi* (Record of Rites) regulates order for the purpose of adapting it to human concepts.

The *Yüeh Ching* (Classic of Music) regulates natural harmony for the purpose of guiding the seven human passions.

The *Shu Ching* (Classic of History) is the guide for those who wish to receive the mandate of Heaven in order to govern according to the laws.

The *Shih Ching* (Classic of Poetry) unites the vibrations of beings in order to express their passions, words, and wills.

The *Ch'un Ch'in* (Spring and Autumn Annals [of the State of Lu]) is the study-book of history and of memoirs, of law and of impartiality in criticism.

These are the books that contemporaries call the six classics. It is thanks to these six classics, powerful auxiliaries of the mind, that the influence of

culture could be disseminated among humanity. The *Ju* (Confucian school), using them as tools for instruction, were able, through these books, to transmit to posterity all the elements of civilization.

Each of the masters of a hundred different schools of philosophy has his own principle, which is the emblem of his particular theory. While Chuang 'tzu said: "The mystery of Tao is in beings," Shang Yang declared that "[philosophies] advance an [argument] which stimulates [another] one not very different and likely to be in harmony with it." They direct their thoughts toward the objective, stay with it, and impose it. But they cannot achieve it through reason, calmly and impartially. This becomes a gyratory exercise and such a method of instruction has caused division in the world.

When we speak of the Confucian thought that brought together the great achievements of antiquity, we must point out that it is a great factor in the whole of humanist thought. When we then speak of traditionalist and progressivist spirits that are firmly established, we must add that they are important factors and that, in constituting the new and the old into a homogeneous body, synthesized and lively in character, they can, by their union, buttress the humanist thought of all times.

Certain critics of antiquity, convinced that Confucianist thought could swallow up the whole of humanist thought and that it could turn men away from processes of education capable of corrupting that thought, have said forthwith that Confucian humanist ideas were not the work of *Ju*.

1. If one seriously considers the whole of Confucian thought, one finds that it is contained in these two formulas: "The goodness of reason," and "diversity in harmony." In other words, diverse ideas on the processes of teaching can be reconciled and made to agree, and each can appreciate the value of the other's point of view. Confucian thought on pedagogical processes evolves above all with sympathy and understanding, hence Sun-'tzu's two maxims: "One must not injure the one to benefit the other," and "one must not make one's own what is destined for others." Confucianists have broad conceptions in regard to thoughts that are not their own. What they despise is the inhuman and the utopian. Those who contradict accept one idea and spoil one hundred. When it comes to the principles of all the philosophies of the hundred schools of thought, each one is sure that he is right and he subjects society and humanity to the necessary rightness of his thesis; nothing can be created unless it is in agreement with his concept of necessary rightness, expressed by the Taoist

slogans of “liberty,” by “equality in peace” for the disciples of Mo Ti, and by the “duty and passive obedience” of the Legists.

The Confucianists respect and approve all this. The great ancient and modern Confucianists had been in contact with Buddhists, Taoists, and the various philosophical schools. They agree with Chuang 'tzu and make use of Mo Ti. Thus we can see that they are capable of establishing numerous and important doctrines in a single context; from all the particular points of view of humanist thought, they can extract its true countenance in its integrity.

2. Let us emphasize the very great importance of Confucian thought on the place of an event “in time.” “How it took place in time.” “What gain accrued to it through obstruction.”

Those who truly understand the essence of the Confucianist spirit know that one must act while observing the classical rules and with knowledge of the changes in tradition. They know that only what one possesses exists and that only what evolves triumphs. Since Confucianist thought admits of group study, the pleasant path, respect for situations, and since it proffers objectives in conformity with our strengths, one can say that it is living, fruitful, and without limitations.

Such is certainly not the opinion of men today who censure Confucianist thought, saying that it is nourished by undigested rubbish and that it blocks up the holes of old drums and zithers. They imply that it is tied to the methods of ancient kings, terrified by the idea of change, like the people of ancient times, and seeks solely to halt the progress of the modern epoch and to reverse the wheel of history.

