

Confucius

"Sage" of the Reactionary Classes

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反动阶级的“圣人”——孔子

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I. THE AGE IN WHICH CONFUCIUS LIVED

The Tribal Slave-holding State

Confucius lived at the end of the Spring and Autumn Period,¹ at a time when the tribal slave-holding state of the Chou Dynasty was collapsing.

What was the tribal slave-holding state, and how did it come into existence?

In the very early primitive society there were no classes. Later, as the productive forces gradually developed, there was a surplus of products. This surplus was appropriated by the tribal heads, making their condition of life increasingly different from that of the ordinary tribal members, so that a privileged tribal aristocracy arose.

Towards the end of primitive society, wars often broke out among the various tribes. At first, the captives taken in the fighting were killed. Later, as the productive forces grew, the tribal chiefs got the idea of using their captives from enemy tribes as slaves for production. In case a whole tribe was defeated, all of its members became slaves of the

¹The name "Spring and Autumn Period" comes from the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a historical record (722-481 B.C.) of the state of Lu. However, historians generally take the year 770 B.C., the first year of the Eastern Chou Dynasty, as the beginning of the Spring and Autumn Period and 476 B.C. (when the Warring States Period began) as its end.

conquering tribe. In this way the classless primitive society in time became a slave society in which the slaves and the slave-owners formed two big classes opposed to each other.

This was the tribal slave-holding state — a state in which the conquering tribe ruled many defeated tribes, making all the captives their slaves. This type of slave-holding state system prevailed in China's Yin (16th-11th centuries B.C., known in history as Yin-Shang, first called Shang and later Yin) and Western Chou (11th century-770 B.C.) dynasties. For example, in Yin times, a tribe named Tzu was the sole ruler, and this ruling clique headed by the king of Yin formed the tribal aristocracy, the slave-owning class of the tribal slave-holding state.

Yin Dynasty slaves were classified as slaves for production and household slaves. The former engaged in productive labour and are referred to in oracle-bone inscriptions as *chung* or *chung jen*. The latter were divided into *chen*, *pu*, *hsi*, *nu*, *chieh* and so forth. According to bone inscriptions, the raiding Yin tribe made slaves of their captives taken from the Chiang tribe and ordered them to hunt, their bags to be given over to the Yin tribe.

Under tribal slavery, the slaves not only lived worse than beasts of burden, but their very lives were in the hands of the slave-owners, who could put them to death at will. When a slave-owner died, many slaves were killed as human sacrifice, the number sometimes reaching several hundred at one time.²

Whenever the king of Yin sacrificed to the gods and his ancestors, he used slaves as sacrificial objects. For instance,

²Archaeological excavations at Houchiachuang in Anyang, Honan Province, have revealed large Yin tombs each containing the remains of nearly 400 slaves.

when sacrifices were offered to a certain Futing, three hundred slaves of the Chiang tribe were killed as though they were cattle, sheep or swine.

There was no basic change in the nature of the political power in the Chou Dynasty; it remained a tribal slave-holding state, only Chi replaced Tzu as the ruling tribe.

Having overthrown the Yin Dynasty, the slave-owners headed by the king of Chou made slaves of the various tribes they captured. For instance, at the beginning of Chou, 71 vassal states were set up one after another, slave-owning princes being assigned by the royal house to rule over the enslaved tribes in the various states.

Among the principal vassal states of the time, Wei, which was given to King Wu's younger brother Kang Shu, took the "seven Yin tribes" to be slaves; Lu, which was given to Po Chin, the eldest son of Duke Chou, made slaves of the "people of the state of Yen under the Yin Dynasty" and the "six Yin tribes"; Tsin, which was given to King Cheng's younger brother Tang Shu, continued to rule the "nine clans named Huai," originally slaves of the Yin tribe.³ The remaining states likewise used slaves within their own borders.

In Chou times, as in Yin, slaves were forced to do farm labour, so that thousands of slaves were seen in the fields toiling under the surveillance of the slave-owners.⁴ Besides those in agriculture, slaves used in handicrafts and commerce also supported the luxury of the slave-owners. From generation to generation the slaves were cruelly oppressed and exploited by the slave-owning class.

