



The Economic Principles of Confucius and His School (英文版)

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**THE ECONOMIC PRINCIPLES OF
CONFUCIUS AND HIS SCHOOL**

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BOOK VI. BRANCHES OF PRODUCTION

CHAPTER XX

BRANCHES OF PRODUCTION IN GENERAL

I. THE FOUR GROUPS OF PEOPLE

USING the principle of the division of labor as a basis, the Chinese have classified their people into four groups from a very early period. Such a classification is not a caste system, but a division of occupations, and it includes all the people. *Ku-liang's Commentary* says: "In the ancient time there were four groups of people: there was a group of people called students; there was a group of people called merchants; there was a group of people called farmers; and there was a group of people called artisans."¹ The definition of these four groups is given by Ho Hsiu. He says:

First, those whose virtue enabled them to occupy the public positions were called students. Second, those who cultivated land and produced grain were called farmers. Third, those who finished the goods by skilful mind and toilsome hand were called artisans. Fourth, those who exchanged wealth and sold goods were called merchants. The four groups worked separately and the labor of one group was not taken by the other three. Therefore, the wealth was sufficient.²

¹ First year of Duke Ch'êng.

² Annotation of *Kung-yang*, first year of Duke Ch'êng.

This was the system of the ancients and the same classification is still used now.

Under the influence of Confucius, China had no social class or caste. But by the division of labor, she had, and has, four groups of people. In the statements just quoted above we may note three points of special significance. The first is social equality. All the four groups are indiscriminately called people, and no group is higher than the others. The second is that the merchant is productive as well as the student, the farmer and the artisan. In the Chinese language the order of these four groups is usually this: the first is student, the second farmer, the third artisan, and the fourth merchant. But, according to *Ku-liang's Commentary*, the merchant is next to the student. It is obvious that the Confucians recognize the productivity of the merchant, and that they are not hostile to him, no matter whether he is put second or fourth in order. The third is the principle of division of labor. These four groups are divided in order to make the productive power more sufficient; and the people are not confined to any given group, but simply fall into one through the classification of occupations. These are the essentials of this grouping system.

In ancient times there was a static theory about the four groups. According to Kuan Tzū, the sage kings settled the students in the quiet place, the artisans in the factory, the merchants in the market-place, and the farmers in the country. Each group collectively lived in a special district by itself and attended to its own business day and night. They practised their occupation when they were young; their minds were satisfied; and they did not like to change their occupations, even when they saw strange things. Therefore, the teaching of their fathers and older brothers was effective without severity, and the learning of their sons and younger brothers was successful without difficulty.

Hence, the sons of each group usually took up the occupation of their fathers. Therefore, these four groups should live separately. Had they all lived together, their talking would be confused and their business would be changed.¹ Such a theory was carried out successfully by Kuan Tzū, and it was harmonious with the theory of the Confucians. In fact, the separation of the four groups was not for social distinction, but for occupational specialization.

Because the ancient Chinese had static economics in mind, they thought that it was a good thing for people not to change their occupations. When Tzū-nang, prime minister of Ch'u, described the good social conditions of Tsin (27 B. K. or 578 B. C.), he said: "The students of the prince of Tsin vigorously study their lessons; his common people attend diligently to agriculture; his merchants, artisans, and servants know nothing of changing their occupations."² According to this statement, Tzū-nang judged the economic condition of Tsin by the adherence to their occupations of the four groups. Such a judgment is correct. For, if the people are not satisfied with their occupations, they must change from group to group. So long as the people can remain in their own group without moving, it means that they can earn a living in their group, and there is no inducement offered by other groups. It is a static state, because the four groups stand on the same level and the people do not want to change their occupations.

II. FREEDOM OF OCCUPATION

Although by the system of four groups, the people are divided up on account of their different occupations, there is freedom of occupation. According to the theory of the

¹ *Narratives of Nations*, bk. vi.

² *Classics*, vol. v, pt. ii, p. 440.

Confucians, every one should have free choice of his own occupation, and this was the fact in ancient times. Mencius says:

Is the arrow-maker less benevolent than the maker of armor of defence? And yet, the arrow-maker's only fear is lest men should not be hurt, and the armor-maker's only fear is lest men should be hurt. So it is with the priest and the coffin-maker. The choice of a profession, therefore, is a thing in which great caution is required.¹

According to this statement, Mencius refers to any kind of profession, and the arrow-maker, armor-maker, coffin-maker and priest are only examples. His essential point is that a man should be careful to choose his profession for the development of moral sense. An arrow-maker and a coffin-maker are not inhumane, but their professions make them wish men to die. Pan Ku says that the reason those who sell coffins wish to have an epidemic in the year is not because they hate men and wish to kill them, but because their profit depends upon the death of men.² His idea is the same as that of Mencius.