But an “intelligent curiosity in the love of the ancients” means simply that in the wake of great history and with the immense practical knowledge of the ancients, we should reap the great benefit of their ideas in order to open the way for those who will follow us. This does not suggest a return to the conservatism of antiquity. The knowledge and the talents of the ancients certainly do not exceed those of our contemporaries, who have acquired this ancient lore and are far more successful in assessing the worth of each actual individual. When men of today look at and speak of the history of civilization they confine themselves to maintaining ruins and preserving chateaus. This is because they do not know that one must go all the way to the deeply embedded roots of the history of civilization in order to extract from them the greatest consequences of their full flowering.

3. Why do the Confucianists honor Fu Hai, Shen Nung, Huang Ti,

Yao, Shun, Yü, T'ang, Wen Wang, Wu, the Duke of Chou, Confucius? Because of inventions such as the cultivation of the mulberry tree, the development of medicine and pharmacology, wagons and ships, palaces and houses, clothing, techniques in the struggle to combat floods, studies, and so on—works of great value in the life of the people. It is pointless to ask whether there is any truth in the tradition that comes to us from very ancient times. All one has to do is examine the objects that resulted from the inventions of that period, and subsequently further developed, and to discover that these are objects which ten thousand successive generations have not been able to do without.

Among the objects which men imitated from that tradition one must never forget the divining plant (*tsao-lai*) of creation, precursor of all civilized inventions. Nor can one forget that the rules for virtue, for morality and action constituted the code of life for our people, a life that one might say has become the emblem of our race. Thus the actions and ideas of successive generations stem for the most part from the profound sources of ancient societies, and the individuals most representative of this epoch are considered, like us, to have handed down the rules from mouth to mouth.

As Han Yü's observations have indicated, to teach men what they owe to the original sources, to transmit the succession of ideas through tales, is also truly to contribute to the bases of the people's civilization.

4. Goodness and equity, morality, faithfulness, and forgiveness among the Confucianists, as treated in the chapter on morals and philosophy, have always been practiced in human societies without distinction of time or place, but in our present period, when human nature is in grave jeopardy, it becomes even more significant.

When contemporaries observe the Confucianists' tendency to speak of goodness, of equity, of morality, they never fail to say, "old men's twaddle," "a great display of rubbish." This sort of thing comes from the mouths of masters withered by many winters and oozing decay. But these essential moral precepts emanated thousands of years ago from the twaddle of old men precisely as did the daily use of materials, wheat, and vegetables in the life of men, which proves that something can traverse the course of time and yet remain a living thing. If this is not the supreme reason of here below, then truly these teachings are not the chatterings of ancient or of modern man.

Moreover, if one studies closely a man who professes to despise goodness, equity, and morality, one observes that, without his knowing it, he

was penetrated from infancy by transcendental effluvia which were surely in conformity with those sentiments. What causes any man to hold such involuntary sentiments is a force of goodness, of equity, of morality. This is what Meng Tzu (Mencius) expressed when he said: "Reason and equity please my spirit just as an aromatic roast of meat pleases my palate." Certainly no men exist who are naturally insensitive to goodness, resolutely opposed to equity, and without any notion of public or private morality.

5. Confucianist maxims such as: "What Heaven sees our people naturally see, what Heaven hears our people naturally hear," "one must love what the people love, despise what the people despise," "the people are the armor of the country," "the people are precious, the princes are of no value," and other political ideas, whatever they might be, cannot be injurious to the development of democratic government. On the contrary, the search for rectitude, for equality and peace, beginning with the individual and spreading to everyone, grows by degrees, establishes a political culture, and greatly helps to correct the vices of the times; it is this political culture that will prevent the government from encountering opposition.

Or again, "Know that one knows what one knows, know that one does not know what one does not know," and "Desire nothing, be neither peremptory, nor obstinate, nor selfish" are a guide for the mind in order to attain, while rejecting methods of divination, the objective which primitive men expected of Heaven. And the maxims of the Masters adapt themselves to the spirit of experimental science.

As regards the making of objects, the *Ju* thought is to be taken seriously, as is said: "Things of good quality last a long time" and "avoid making hardships for the workers and lead them with gentleness." There exists nothing in *Ju* thought that could be said to be in opposition to the development of natural experimental science.

