

POLITICAL SCIENCE CLASSICS

ISSUED UNDER THE GENERAL EDITORSHIP OF LINDSAY ROGERS,
OF THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

CHINESE POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY

by

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NEW YORK ALFRED · A · KNOPF MCMXXV

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VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.
ESPARTO PAPER MANUFACTURED IN SCOTLAND
AND FURNISHED BY W. F. ETHERINGTON & CO.,
NEW YORK · BOUND BY H. WOLFF ESTATE, NEW
YORK.

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**CHINESE POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY**

To the Memory of My Mother

*who possessed the highest virtues of East and
West, and of whom this comparative
Study is far from worthy.*

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

It is fitting that a series of Political Science Classics should be inaugurated with a volume on Chinese political philosophy. The oriental sages, as the present essay makes abundantly clear, never produced an ordered system of thought. There was not the continuity, nor the logic, nor the criticism which are inseparable from philosophical categories; "political philosophy," indeed, is perhaps too concrete a term to be applied to their speculations. But in point of time the maxims of the Orient antedated the political theories of the Western world and, although Hellenic political philosophy was the first ordered system of thought, the oriental world was at least familiar with ordered political life. As has been the case with so many modern philosophers, it was the observation of the deficiencies and the injustices of the contemporary rulers that in part led Confucius to state his principles for the betterment of the relations between state and individual.

His philosophy was simple but at the same time it was complex. Ruler and subject, husband and wife, father and son, older brothers and younger—rule by the first and submission by the latter: this was his injunction. Governance should be in righteousness and benevolence; submission in righteousness and sincerity; the promotion of virtue should be the aim of friends. The disregard of these principles caused the anarchy in which the state found itself. The

power of example and the inherent goodness of human nature were adequate to effect an improvement.

Mencius built on this Confucian doctrine. Both believed that government was an Heaven-sent institution, but Mencius qualified this by maintaining that "divine right" should be allowed a sovereign only if he were exercising his rule for the good of the people. To a greater degree than Confucius he went into details of what constituted this good. Royal pleasures, taxes, game laws, irrigation, free trade, the right of subsistence, education—he held definite views on these matters and thought that if a ruler would follow his instructions a good government would be possible. Chinese political philosophers, unlike some of their successors in the Western world, were not concerned with drawing up ideal constitutions; they wanted to be the advisors of princes and have their precepts put into practice.

To the task of interpreting Chinese political philosophy to the Western world Mr. Pott brings quite exceptional qualifications. As a child he learned Chinese from his mother who, as his note of dedication suggests, put heredity on his side in writing this book. He was instructor in Philosophy at St. John's University, Shanghai, from 1913 to 1916 and was Professor of Philosophy there from 1919 to 1922. Since 1922 he has been Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Virginia.

L. R.

PREFACE

This little book lays no claim to being a thorough or even an adequate study of Chinese political thought. It is nothing more than a modest effort to suggest a point of view which is both familiar and simple: sound logical procedure requires that in analogical reasoning we should note significant differences as well as striking resemblances lest the latter influence us unduly in the formation of our conclusions.

This small volume is simply the expression of the belief that the West will always be better prepared to understand the East in the field of political thought or in any of the other branches of civilization when it observes the injunction of the Delphic Oracle to know itself better.

In studies which compare one's own culture with that of another land, it chanced all too frequently that misleading analogies, which lead to a falsification of perspective, are due as often to insufficient analysis of one's own culture as to lack of intimate acquaintance with the foreign culture in question.

Accordingly, if it appears in the following pages that too much account is taken of differences and not enough of resemblances, and that too much space is given to the debt which the West owes to the Greeks, my only excuse is the conviction that, at the present time, such apparent one-sidedness is needed to redress a balance.

I wish to acknowledge the kindness of the Open Court

Company and of the Oxford University Press in permitting respectively the use of Carus' translation of the Tao Teh King and of Legge's translation of the Four Books in Part Two.

Finally, my thanks are due to all who have gone before. In attempting to set forth the point of view indicated above, I have been aided by the counsel and encouragement of my colleagues in the School of Philosophy of the University of Virginia. I feel under a singular obligation to Professor Albert G. A. Balz whose interest and support has been of such great value as to prompt this special mention of my deep appreciation.

University of Virginia

May 1, 1925.

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PART ONE

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It is plain that the varied and steadily increasing discussion of China in books, periodicals, and the daily newspapers attests an increased interest in the Far East and, more particularly, in the oldest, the largest, and potentially the most powerful country of the Far East. By reason of the wealth of the country, the size of its population, and the many admirable qualities of its people, as well as the frantic and as yet unsuccessful efforts it is making in the direction of self-government, China has become the cynosure of all eyes. Of all the factors that have worked recently to attract the notice of the Western World to China and draw her into the forum of discussion, none has had such far-reaching consequences as the Treaty of Versailles and the Washington Conference. In a very real sense China is no longer a problem in the "back yard" of international politics.