Indeed, a profession can generally affect the motives of man. For this reason the Chinese still have a general conception about the choice of an occupation from the standpoint of morality. Our discussion here, however, is not from the moral point of view, but from the economic. Since Mencius teaches men to be careful in choosing their professions, it indicates that there is freedom of occupation and every one may make his own choice freely. Otherwise, if there were no choice, how could a man be careful about his choice?

¹ *Classics*, vol. ii, p. 204.

² *History of Han*, ch. xxiii.

Since there is freedom of occupation, a son does not necessarily have to follow in the steps of his father. The reason a son usually takes up the profession of his father is not because he has no freedom of choice, but because it is easy for him to do so. According to the "Record of Education," a son may usually change from the occupation of his father, simply because he gets the education from his father's occupation, but applies it to another line. It says: "The son of a good founder is sure to learn how to make a fur robe. The son of a good maker of bows is sure to learn how to make a sieve."¹ Because the founder melts the different metals to make a complete article, or repairs the broken things by fixing the metals on it, such an art is similar to the making of fur robes by putting the different pieces of fur together. Because the bow-maker bends the wood in a good condition, it is similar to the making of sieves. Therefore, when the sons of the founder and the bow-maker have familiarly seen the practice of their fathers, they use similar principles for different applications. In a word, the sons utilize the occupations of their fathers as the basis of their education, but they specialize in their own occupations. Therefore, the son does not necessarily succeed to the profession of his father and has freedom of choice.

III. THE NECESSITY, JUSTICE AND HONOR OF WORK

Confucius never holds in contempt any kind of work, and he thinks that work is necessary, just and honorable. First, let us see why work is necessary. The *Canon of History* says: "When the farmer labors upon the fields and spends his strength in reaping, there is then a good harvest. . . . When the lazy farmer yields himself to ease, and is not strong to toil and to labor on his acres, he cannot have

¹ Li Ki, bk. xvi, p. 90.

either rice or millet." Therefore, P'an Kêng (850-823 B. K. or 1401-1374 B. C.) reproved his people by saying: "You, the myriads of the people, unexpectedly do not know how to produce wealth." And he encouraged them to move the capital city by saying: "Go! Produce wealth there."¹ Indeed, the production of wealth is the necessary business of the people, and they must not be lazy. Therefore, there is a proverb: "The life of the people depends on diligence; with diligence there is no want."²

According to Confucius, the lazy man is very bad. He says: "Hard is it to deal with him who will stuff himself with food the whole day without applying his mind to anything. Are there not gamesters and chessplayers? To be one of these would still be better than doing nothing at all."³ Confucius does not teach man to be a gamester or chessplayer, but he still thinks that they are better than the idler. Therefore, either physical work or mental work is necessary for the life of man.

Second, let us see why work is just. Confucius says:

What the superior man calls justice, is that noble and mean all do their work in the world. The emperor himself ploughs the ground for the rice with which to fill the vessels, and the black millet from which to distil the spirit to be mixed with fragrant herbs, for the services of God; and the feudal princes are diligent in discharging their duties to the emperor.⁴

Indeed, in the world none should be idle. Even the emperor and the princes must have to do their work; it is what the superior man calls justice. In other words, not to work is unjust.

¹ *Classics*, vol. iii, pt. i, pp. 226-7, 239, 241.

² *Classics*, vol. v, pt. i, p. 318.

³ *Classics*, vol. i, p. 329.

⁴ *Li Ki*, bk. xxix, p. 338.

Third, let us find out how work is honorable. Take Confucius for example. He was a good worker. He was once keeper of granaries, and his calculations were all correct. He was once in charge of the public fields, and the oxen and sheep were fat, strong, and superior.¹ Confucius worked in many ways, and was famous on account of his various abilities. But he himself spoke of it modestly: "When I was young my condition was low, and therefore I acquired my ability in many mean matters."² This was only a modest description of himself, but it indicates that he did not think work a dishonor to the worker.

