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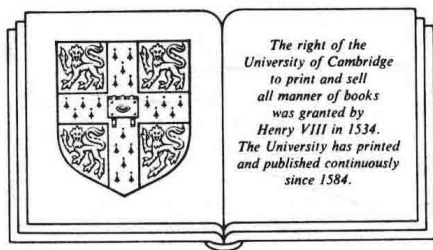
The thought of Chang Tsai (1020-1077)

IRA E. KASOFF

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FOR MY MOTHER

PREFACE

This is a study of the philosophy of a brilliant and original thinker, Chang Tsai (1020–77). It is intended to be of interest both to sinologists, since there has not yet been a full-length monograph on Chang's philosophy; and also to non-specialists interested in reading something about Chinese philosophy, about what a Chinese philosopher thought about the world and man's place in it.

Although much of Chang's writings are no longer extant, enough remains to enable us to piece together a comprehensive philosophic system. His was an optimistic philosophy, asserting the basic goodness and perfectability of man. At the same time Chang accounted for the presence of evil in the world, without introducing any god-like figure or creator deity, nor any fall from grace. Chang developed a cosmology derived from traditional Chinese concepts like *ch'i* and yin-yang, and yet different from anything that had come before. In fact his philosophy, along with that of the rival school of his cousins Ch'eng Yi and Ch'eng Hao, marked a new departure in the history of Chinese philosophy: the beginning of the Neo-Confucian movement which was to be the dominant school of thought for centuries to come.¹

The thinkers associated with this movement developed complex and comprehensive philosophic systems unprecedented in Chinese history. As A.C. Graham has written, '...a European who turns to Chinese thought in the hope of learning to see his own philosophic tradition in perspective...is likely to gain more from the Sung school than from the ancient thinkers.'² Nevertheless, the content of Neo-Confucian thought is not as well known in the West as is the philosophy of pre-Ch'in thinkers like Confucius, Mencius and Lao-tzu. Chang Tsai, one of the most interesting of the early Sung philosophers, has not yet been adequately studied in any Western language. I believe that we can best understand Neo-Confucian philosophy by examining in detail the work of an individual thinker like Chang.

Chang appears to have seen himself as a latter-day Confucius, and like

Confucius was frustrated that he was unable to be more influential during his lifetime. Nevertheless, Chang has exerted great influence on many Chinese figures in the nine hundred years since his death. His most famous essay, the 'Western Inscription,' has been part of the curriculum of all educated Chinese, and is still well known to students in Taiwan. And in the People's Republic there has been a surge of interest in Chang's philosophy in recent years. This, then, is a study of the philosophy of an eleventh-century individual whose work is still of interest today; I hope it will contribute to our understanding of the philosophic movement he helped begin.

Problems

When trying to reconstruct the thought of a philosopher who lived over 900 years ago, one inevitably encounters problems. Some of Chang's writings have not been preserved, and often there are variations in the different editions of the texts that are extant.³ Furthermore, the evidence indicates that Chang compiled much of *Correcting the Unenlightened* (*Cheng meng*), the best representation of his mature thought, by extracting passages from his earlier works.⁴ Where the earlier text has been preserved, these extracts can often be understood more clearly by reading them in their original contexts. However, other passages, which appear to have been culled from works which have since been lost, are difficult to understand in isolation from their original contexts.

Also, Chang's writing style itself, which consists of brief comments or observations made at different times and in response to different situations, adds to the difficulty. Chang's remark about the *Analects* is interesting in this regard:

There are a great many instances of different responses to the same question in the *Analects*. Sometimes they respond to the [particular] individual's talent or nature, sometimes [they were made by] observing the intent and language of the question the man asked, and the position he occupied.⁵

It is likely that Chang taught in the same manner, varying his responses on a given topic to suit the circumstances. Further, it seems that Chang fashioned the cryptic style of *Correcting the Unenlightened*, at least in part, as a pedagogic technique designed to make his followers ponder his words and figure things out for themselves. When Chang presented this work to his disciples, he is reputed to have said:

This book that I have written is comparable to a dried tree. The

roots, branches and leaves are all fully intact, but human effort is needed to make it flourish. Or again, it is like showing a child his birthday tray; everything is there: it just depends on what he chooses.⁶

Chang expected his student to be an active participant who would read the passages over and over and ponder them. Only in this way, he believed, could the student arrive at an understanding of the vision that Chang was trying to convey. The modern student of Chang Tsai's thought is faced with the same challenge.