When a contemporary reads Meng Tzu's saying: "When one knows one's own heart thoroughly, one knows nature and consequently Heaven," he progresses from a study of self-awareness to that of metaphysics, thanks to the association of ideas. Any master of the positive sciences will find in this an aid to his talent for discovery and invention. Whatever might be the object of one who seeks the reason of things, who observes and experiments, it would be most profitable for his endeavor if he began with the principle: "Through profound knowledge of the heart one knows nature."

To seek the reason of things, to observe, to experiment—all this goes

back to the same source; it is a single thing bearing different names, contained in the two words: *Ko chich* (to seek). Methods of research have certainly progressed and will progress further in all domains, but surely not as much as the *Ju* said they would under the Song dynasty.

6. The perpetual disorders in human society have human nature as their source.

The pedagogical thinking of the *Ju* in regard to civic instruction represents a system based upon moral reasoning that is at the outset in harmony with human nature, just as one who wishes to regulate the flow of waters at first follows nature's design and then prepares to moderate and guide its waves and eddies. This comparison can be applied to human nature in its pure state, the "growth of individuality" and "social discipline" combining to establish harmony. One can also apply it to man's natural docility; it is by following his desires that one can keep him peaceful.

Another point that attracted the *Ju*'s particular attention in discussions on human nature was the fundamental social problem of mankind.

Meng Tzu, taking as his point of departure innate reason (awareness), which emits correct judgments, says that human nature is good. Hsun Tzu, whose point of departure is the powerful influence of human passions, says that it is evil. But they both have the same objective, which is to seek, within the norm of human nature, to behave in such a way that this nature evolves continuously toward higher things and attains to peace of body and soul through the individual's harmony within society.

Certain contemporaries believe that the *Ju*'s discourse on culture through self-discipline applies too exclusively to the individual and ignores society. These critics are not aware that in all dissertations on morality, virtue, rites, music, etc., the point of departure is the individual, whereas society is the final objective. In studying the *Ju*'s teachings about life these men also censure them for attaching too much importance to states of mind while neglecting the material aspect of life. And yet the *Ju* spoke a good deal about equalizing the resources of the people's economy, a subject previously neglected.

The adages of the *Ju*, "Be peaceful in poverty and joyous in reason," "Do not blush for worn-out clothes and coarse foods," are formulas suitable to self-discipline, but they do not apply to the way of life of the entire human species.

"The Master (Confucius) spoke rarely of profit" and "the distinction between profit and equity" are also formulas that differentiate between gains in conformity with goodness, equity, and generosity, and purely

selfish ones. Those who are concerned with the mounting tide of corruption all believe that people must have the opportunity of utilizing all their potentialities so that everyone will receive his due share.

7. The importance the *Ju* attach to practice is evidenced in the precept: "Words are of no avail, to bow down timidly leads to nothing." Words must be rare and brief, spoken with the calm that one maintains when walking into water. One must not imitate the heads of the hundred schools whose eloquence is a means of galloping through debate,

Those who would like to understand the true spirit of the *Ju* must necessarily practice their precepts without concerning themselves with the whole of their ideas, like the man who drinks water but savors only its freshness. What exists in books and pamphlets does not solve problems, and in the end remains questionable.

The *Ju*'s ideas are extremely useful to those who are engaged in government—useful, as well, to men of present-day democracy, the spirit of which these ideas have in no way neglected. They express themselves kindly about the little people and are severe in their judgments of the leaders of all ranks in ancient society.

8. The goods that have been handed down to us and our descendants by preceding generations, and which the *Ju* considered the most essential, are instruction and culture. We must transmit these essentials to our successors, enhanced by our own knowledge. Whatever is dispensable will disappear as a matter of course.

The ancients' concept of what was essential depended upon the period in which they lived and on their milieu, both of which accounted for their ways of thought and for their pedagogical methods, from which they derived their social laws. But a time came and circumstances arose, inevitably, when these laws became inapplicable. We ourselves cannot apply in their entirety the ideas and the teachings of the ancients to the exigencies of our times and of succeeding ones. But on the other hand, we must not, because of this, despise every phase of the life of the ancients, nor censure inadvisedly all that their dignity and their worth represent. There will always be something of value to be learned from the ancients. If, which seems improbable, we had to correct some truly vicious necessity, we should not expend our energy blaming the ancients. I Chou, when he heard someone criticize their shortcomings, said: "Well, then it is you who have taken over their good qualities." This phrase shows a fine discernment.

