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天地與我並生而萬物與我為一

The Concept of Man in Early China

Donald J. Munro

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To My Father and Mother

PREFACE

THIS STUDY analyzes two conceptions of human nature that emerged in classical Chinese philosophy. But more than this, it is concerned with the birth of an idea that has had a long odyssey in Chinese intellectual history. The idea is that men are naturally equal, and the end of the odyssey is still not in sight.

Previous commentators on classical Chinese philosophy have been misled by the Confucian assertion that a hierarchical society is justified by the hierarchical character of nature itself, and that men are of unequal merit. It is accurate to associate this assertion with the dominant school in Chinese thought; but the very complexity of the concepts "equality" and "inequality" has blinded many scholars to the essential feature in the early Chinese concept of man. "Equality," as applied to human beings, has two very different broad meanings. The first implies that all men, being of similar worth (the meaning of "worth" varies), should be treated in the same way: they should receive equal political or economic privilege, or impartial treatment before the law, and so forth. In this sense, the dominant Chinese position on human equality has been a belief that men (as adults) are of unequal merit, and that unequal treatment is therefore justified. The second meaning is basically descriptive; it refers to common attributes shared by all men at birth. The present study is concerned primarily with the relationship between equality in this latter sense and the conceptions of man in early China.

The importance of the idea of natural equality lies in the assumption derived from it by the Chinese: that men, lacking innate defects, are perfectible through education. The educational environment determines whether or not men will be good or evil, and educational reform is a key to the solution of urgent social and

political problems. Several related assumptions pertaining to the content of that education have important implications for modern educational theory and social control theory, since they concern ways of causing large groups of people to behave in a certain manner. Two such assumptions will be examined in the present study: first, that the primary aim of education and "self-cultivation" is to give men a permanent and correct mental attitude toward certain norms (in other words, social control is to be internalized); second, that people learn through the emulation of models, and that the best way to inculcate any behavior in them is to present them with a model. The idea of natural equality is also significant in that it sets classical Chinese philosophy apart from its European counterparts. For this reason alone the study of the concept of man in early China should be of great interest to a student of cultural history.

My secondary aim in this study is to make the reader aware of a danger confronting any student of early Chinese philosophy—that of injecting ideas that developed at a later time into the interpretation of philosophical terms in the classical texts. For instance, in the Neo-Confucian period metaphysical thought, influenced by Buddhism, had developed to a high degree, and it permeates the numerous commentaries on the classics produced at that time. As a result, old philosophical ideas had evolved and changed their meanings, although the terms employed remain the same. Judging by the extent to which sophisticated Neo-Confucian interpretations of key philosophical concepts (or those from even later periods) are read into the early Chinese texts, many writers have been less than mindful of this fact. For example, two important terms in the present study, *^{e}hsing* (nature, as in human nature) and *^{a}te* (virtue), have frequently been misinterpreted because of the injection of ideas of a later time into the early texts. The mistake is easy to make when apparently helpful and easily available commentaries are of a much later age. The problems of grasping what was actually being said in the Chou works are enormous, and often insurmountable; but the student should still try to understand these works on their own terms, for the failure to do so has already negated much of the practical value of the scholarship done on the

classical period by preventing both adequate description of that period and adequate evaluation of subsequent trends. In our own time an acquaintance with anthropology, though often helpful, has unfortunately produced in some scholars an obsession for reinterpreting classical philosophical concepts to make them compatible with modern generalizations about primitive religion.

One probably should not stop with a criticism of injecting ideas from a contemporary social science into early Chinese thought. There is a general tendency among Western readers, especially those with some philosophical training, to interpret and evaluate Chinese philosophy in terms of familiar categories. For example, they look first for the "argument," or demonstration that the position being advocated in the Chinese work is true; when they find no systematic, step-by-step argument, there is often a feeling of frustration. A new way of viewing Chinese philosophy is essential, and the present study attempts to orient the reader in the new direction.