The growing interest in things Chinese, in her commercial opportunities, her art, her poetry, and her politics, is destined, I believe, to arouse a wider interest than has hitherto existed in the West in her philosophy. If philosophy be the guide of life—and nowhere has philosophy aspired to play this high rôle more persistently than in China—a familiarity with the character and purposes of Chinese philosophy in its more general aspects must be indispensable

for an appreciation of Chinese civilization and an intelligent understanding of China as a political problem.

It is to be feared that in the West the economic and political questions, national and international, relating to China, will be envisaged in too narrow and abstract a fashion, and that when thus envisaged, they will exhaust for many minds the entire so-called problem of the Far East. This would be a misfortune, to say the least. And yet it can scarcely be denied that already there is a dismaying tendency in some quarters to such one-sidedness. It would hardly seem necessary to dwell on the mischievous consequences of such an error. Suffice it to say that what we may, for want of a better term, call cultural questions, which appear so much less pressing in the exigencies of practical relationships, are in danger of being either obscured or reserved almost exclusively for collectors, dilettantes and leisured Orientalists. In reality it is just these cultural questions growing out of remote historical circumstances that are provoking the economic, social, and political questions of the present—in short, generating the entire so-called problem.

A great statesman has affirmed that whoever understood China politically, economically, religiously, and socially would hold the keys to the Pacific for the next five hundred years.¹ Whether or not such a political forecast be accurate, it may yet be maintained that an attempt to comprehend certain aspects of Chinese civilization would be highly desirable. An interest in China that is tempered by a measure of insight, of which there is as yet but little, as well as by cordiality, of which there is already a great deal, would lead to a better understanding between China and the West to the mutual benefit of each. It is with such an

¹ John Hay. See Thayer's *Life of John Hay*.

end in view that this modest volume on Chinese political philosophy is undertaken. No claim to either thoroughness or originality can be made. I have tried to assemble a few of the more striking passages relating to politics and government that are to be found in the sayings of Confucius and his chief disciple, Mencius; in the Doctrine of the Mean and in the Great Learning; and in the Tao Teh King or Canon of Reason and Virtue which is ascribed to the philosopher Lao Tzu. I have selected those passages which seem to me to be most typical of the peculiarity of Chinese political thought and most illustrative of the main principles on which that thought turns. In doing so I have borrowed from a Chinese edition of the translation of Dr. James Legge in the case of the writings in the Confucian tradition and from the translation of Dr. Paul Carus in the case of the Canon of Reason and Virtue. It is feared that the introduction to these scattered passages may seem to lack at times a sufficiently direct bearing upon the text. If such be the case, extenuation for this fault may perhaps, with propriety, be claimed. What we call Chinese political philosophy is in the form of more or less disconnected sayings that are worked into no well-rounded philosophical synthesis such as we find in the systems of Western political philosophers. Thus the task of the would-be interpreter is to articulate the thought embodied in these sayings by trying to paint in a background against which they may be seen in clearer relief; or, to change the figure, he must play the humble part of setting the stage for the benefit of those who might possibly be interested in the programme that is to follow. And when one has the temerity to attempt such a *mise en scène* within a small compass, the difficulty of the task is of course greatly enhanced.

It has been remarked that "while the Confucians developed valuable ethical conceptions and founded upon them social institutions and conventions that have been of importance in actual political life, no distinct theories were produced. Short sentences and aphoristic sayings upon matters political occur in early writings on the East, and some of them, as, for example, a number of the reputed writings of Mencius, the disciple of Confucius, are surprisingly liberal."² This is a true characterization of the form of Chinese political thought. But when we are told that "confused as these sayings are with religious and ethical dicta and wholly unrelated to any general principles that have been previously established, they can scarcely be of value to the historian of political philosophies,"³ we feel that the estimate becomes a too sweeping indictment. "General principles that have been previously established" can perhaps be shown to underlie Chinese political thought; and to uncover a few of these leading principles by showing the relation they bear to Chinese civilization would seem to be the most satisfactory way of introducing the Western reader to the texts themselves. To be sure, there has been in China no continuous growth of "systems" of political philosophy. But if politics in the last analysis be, as Dewey says, "the intelligent management of social affairs" there has been in China much thought on this subject and, therefore, on political philosophy.

The inclusion of selections from Lao Tzu with those from the Confucian canon calls for a word of explanation. Lao Tzu and Confucius are usually regarded as philosophical opponents and it is customary to contrast their thought as inherently antagonistic. It may therefore occasion some

² Willoughby, *Political Theories of the Ancient World*, pp. 16-17.