The Chinese, alas, must search diligently for what is left of Chinese

culture and Confucianist ideas after the advent of Western sciences and Oriental infiltrations; very little remains. Many of the classics are in a state of ruin. There is reason to fear that the old Chinese books which should be carefully preserved may not last much longer. In not too many years to come the contribution of China to knowledge will erroneously be looked upon as stemming from Western thought, as emanating from across the ocean. According to the new generation, in other words, Chinese culture and Confucianist thought do not contribute any large weight. If we want Chinese culture to spread, to become unified with Western civilization and to meet the needs of our time, we must present the best and finest we possess, disseminate its brilliant essence and reject what is worthless in it.

During the last ten years the Chinese have contributed a great deal to the work of destroying their own civilization. To compensate for this a program in conformity with changing circumstances is called for. Confucianist ideas will then enrich the personal knowledge of every writer, not only by unifying and clarifying thought, which is their major function, but also by protecting it from trends that might run counter to a universal civilization.

The sublimely intelligent principles on the knowledge of life contained in the *Chung Yung* (Doctrine of the Mean) must also be considered as an excellent intellectual stimulant. Due to the moderation of these private and public discourses, no personal sentiments are violated. The constitution of a country could not be imperialistic if it were based upon these principles; nor would the government be dictatorial. Since production would be equally divided, neither would it be capitalistic.

If the Chinese want, in saving themselves, to save the world, the very thing they must fear is that they might forsake this difficult path. To be sure, Chinese civilization has some shortcomings. This is true of all the civilizations of the world. The ideas of the *Ju*, which came into being during a period of decadence, represented a somewhat vague and conciliatory partiality. For instance, the *Ju* would attack government and then withdraw, maintaining a vacillating attitude, according to the circumstances. If they did not go so far as to say "I am only acting in my own interest," nonetheless they did not exhibit the unselfish spirit of a *Wen Wang*.

Other formulas like "the wise man tries to bring everything back to himself," "the wise man remains peaceful while awaiting orders," and finally, "when the country is ruled by reason, the wise man appears; if it is

ruled foolishly the wise man hides," tended to encourage the *Ju* in a passive attitude of calm retreat, without taking into account the valuable time they sacrificed to their particular interest, and which was lost to the general welfare.

There were also those who, rationalizing, put the greater part of their faith in education. "Enlighten reason to nourish virtue." This attitude excluded any attempt at progress. Thus, for thousands of years, Chinese education and culture were based upon the exaltation of inner enlightenment. Before and after the *Ch'in* (252–202) the *Ju* always showed a preference for the inner moral problems rather than for external ones, for theory rather than practice. Called upon to participate in government to insure the peace of the world and the happiness of their people, they refused because they believed the function of governing had been sullied. Because from the start there was an excess of weakness among the good, the actions of reasonable people were no longer good, and governments became irrational.

It frequently happens that the more corrupt the government, the more the men of letters withdraw from it, and the more they withdraw from it the more corruption grows. One can see the reputation of a corrupt government affect that of the men of letters. The situation of a country is not improved thereby. Rarely, on the other hand, does one see the good reputation of the wise men improve that of the government. This makes for trouble and the destruction of order in the world. Because the majority of scholars do not follow the path of authority, very few of them can truly follow the path of reason.

The scholars of the contemporary epoch, having no power, cannot nevertheless remain in the shadows meditating, as their white hair and their emaciated bodies would seem to indicate. Most of them have this appearance and they cannot change it radically. Hence the people of this century consider them as beings absolutely apart from active society and believe that scholarship and politics are two entirely separate paths.