What were important to the Chinese philosophers, where questions of truth and falsity were not, were the behavioral implications of the statement or belief in question. In other words, the Chinese asked: What kind of behavior is likely to occur if a person adheres to this belief? Can the statement be interpreted to imply that men should act in a certain way? The Chinese thinker's regrettable lack of attention to the logical validity of a philosophical tenet is balanced by his great concern with problems important to human life. There are times when Western philosophy has been characterized by the reverse situation—an enormous interest in epistemological and logical problems and a seeming unconcern with the bearing of its mental labors on the well-being of man.

A word of caution is also appropriate for Westerners who expect the archaic Chinese texts to show the same consistency in philosophical position that Western writings do. Occasionally, a Chinese classic will contain passages on some important topic that seem to contradict other passages in the same work. For example, at the beginning of Section 9 of the *Hsün-tzu* is a reference to some men who are "incorrigibly evil"; this contradicts the Confucian assump-

tion (elsewhere shared by Hsün Tzu) that men are perfectible through education. One must ask whether or not such passages are frequent enough to merit some special explanation (an example appears in this book, in the chapters on the Taoist view of man). If they are not, one had best concentrate on the dominant themes and try to live with the inconsistencies. In many cases they are a product of later additions to the archaic texts; in others they may simply represent the author's lack of concern with consistency, which is so dear to Western thinkers.

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D.J.M.

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

HUMAN NATURE AND NATURAL EQUALITY

TWO THEMES can be found woven through the various poetic, conversational, and prose passages in which early Confucian and Taoist thinkers put forth their concept of man. The first of these themes concerns the presence or absence in nature of a basis for the ethical categories "right and wrong," "proper and improper," and "superior and inferior." The Confucians assumed that nature did reveal these qualities. Certain relationships between natural bodies (planets, rivers, mountains, and so forth) were seen in ethical terms: for example, the "proper" relationship of Heaven to earth was that of superior to inferior, and it was "good" for a planet to move only in its own orbit. Similarly, some human relationships are "proper," and some actions are "good." In short, human society is simply an extension of nature. Taoist thinkers, by contrast, denied that nature revealed any of these qualities. "Superior and inferior," "right and wrong," and "proper and improper," they maintained, were human inventions, which should be "forgotten" by men when in contact with their fellows and should never be read into nature as a whole.

A similar controversy exists in Western philosophy, e.g. between the Platonists (on the Confucian side) and the sophists, over such questions as whether "justice" is a cosmic virtue or simply an arbitrary label. What is unique about China is the agreement on all sides that men are naturally equal. This is the second of our two central themes. Both sides were quick to dismiss as unimportant the objective differences between men; both tried above all to establish a quintessential equality. This second theme, the natural equality of all men, is a major topic of the present study.

As I shall use the expression, "natural equality" is a descriptive term; it refers to the common attributes or characteristics with

which all men are born. It is to be differentiated from "equality" in the evaluative sense, which carries the suggestion that men are of similar "worth" or deserve similar treatment. The two senses, descriptive and evaluative, can be related, but they are basically different (see p. 179, footnote †).

Why Natural Equality?

Why did the idea of natural equality arise in China when it did? The answer doubtless lies in the increasing opposition to hereditary privilege among thinkers of the Chou period.* Indeed, opposition to hereditary privilege is the single theoretical position common to all the philosophical schools of the Warring States era. In spite of their clashing views on other issues, they could agree on this. To be sure, one finds occasional favorable references to people with hereditary claims to high position.† The prevailing view was not so much that such claims should be ignored, as that other claims to preferment be given equal recognition. In my subsequent references to "the rejection of the hereditary principle" in early China, these qualifying remarks should be remembered.