³ *Ibid.*

surprise to those who have even a slight acquaintance with Chinese philosophy, that the sayings of these rivals should be made to keep company in a joint representation of Chinese political philosophy. No doubt these two philosophical worthies would, if consulted, strenuously resist any attempt to force them into a philosophical partnership. But despite the divergencies in temper and thought between Lao Tzu and Confucius, there are certain fundamental resemblances between them; and this I hope to make more clear in that portion of the text bearing upon the extracts from the Tao Teh King.

Finally, in undertaking to present to Western readers an account of the nature of Chinese political thought, I am mindful of the fact that the outsider is constantly beset by the danger of producing "a mummied specimen of human thought and aspiration preserved for all time in the wrappings of erudition." These are words which Tagore uses to denounce all attempts of Occidentals to interpret the East. But I will be bold enough to take such a risk with only the hope that the small specimens I offer will not be utterly devoid of life.

CHAPTER II

THE MENTALITY OF CONFUCIAN CHINA

In considering an alien culture we must at once inquire: What are the things that the people of that culture ultimately value and esteem? What sort of society does the culture count most desirable for achieving ends deemed most appropriate to human nature as it conceives human nature? What is the dominant tradition, or what are the dominant traditions, that determine its judgments upon these matters? What are the sentiments, dispositions and attitudes that have in the course of time become organized on a wide scale into a skeletal texture, so to speak, that might be called its mental outlook or its mentality? All this may seem very vague and general, but it is difficult to be more specific. We may, however, illustrate.

An expert intellectual anatomist might dissect us, we have been told, and "find Platonic and Aristotelian tissues, organs from St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, Locke and Descartes, in the make-up of the ideas by which we are habitually swayed, and find indeed that other thinkers of whose names we may never have heard constitute a larger part of our mental structure than does the Calvin or Kant, Darwin or Spencer, Hegel or Emerson, Bergson or Browning to whom we yield conscious allegiance."¹ Through multitudes of non-reflective channels, general ideas infiltrate into

¹ John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, p.10.

our habits of imagination and behavior, mould our minds and furnish them with a bent that powerfully determines the direction of our future reflective activity. This habitual bent of mind of a people, this spiritual posture, is what we mean by its mentality. And it is obvious that if the mentality of a people is thus distilled from what seems a dead or distant past, some knowledge of that people's history and traditions must condition our appreciation of the distillate. If, now, we could substitute for the Platonic, Aristotelian and other tissues mentioned in the above quotation, certain tissues which we shall call Confucian, we would have in effect the mentality, if not of China, at least of the educated classes or literati by whom China was, until recent years, governed.

There are material differences between the several nations of the West, and yet there is withal a spiritual affinity between them, because their separate cultures have common roots in the history of Europe from the time of the Greeks. Despite all the apparent diversity, therefore, there is such a thing as the "unity of Western civilization." A common heritage, facility of communication, knowledge of one another's language, a common religion—these and many other forces conspire to knit together the contributions of the various portions of the West into something like a unified whole despite the manifold centrifugal forces that tend in the opposite direction toward differentiation and even disruption. But in the case of a great Oriental country like China, which has developed a civilization in complete independence of Western influences, which has maintained this civilization in splendid isolation for more than three thousand years, and whose language and script show no similarity to anything in the West, it is not a matter for surprise to find a mentality differing profoundly from the mental-

ity of the West. Our task is therefore to disclose, at least partially, the mentality of the Chinese people by suggesting how it has been moulded by the Confucian tradition, and to contrast this mentality with the mentality of the West.

East and West are obviously different and the recognition of the fact that a profound difference exists must be the beginning of mutual understanding. That the twain shall never meet is a sentiment that is more poetically appealing than psychologically sound. The events of our day are already belying the poet's prophecy. But if they are to meet in any intimate and fruitful fashion, it must be on the plane of understanding, and, as we have said, on an understanding predicated upon a prior recognition of differences. The merits and duration of the differences are other matters.

In contrast with the view that magnifies unduly the differences between East and West, there is an equally widespread view that ignores or suppresses significant divergences and thereby greatly over-simplifies the East-West problem. According to this second view, the chief difference seems to be a religious difference. The West is just Christian and the East just heathen, and more specifically China or its upper class is just Confucian. But the religion of the West will eventually win all China. Religious allegiances have changed, nay, are changing, and so there is the comfortable assurance that somehow or other East and West must come together completely in the end. To put the case in this way is of course to fail to see the complexities of the problem of the spiritual *rapprochement* between Occident and Orient and to substitute for analysis unwitting but none the less crude caricature. Indeed it may truthfully be said that Christian China awaits a Chinese St. Paul.