Little information on Chang Tsai's life has been preserved. We do not know about the ten-year period during which he reputedly studied Buddhist philosophy. This is unfortunate, since Chang's understanding of Buddhism doubtless exerted great influence on his thought. Nor are we able to date many of Chang's writings. It seems reasonable to assume that his *Commentary on the Change (Yi shuo)* is an early work, probably from the period when he was in the capital lecturing on the *Book of Change* around 1057.⁷ And *Correcting the Unenlightened*, which he presented to his disciples a year before his death, appears to be his final statement. We do not know about the date of the *Den of Principles of Classical Learning (Ching hsüeh li k'u)*, and some have even questioned its authorship. Similarly, the details of the compilation of the *Record of Sayings of Master Chang (Chang-tzu yü lu)*, and of the no longer extant commentaries on the *Analects*, *Mencius* and *Spring and Autumn Annals*, remain unclear.⁸

In short, the problems are considerable. Nevertheless, several of Chang's works have been preserved, and they are internally consistent; thus, I believe it is possible to reconstruct his philosophic system on the basis of those works.

Methods and Assumptions

The method I have followed is quite straightforward. I began by reading and rereading Chang's writings in order to reach a general understanding of his philosophy. I then determined the major concepts in that philosophy by using a simple criterion: the major concepts were those that Chang discussed in the most detail. Having made this determination, I grouped together all the passages about each of these concepts. By examining all of these passages together I attempted to understand what these concepts meant to Chang Tsai. Chapters 2-4 of this work represent the results of that effort.

In adopting this approach I have made certain assumptions. The first, like Chang Tsai's assumption about the Classics, is that there is one 'Way'

described in the various works and in different parts of the same work. That is, I assume first that Chang's writings embody a systematic, consistent philosophy; and second, that we can piece this philosophy together from the extant texts. I believe that the first assumption need not be justified. The second assumption is problematic, because we do not know the dates of many of Chang's writings, and we do not have much information on how his thought evolved. However, I believe that we must use passages from different texts to flesh out the 'dried tree' of *Correcting the Unenlightened*. Furthermore, aside from the obvious fact that he polished and refined his ideas, there is no evidence that Chang changed his thinking significantly between the time he began to teach and write in his late thirties and the time when he compiled *Correcting the Unenlightened* some twenty years later. And this perception is strengthened by the strong probability that Chang himself drew from his earlier writings in compiling *Correcting the Unenlightened*.⁹ The assumption that Chang's writings form one 'system' was held, at least implicitly, by the Ming and Ch'ing scholars who gathered together all of Chang's extant works and published them as *The Complete Works of Master Chang* (*Chang-tzu ch'üan shu*),¹⁰ as well as by the scholars who edited and published *The Collected Works of Chang Tsai* (*Chang Tsai chi*) in 1978.

I too believe that there is a systematic philosophy in the *Collected Works*, and I have attempted to explicate it in this book. I hope it is a fair representation of Chang Tsai's vision of the world.

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I am grateful to all of these people, and to many others not mentioned here. However, I have not been able to make all the changes and additions that they suggested. Any limitations which remain, therefore, are my responsibility.