For the illustration of this principle we may go to Mencius. He says:

Shun rose from among the channelled fields. Fu Yüeh was called to office from the midst of his building-frames; Chiao Ko from his fish and salt; Kuan Yi-wu from the hands of his gaoler; Sun-shu Ao from his hiding by the seashore; and Pai-li Hsi from the market-place. Thus, when Heaven is about to confer a great work on any man, it must first exercise his mind with suffering, and his sinews and bones with toil; expose his body to hunger; subject him to extreme poverty; and confound his undertakings. By all these methods it stimulates his mind, hardens his nature, and supplies his incompetencies.³

According to Mencius, all great men are developed by hardships. Therefore, the farmer, the artisan, or the merchant may become a great emperor or a great minister. His conclusion is this: "Life springs from sorrow and calamity, and death from ease and pleasure." Therefore,

¹ *Classics*, vol. ii, pp. 383-4.

² *Classics*, vol. i, p. 218.

³ Shun was the best emperor; Fu Yüeh and Chiao Ko were great ministers of the Yin dynasty; Kuan Yi-wu (Kuan Tzū), Sun-shu Ao, and Pai-li Hsi were great ministers of the states of Ch'i, Ch'u and Ch'in. *Classics*, vol. ii, pp. 446-7.

we should not dislike work, and should accept the hardship with thankfulness to Heaven. Indeed, poverty is a condition under which great men are produced, and a man's working does not bring him any dishonor at all. Under the influence of such teachings, the poor may keep their ambitions even higher than the rich, and workingmen may hold an honorable position in society.

IV. ABSENCE OF SLAVERY

In Chinese history there is a very glorious thing—that is, China has never had slavery existing as a general institution. Under the *tsing tien* system every one received one hundred acres of land from the government, so that every one was a landlord. Who would be a slave? And how could slavery come to exist? Since the land was rich and easily cultivated, and landholding was limited to one hundred acres, there was no need of slaves. Moreover, such intensive cultivation was not fitted to slave labor, and the free labor would not permit slavery to exist, under competition, because there was a large population. Furthermore, China has been an agricultural country, and the Chinese have been a diligent people, since the remotest times. Therefore, they made agriculture the fundamental and honorable occupation, and even the emperor took up such work. The theory that slavery becomes an institution most often in the agricultural stage seems refuted when we study Chinese history. Slavery may have existed in the prehistoric period, but if so there is no trace of it.

Although China had no slavery as a general institution, there were still a few slaves. According to the *Official System of Chou*, slavery resulted from crime. But no innocent man became a slave. It was only a kind of punishment, and it exempted those who had titles and those whose age was either above seventy or below eight.¹ But it was

¹ Ch. xxxvi.

not a social or an economic institution. Hence, Hsü Shên's *Dictionary* defines the word slave as the criminal of the ancients.

Such are the facts of history. Now, we come to the teachings of Confucius. According to him and his school, there should be no slavery. The social classes are five—emperor, princes, great officials, students, and common people. The groups of people are four—student, farmer, artisan, and merchant. But there is no such class or group as that of slave. According to his system, all the menial work in the family is done by the son, the daughter and the daughter-in-law; in society, by young men; in the government, by government employees. There is no need of slaves. Take Confucius himself for example. He lived in the style of the great official. Yet he had no slave, and not even a servant. The drivers of his carriage were his pupils, such as Fan Ch'ih and Jan Yu. When he employed a boy as the bearer of a visitor's card, he meant that it should teach the boy a lesson.¹ Even for himself, he said, "I will take up driving as a profession."² Therefore, Tzū-hsia taught his pupils to sprinkle and sweep the ground, to answer and reply, and to advance and recede.³ These things are the necessary lessons of a servant, but Tzū-hsia took them to teach his pupils. This shows that everyone should learn the duties of a servant, because in the ordinary life there was no servant. Confucius says: "Among all the lives given by Heaven and Earth, that of man is the noblest."⁴ According to the system of Confucius, there is absolutely no slavery.

Although China had no slavery before Confucius, and

¹ *Classics*, vol. i, p. 293.

² *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁴ *Sacred Books*, vol. iii, p. 476.

although Confucius' system has no slavery, the economic condition changed in the Ch'in dynasty. After the *tsing tien* system was destroyed (202 A. K. or 350 B. C.), continuous wars went on, taxes were very heavy, and wealth was unequally distributed, so the poor people were unable to maintain their independent condition. Hence, the market of slaves was established, and there was traffic in slaves who came from the kidnapper and the robber.¹ Therefore, slavery arose during the Ch'in dynasty.