In the Chou Dynasty there were also *kuo jen* (inhabitants of the capital), freemen in the tribal slave-holding state.

³ *Tso Chuan*, Prince Ting, 4th year.

⁴ *Discourses of the States*, "Discourses of Chou."

Belonging to the ruling tribe by blood, they enjoyed a higher political and social status than the slaves. They were ordinary members of the ruling tribe, without authority or the privileges accorded to the slave-owning aristocracy. The relationship between the aristocracy and the freemen was that of the leaders and the led within the ruling class.

Slave Revolts

Where there is oppression there is bound to be resistance. Whether in the Yin or the Chou Dynasty, under the ruthless rule of the tribal slave-owners the slaves continuously put up resistance.

Oracle-bone inscriptions of Yin record that many slaves ran away — also a kind of resistance — obviously because of unbearable oppression. Others, forced by the slave-owners to labour in the fields or perform various services, refused to work, or even rose up in revolt.

Whenever the chance came, the slaves staged large-scale uprisings. One instance occurred at the end of the Yin Dynasty, when the Chou people attacked King Tsou of Yin. The king's slaves turned their weapons against him and other tribal slave-owners of Yin. Likewise, as the Chou slave-owners were extremely brutal in their oppression of the slaves, the latter rebelled continually.

The decline of the slave-holding Chou Dynasty set in after the middle of Western Chou, and at the time of King Yi the dynasty was already tottering. After him, King Li not only ruthlessly oppressed and exploited the slaves, but also sternly suppressed the ordinary members of his own tribe, the freemen, executing any found talking behind his

back. The result was that freeman and slave made common cause and expelled King Li.⁵

Runaways and revolts gradually diminished the number of the slaves, and a census attempted in the time of King Hsuan failed.⁶

King Hsuan's son, King Yu, was a dull-witted and brutal ruler who was later killed by a tribe named Chuan Jung at the foot of Mt. Lishan near the Chou capital. After that the royal house of Chou could not maintain itself in and around present-day Shensi and King Ping, who succeeded King Yu, moved to Loyang in Honan Province where he set up what is recorded in history as the Eastern Chou Dynasty (770-249 B.C.). From that time on, the rule of the king of Chou existed only in name, as the slave system was on the decline and giving way to the rising feudal system.

The Spring and Autumn Period — a Time of Change

By the time of the Spring and Autumn Period, not only had the Chou kings become rulers in name only as a result of the slaves' continual escapes and revolts, but the rule in the various vassal states was also quite unstable.

For example, in 550 B.C., slaves in the state of Chen were ordered to build a city wall under overseers who killed them at will. Angered by the atrocities, the slaves rose in revolt and killed the slave-owners Ching Hu and Ching Yin.⁷

⁵ *Historical Records*, "Annals of Chou Dynasty"; also *Discourses of the States*, "Discourses of Chou."

⁶ *Discourses of the States*, "Discourses of Chou."

⁷ *Tso Chuan*, Prince Hsiang, 23rd year.

In 478 B.C., Shih Pu of the state of Wei took the opportunity of an uprising of handicraft slaves to besiege the chief slave-owner Prince Chuang. The prince fled, to be killed by the Chi people from Jungchow within his domain.⁸

In 470 B.C., handicraft slaves in the state of Wei rose in revolt again. Without arms, they took up their tools as weapons to attack the slave-owners, putting the chief slave-owner Prince Cheh to flight.⁹

In the state of Cheng, the slaves assembled in a reed marsh and attacked the slave-owners.¹⁰ And when slaves in the state of Tsin were given an order to work, they ran away as if from a pursuing enemy.¹¹

At the same time, as the new rising feudal landlord forces were developing, divisions were occurring within the ruling class. The house of Chi of Lu state, for example, changed its governing methods under conditions of the new social changes.

In 562 B.C., the three houses of Chi Sun, Shu Sun and Meng Sun, who were senior officials of the state of Lu, began dividing the prince's estates, i.e., the land and slaves of the biggest slave-owner of the state.