It is not by writing books of poetry or by inspiring disciples and guiding them in the means of preserving the values of the past while awaiting the future that the transition from the preceding generations to the contemporary period will be accomplished. If an all-powerful tyranny should develop, which is happening today, it will no longer be possible to express oneself freely on educational problems; if one follows the educational precept: "Love reason exclusively until death," intellectual endeavor will in a short time be pointless. All that remains for bewildered spirits is

to exchange expressions of sympathy in a confused world and, in response, to observe the pantomime of delusive demons, since the reason for living has disappeared. These spirits will transmit the feeble hope, inspired by extraordinary ancient sovereigns, of saving the world by practicing virtue. But finally a time will come when people will no longer endure the present authority. Fate makes this a certainty. One can foresee that the first wish will be "to save the world by making the people greater," which ancient and modern wisdom cannot accomplish merely by compassion. Great obstacles over which one might weep bitterly must be surmounted before there can be compliance with the dictates both ancient and modern, moral and physical, which demand that the people should not be in any way frustrated.

Ever since Confucius and Mencius permitted themselves to be hypnotized by the emperors, everything inevitably culminated in the condescending doctrine of intelligent reason, and the hope was handed down from one generation to another that the wise men who would follow would decide how to meet current problems. Since then 2,500 years have passed. If from generation to generation the rare Confucianist saints and sages should concentrate their bewildered minds on writing books, making speeches, and transmitting hope to succeeding generations, those who follow us will consider our present just as we consider the past.

It is to be feared that the sufferings which the human species must soon experience will be like an immense and mortal inundation—eternal day without "celestial refuge"; and in each generation vast numbers of people will be treated like cattle, reduced to slavery. What each generation will gain by it will be no more than a few tears shed for the heavens and a few lamentations uttered for those who were taught by the wise men.

According to the cultural formula of the *Ju*, "It is enough to develop oneself without concerning oneself with what is external," one could certainly live alone among barbarians, adapt oneself to the circumstances of the times and, in yielding, be perfectly happy. However, since the *Ju* think of the world as one large family and of the ten thousand peoples as a single body, whenever extreme tyranny is practiced upon a living people, they will actually be unable to witness the sufferings of the masses and remain perfectly happy, if their own mental qualities have not been exhausted, if they still have feeling and will. If, on the other hand, they can observe the world with a cold eye and frivolously ignore human beings in order to preserve their own beatific attitude, then one might say that they have come to "look upon men as straw dogs."

These are certainly not the opinions of Confucius nor of Mencius on the virtue of humanity, nor those of the *Ju*, which originally were studied with a view to achieving the spirit of total peace.

“The body renews itself entirely” and “Only that which changes progresses.” The *Ju* of today and of tomorrow would answer this as follows: How can one prove the strength of mind that resides in the formula “When one is good one does not yield?” By the spirit of enterprise that says: “One speaks sitting down, one stands up to act.”

Looking within oneself and at matters external to oneself, one hopes to be able to aid the wise men, to aid in government for the purpose of spreading the culture of humanity, of helping to develop international education so that the great and remarkable talents of all men may flourish. Governments and intellectuals must be made to help each other and together effect the resumption of projects for a new society of the future which have been abandoned in past ages. In so doing, it will be truly imperative to rely on the great schools of the *Ju* and on the governments of the “times of the saints,” on the “competence of the saints” as a guidepost for those who spread enlightenment.

Let us say, in concluding, that one must not limit to excess the freedom to act. This is the: “Those who are light run fast” of all good masters, ancient and modern.

Your hands on your chests, rest.

NOTE: Confucianist thought has been generally influenced by modern Western authors' translations of the words “humanism” and “anthropocentrism.” When we compare the Western meaning of these two words we can say that they are almost similar, but not that they are absolutely alike. The essential difference resides in the more or less elastic use of the initial meaning of the word. We suggest, for clarification, two articles by Mr. T'ang Kiu-i: “Le sens du mot humanisme,” in No. 75 of the review *Jen Cheng*, and “L'Idée d'humanisme dans le monde,” in No. 49. In addition, see in “Critique de la démocratie,” the first chapter of the third *chüan*, “La structure de la pensée politique chez les *Ju* et son évolution progressive,” and in the supplement to its tenth chapter, “Le caractère fondamental de l'esprit confucianiste et ses réserves sur la vie moderne,” two works by Mr. Siu Fou-koan, which contain many provocative statements and offer much fruitful advice.