In 347 A. K. (205 B. C.), during the war between Han and Ch'u, a great famine occurred, so that the people ate human flesh. Then Han Kao Ti permitted the people to sell their sons. It was the first time that the people were allowed to sell themselves as slaves. But, in 350 A. K., when Han Kao Ti conquered Ch'u and became emperor, he issued a decree: "The people who have sold themselves to be slaves of others on account of famine are all emancipated as free citizens." This shows that slavery was not an institution. But it was bad enough that criminals became government slaves and that the poor sold themselves as private slaves. The slaves, however, were very few in number and did not form a special class. They should be called servants rather than slaves. For example, Wei Ts'ing (died in 446 A. K. or 106 B. C.) was a slave. But he was later the commander-in-chief of the army which conquered the Huns, the marquis of an honorary estate amounting to twenty thousand two hundred families, and the husband of the oldest sister of Han Wu Ti.

The first to make a public announcement against slavery was Tung Chung-shu. In 432 A. K. (120 B. C.) he petitioned Wu Ti in the following words: "We should abolish slavery, and prevent the master from killing the slave by

¹ *History of Han*, ch. xcix.

arbitrary oppression." ¹ But this proposal was not carried out by Wu Ti.

The first to abolish slavery was Wang Mang. In 560 A. K. (9 A. D.) he decreed that all slaves should be called "private dependents," and should not be bought and sold. But there was still slavery as a punishment. Since his government was not successful, in 563 A. K. he allowed the people to sell and buy the "private dependents." ²

The Confucian emperor most influential in the abolition of slavery was Kuang-wu, whose reign was from 576 to 608 A. K. (25-57 A. D.). In 577 he decreed: "The people have formerly married their wives away and sold their sons; now they are all allowed to go back to their parents if they wish. Who dares to hold them shall be punished according to law." In 581 he decreed: "The officials and the commons who, during the time of Wang Mang, were subdued to slavery without the accordance of old law, are all emancipated to be free citizens." In 582 he decreed: "The officials and the commons who became slaves or inferior wives, either on account of famine and warfare or through the robbers of Sü Chow and Ts'ing Chow, are all allowed either to go or to stay, as they please. Who dares to hold them and not give them return shall be punished by the law of selling persons."

In the second month of 586 he decreed: "'Among all the lives given by Heaven and Earth, that of man is the noblest.' If anyone kills a slave, his crime cannot be less than ordinary murder." In the eighth month he decreed: "He who dares to torture a slave with fire shall be punished according to law, and those who are tortured are emancipated as free citizens." In the eleventh month he abolished the law that the slave who wounded any person was to be punished by death.

¹ *History of Han*, ch. xxiv.

² *Ibid.*, ch. xcix.

In 587 he decreed: "The people of Lung¹ and Shu² who were captured and made slaves, whether those who have appealed to the courts or those who have not been reported by the judges, are all emancipated to be free citizens." In 588 he decreed: "Since the eighth year [583], the people of Yi Chow³ who were captured and made slaves are all emancipated to be free citizens. Those who depend on others as inferior wives are all allowed to go away if they wish. Who dares to keep them shall be punished by the law of capturing persons, as it has been applied to Sü Chow and Ts'ing Chow." In 589 he decreed: "Since the eighth year, the slaves of Yi Chow² and Liang Chow,¹ who have appealed to the local courts, are all emancipated to be free citizens. Those who were sold need not pay back the price to their owner."⁴

In Chinese history, although there were many emperors who freed slaves, Kuang-wu was the most important. He decreed freedom to the slaves nine times. Since his reign, China virtually has had no slaves at all. Some other emperors paid the price to the slave-owner, but he did not do so. He was the Abraham Lincoln of China, but he abolished slavery without civil war. In an absolute government, although the emperor can do wrong easily, he can also do good easily.

Unfortunately, during the disturbance of the Five Barbarians (855-990 A. K. or 304-439 A. D.) and the conquest of the Tartars and the Mongolians, slavery was introduced into China by those barbaric tribes. From the Northern Wei dynasty to the beginning of the present dynasty (937-2195 A. K. or 386-1644 A. D.), however, the slaves were generally not actual slaves. They were

¹ Kansu province.

² Szechuan province.

³ *History of Latter Han*, ch. i.

mostly persons who pretended to be dependents of noble or rich families in order to escape taxes. At the end of 2460 (Jan. 1909 A. D.) slavery was absolutely abolished in China.

We cannot say that China had no slaves at all. But we deny that China had such slavery as that of ancient Greece and Rome or that of the United States before the Civil War.