In dealing with the holdings he received, Chi Sun acted according to the new situation and freed the slaves allotted to him, renting land to them to till as tenants. Shu Sun, however, maintained the original relationship under the slave system, while Meng Sun used a combination of the old and new systems. Twenty-five years after, the three houses again divided the prince's remaining estates into four parts (the

⁸ Ibid., Prince Ai, 17th year.

⁹ Ibid., Prince Ai, 25th year.

¹⁰ Ibid., Prince Chao, 20th year.

¹¹ Ibid., Prince Chao, 3rd year.

Chi house got two parts), and all followed the method adopted by Chi Sun.¹² That is to say, the three houses were gradually changing over to the feudal landlord class.

Another example illustrating this trend is furnished by Tien Cheng-tzu of the state of Chi. In the struggle against the decadent slave-owning aristocracy of Chi, he used a small measure in collecting grain for land rent and a large measure when lending grain to the peasants. Though the method was an expedient one used by the new rising feudal landlord class to wrest power from the slave-owning aristocracy, Tien won the support of the masses and was welcomed by them.¹³ In 485 B.C., he finally killed the chief slave-owning aristocrat Prince Chien and seized the power of Chi.

It may be seen from the above events that the Spring and Autumn Period was a time of radical change.

Decline of the Slave-owning Aristocracy

Society was changing, time was marching on.

The slaves were rebelling, and the new rising feudal landlord forces were taking the offensive. Pounded by the tide of history in the stream of great social change, the slave-owning aristocrats were in desperate straits and on their way out.

Let us look for a moment at what happened to so-called ancient sage-kings such as Shun of the Yu times, Yu of the Hsia times and Tang of the Yin Dynasty. The descendants of their tribes had long become slaves themselves.¹⁴ The

¹² Ibid., Prince Chao, 5th year.

¹³ Ibid., Prince Chao, 26th year, and 3rd year.

¹⁴ Ibid., Prince Chao, 32nd year.

descendants of the eight aristocratic families of the state of Tsin — Luan, Hsi, Hsu, Yuan, Hu, Su, Ching and Po — also became slaves during the Spring and Autumn Period.¹⁵ That is to say, the social change was effecting a reciprocal transformation in the relationships between the higher and the lower, between the ruler and the ruled.

This transformation is like geographical changes in the natural world. As an ancient poet put it: "Cliffs sink into valleys; ravines heave up into peaks." Everything in society undergoes constant change, and the verses precisely express the type of change in social relationships that was going on in the Spring and Autumn Period.

Which Side Was Confucius On?

At a time of such epochal change — when the slaves were struggling for emancipation, the rising forces were continually gaining victories in their resistance fight, and some aristocratic slave-owners decayed and became slaves — the whole slave system was on the verge of collapse. This was an objective law of historical development independent of man's will.

Where did Confucius stand at this critical time of social change? Did his standpoint, political attitude and thinking proceed with the development of society? Did he side with the new rising forces, oil the wheels of change over to the feudal system? Or did he go against the tide of the times, side with the decaying slave-owning aristocracy and stubbornly uphold the moribund slave system? In other words, did Confucius seek to effect social reform, or did he try hard to stand pat? Was he progressive or reactionary?

¹⁵ Ibid., Prince Chao, 3rd year.

This involved a struggle between two classes, two roads and two lines at that time. A look at Confucius' words and actions throughout his lifetime will show clearly where he stood in this struggle.

II. WHAT CONFUCIUS DID

A Glance at His Life

Confucius lived between 551 and 479 B.C. His family name was Kung and his personal name Chiu. The second son of Kung, he was also called by his polite name Chung-ni. Reactionary rulers through the ages have acclaimed him as "Kung the Sage." In the May Fourth Movement of 1919 against imperialism and feudalism, the revolutionaries who raised the slogan "Down with Confucius' Shop!" exposed him as a reactionary.

His ancestors had been aristocrats in the state of Sung, who, as Confucius himself boasted, were descended from Yin Dynasty royalty.¹ Only when his father, Shu-ho, became an official of the state of Lu did his family settle down in that state.