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INTRODUCTION

After several centuries of political fragmentation and turmoil, the political and administrative stability established by the founding Sung (960–1279) emperors led to developments in many fields. For example, agriculture flourished as new land was brought under cultivation and new techniques, including a strain of early ripening rice allowing for double and triple cropping, were introduced and disseminated.¹ Advances were made in industry as well.² Regional specialization and inter-regional trade increased as the economy became more commercialized.³ The volume of money in circulation increased, and in the late eleventh century may have reached twenty times the maximum amount in circulation during the T'ang; the government also introduced paper notes during the first half of the eleventh century.⁴

There were major developments in the cultural sphere as well. In literature, the eleventh century witnessed the rise of the 'old text' (*ku wen*) movement, a rejection of ornate writing in favor of a simple, direct expression of moral principles and emotions. Although the prose of this period is better known, Sung writers also produced a great corpus of poetry, and they developed a new genre, the *tz'u*, a kind of lyric song. One scholar has written, 'Poetry that was so full of description and philosophizing, so taken up with themes of everyday life, so socially conscious as that of the Sung, had never been known before in China.'⁵ A series of great artists raised landscape painting to new heights of grandeur and philosophic expression. Porcelain making, which began in the T'ang dynasty, became much more refined in the Sung dynasty as new innovations made possible almost all forms, textures and colors. Some of the greatest calligraphers in Chinese history, such as Su Shih (1036–1101) Mi Fu (1051–1107) and Huang T'ing-chien (1050–1110) were active during this period. Scholars also produced some of China's greatest works of history in the eleventh century, including Ssu-ma Kuang's (1019–86) famous *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* and Ou-yang Hsiu's (1007–72) histories of the T'ang and the Five Dynasties.

A poem by Su Shih illustrates sentiments shared by many during this period

Days when the world is at peace,
Times when life is good,
And here we have the glory of the flowers again –
How can you bear to go on scowling?⁶

This was an age of optimism, when all seemed within the realm of possibility. Many believed that they could recreate the Golden Age of the past, which was idealized in the writings of Confucius and his disciples fifteen hundred years earlier. And indeed, this was a sort of golden age: some of the most outstanding figures in Chinese history, men like Su Shih, Ou-yang Hsiu, Fan Chung-yen (989-1052), Wang An-shih (1021-1086) and Ssu-ma Kuang all lived at this time. These men were unable to recreate the political harmony they ascribed to the past, but they were the leaders of the new Sung culture, one of the most productive and creative in all of Chinese history. They produced outstanding works of prose and poetry, painting and calligraphy, and history and philosophy. It is for such cultural achievements as theirs that the Sung dynasty is most famous.

My concern here is with developments in philosophy, by which I mean systematic thinking about man and the universe. Chang Tsai's 'Kuan' school and the 'Lo' school of Ch'eng Yi (1033-1107) and Ch'eng Hao (1032-1085) were the most influential philosophical schools in late eleventh-century China.⁷ Each of these schools developed a comprehensive philosophy to resolve problems that concerned many eleventh-century Confucian scholars, philosophies which were different from anything that had come before. It is not possible to identify the specific social, psychological and historical factors which caused this new departure in philosophy; nevertheless, certain general developments did set the stage.

After the An Lu-shan rebellion (756-63), China entered a period of political fragmentation and warlordism which persisted through the remainder of the T'ang dynasty (618-906) and culminated in the almost continuous fighting and turmoil of the Five Dynasties era (907-960). During this half-century, in which short-lived regional 'dynasties' struggled with each other to become the successor to the T'ang, there were no less than four army revolts which placed generals on the throne, as well as other unsuccessful coup attempts.⁸ The last of these revolts was carried out by the most powerful unit of the Chou palace armies, under the command of Chao K'uang-yin. This revolt marked the end of the Chou dynasty; Chao, known posthumously as T'ai-tsu, was the founding emperor of the Sung dynasty.

Most of T'ai-tsu's efforts were devoted to completing the task of

reunifying China through conquest or diplomatic pressure, and to consolidating his rule over the newly integrated areas. For these tasks he needed a strong military. However, he was keenly aware of the dangers that military governors and powerful palace armies beyond the emperor's direct control posed to centralized imperial rule. For example, T'ai-tsu made the following remarks to his chief advisor Chao P'u (922-992) in 961, shortly after he had acceded to the throne:

One day the emperor summoned Chao P'u and asked, 'Since T'ang times, a period of many decades, the empire has had eight changes of royal surname. Fighting and struggle have been without cease, and bodies are strewn over the earth. What is the reason for this? I wish to put an end to fighting in the empire and make long lasting plans for the country. What is the way to do this?'