The family had degenerated by Confucius' time so that in his youth he had to do jobs that were generally looked down upon. He worked as a bookkeeper and as a storekeeper, and tended cattle and sheep.²

Later, Confucius entered officialdom in the state of Lu, not however becoming a senior official until he was 52, when he

¹ *The Book of Rites*, "Tan Kung."

² *Mencius*, "Wan Chang," Part II.

presided over justice and acted in the capacity of prime minister. But Confucius' ecstasy in his official career was short-lived, for he held the position only three months.³

Execution of Reformer Shaocheng Mao and Razing Three Cities

As justice official for the state of Lu, Confucius modelled himself in every action after Duke Chou,⁴ who was a harsh and vicious official. After only seven days in office as acting prime minister he had Shaocheng Mao, a reformer in the state, executed.

How did Confucius justify his verdict against Shaocheng Mao? According to him, anyone guilty of any of the following five "crimes" should be put to death:

1. Understanding the changes of things and launching out on venturesome acts;
2. Not following the orthodox ways prescribed by the slave system, but stubbornly taking the path of so-called reform;
3. Talking glibly about the reasons for such reform;
4. Knowing too much about the decadent and unstable phenomena occurring under the rule of the slave-owners;
5. Using stern, just words to describe why the slave system should be opposed.

³ *Historical Records*, "The Hereditary House of Confucius."

⁴ Duke Chou (surname Chi, personal name Tan) once held office under King Cheng of the Chou Dynasty. From *The Book of Documents* it can be seen that Duke Chou's methods in dealing with the Yin tribe were extremely harsh and cruel. Besides using them as slaves, he ordered them to Loyi under surveillance and cruelly punished those who disobeyed.

Confucius claimed that since Shaocheng Mao had committed all five of these offences, he had to be executed. Thereupon he put Shaocheng Mao to death on the following charges:

1. Gathering a crowd to form an association;
2. Propagating heretical views;
3. Confusing right and wrong.⁵

This event shows how merciless Confucius was in his treatment of progressive personages of the time.

Not long after being removed from office, Confucius managed to do another thing which he smugly prided himself on:

The new rising forces of Lu at that time, e.g., the senior officials Meng Sun, Shu Sun and Chi Sun, not only actually wielded power in the state but also built their own respective cities.

Meng Sun built the city of Cheng, Shu Sun the city of Hou, and Chi Sun the city of Pi.

In slave society in China, as in ancient Europe with the Greek city states (like Athens) as example, a city could not be founded just by anyone at will, for founding a city amounted to founding a state. Now that Meng Sun, Shu Sun and Chi Sun had their own cities, thought Confucius, didn't that mean they had their own states in opposition to his state of Lu?

Confucius felt quite uncomfortable about this and was biding his time to settle the question. Consequently he instigated his disciple Tzu Lu to destroy the cities of Shu Sun and Chi Sun. Only the city of Cheng built by Meng Sun

⁵ *Hsun Tzu*, "Yu Tso."

was left unscathed, perhaps because it was very well defended.⁶

Hated by the New Rising Forces

After that Confucius went to the state of Wei where he stayed for five years, repeatedly inveigling people to say a good word for him to the prince of Wei. But in the five years he never got anywhere.

Then he decided to try the state of Chen. As he was passing through the state of Sung, he happened to stop under a big tree to perform the rites together with his pupils. The war minister of Sung, Huan Tui, who was opposed to Confucius' preachings, ordered the tree chopped down, at which Confucius took to his heels in alarm.⁷

Upon arrival in Chen he met further disappointment, for not only was he slighted at every turn, but no one even offered the hospitality of meals for him and his pupils, so that they went hungry for several days.⁸

There was nothing for it but to return to Lu. On the way past Wei his ambition grew again, and he attempted to govern that state by carrying out what he called the "rectification of names" in the social relationships.⁹ But he failed again, due most likely to the disfavour in which the progressive forces of Wei held him.

⁶ *Tso Chuan*, Prince Ting, 12th year.

⁷ *Historical Records*, "The Hereditary House of Confucius."

⁸ *Analects*, "Wei Ling Kung"; also *Hsun Tzu*, "Yu Tso."

⁹ *Ibid.*, "Tzu Lu."