[Chao] P'u said, 'Your majesty's mentioning this is the good fortune of heaven, earth, men and spirits. The reason is none other than that the military governors are too strong; merely that the ruler is weak and the ministers strong. Now there is no other special technique: the way to deal with this is gradually to strip their power, control their tax revenues, and recall their crack troops. Then the empire will of course be peaceful.'

Before he had finished, the emperor said, 'You need say no more, I already understand.'⁹

Thus, from very early in his reign T'ai-tsu began to take steps to limit the power of his leading generals, and to make institutional changes so that no general would again be in a position to gather enough power to challenge the throne as he himself had done.¹⁰ He also moved to ensure that no military commanders on the borders would have the kind of power that had enabled their T'ang predecessors to become virtually independent regional warlords.¹¹

This, in brief, was the legacy of Sung T'ai-tsu. According to the official history of the Sung, 'When the founding ancestor changed the mandate he first used civil officials and took power away from military officials. The Sung emphasis on culture took its start from this.'¹² This account is exaggerated, of course. T'ai-tsu set the direction that subsequent Sung rulers were to follow: reining in the military leaders and greater centralizing of power. But he had to rely on military men to a great degree himself; consequently, he could not advance this policy fully during his reign.¹³

No longer faced with the task of reunification,¹⁴ T'ai-tsu's successors T'ai-tsung (r. 976-998) and Chen-tsung (r. 998-1022) recognized that the

best means by which to achieve stable centralized rule was through civilian officials who owed their loyalty to the throne.¹⁵ During the forty-six years spanned by these two reigns over 9000 candidates passed the civil service examinations, whereas only 296 candidates were passed during T'ai-tsu's sixteen year reign.¹⁶ In addition, T'ai-tsung sponsored four major scholarly projects and Chen-tsung one,¹⁷ thereby bringing still more literati into the government.¹⁸ T'ai-tsung enjoyed writing poetry¹⁹ and practicing calligraphy,²⁰ and he was genuinely interested in such literary projects; but this rapid expansion of the number of literati brought into the government was, at least in part, the continuation of T'ai-tsu's efforts to reduce the power of the military.²¹

This policy of bringing the literati into the government had far reaching effects. By the early eleventh century scholar-officials were in power, men who gained their positions by mastering the classical tradition. One of the areas to which some of them turned their attention was philosophy, in an attempt to use classical Confucian texts to develop an ideology for this new socio-political order.

There are certain other factors which set the stage for the philosophic developments of the eleventh century. One such factor was the spread of printing. While there is no evidence directly linking the spread of printing to philosophic developments, there is reason to assume a relationship. For the first time, books became available to many for whom they had previously been too difficult to obtain.²² The first woodblock printing of the Confucian Classics was undertaken by prime minister Feng Tao (882-954) of the later T'ang (923-35), and was completed in 953.²³ In 988 scholars at the Directorate of Education (*kuo tzu chien*) printed the *Five Classics with Commentaries*, and in 1001, after collation had been completed, the emperor ordered the Directorate of Education to print the *Nine Classics with Commentaries*.²⁴ By the beginning of the eleventh century, a great variety of material had been printed: such works as Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Records* as well as several other histories, an encyclopedia (the *T'ai p'ing kuang chi*), and the chief dictionary of classical Chinese (the *Erh ya*).²⁵ In addition to these works printed at the Directorate of Education in Kaifeng, other works were printed under the auspices of provincial administrations or schools.²⁶ In 1005, one scholar commented to the emperor on the importance of printing:

At the beginning of the dynasty, there were under 4000 [volumes in the Directorate of Education]; now there are over 100,000. The classics, histories and official commentaries are all complete. As a youth I worked as a scholar; whenever I saw a student who could not