All Confucian writings make it clear that birth should not be the exclusive criterion for preferment. Disciples came to Confucius for training in the refined arts (ritual, poetry, writing, numbers) and in the art of government. He claims to have accepted all without regard to their background, and at least one of his students, Tzu-kung, is said to have achieved official position though of humble origin.[1] Mencius (c. 372–289 B.C.) stated that the sage emperors Yao and Shun "were just the same as other men," and that any man, no matter what his background, might by diligence achieve their status.[2] Hsün Tzu (c. 298–238 B.C.) began his chapter on "kingly government" by stating: "Do not regard seniority

* The classical period of ancient Chinese philosophy was from roughly 550 B.C. to roughly 250 B.C.—i.e., from late in the Spring and Autumn period (770–481 B.C.) to almost the end of the Warring States period (480–222 B.C.).

† In *Mencius* i.B.7, for example, Mencius is reported to have told the king of Ch'i that a ruler gives office to "worthies" only if he cannot help doing so, since he will thereby "cause the humble to pass over the honorable." Actually, Mencius's position on hereditary claims vs. merit in this chapter is far more complex than this well-known passage suggests. See Note 2 to this page.

but advance the worthy and able; dismiss the incompetent and incapable without delay; . . . develop the common people without waiting to compel them by laws. . . . Yet, although a man be the descendant of a king, duke, prefect, or officer, if he does not observe the rules of proper conduct [*li*] and justice [*i*], he must be relegated to the common ranks."[3]

Mo Tzu (fl. 479–438 B.C.), who is believed to have lived a century after Confucius, disagreed with a number of central Confucian principles. The Mohists opposed the depersonalization of the supreme deity, Heaven (*ᵇt'ien*), that they felt had occurred in Confucian thought, and they rejected Confucius's religious skepticism. Moreover, since men should model themselves on Heaven and since Heaven was impartial in its love toward all men, they advocated universal love in contrast to the Confucian dictum that kin are entitled to preferential affection. However, the Mohists concurred in the Confucian opposition to hereditary privilege. They believed that good government required the standardization of rank and monetary reward in accordance with individual virtue. This meant that ordinary farmers and artisans should have the same opportunity as the sons of nobles to achieve high position. According to Mo Tzu, "The sage kings of ancient times ranked the virtuous high and honored the worthy, and although a man might be a farmer or an artisan from the shops, if he had ability they promoted him."[4]

The Lord of Shang or Wei Yang (d. 338 B.C.) and Han Fei-tzu (d. 233 B.C.) were concerned with two characteristic problems of the Warring States period: how to extend a state's control to adjacent territories, and how to organize a society to repel attacks by other states. Their doctrine, known as "Legalism," advocated the universal standardization of behavior by explicit laws impartially applied. No philosophy could be more remote from Confucianism, which advocated "government by men, not by laws," and rated the family's rights at least equal to the state's. And yet the Legalists, like the Mohists, agreed with the Confucian belief that no man had special privilege as a birthright. Law is the means for enforcing this principle, because it knows no favorites. Han

Fei-tzu said: "The law does not fawn on the noble; the [carpenter's] string [when stretched] does not yield to the crooked. Whatever the law applies to, the wise cannot reject nor can the brave defy. Punishment for fault never skips ministers; reward for good never misses commoners."[5] The wise ruler estimates men's abilities and then appoints them to office. He uses ranks and rewards as a means of encouraging the meritorious.

In Taoism we find still another version of the same theme. According to Taoist thinkers, all men, including the ruler, should model themselves on the Tao. Since all things are the same from the standpoint of the Tao, all men should be regarded as equals. The Taoists rejected Confucian distinctions between noble and base, right and wrong, as artificial standards for preferring some people to others. In Taoist thought egalitarianism was carried to its ultimate extreme. Taoists dismissed the very concept of social rank with the observation that he who was superior in the eyes of man was mean in the eyes of the Tao.

The Repudiation of Hereditary Privilege

The repudiation of hereditary privilege had two sources: a religious idea of the West Chou (1111–771 B.C.) and the changing social conditions of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The religious idea was that Heaven was impartially receptive to virtuous behavior and had no prejudices in favor of certain men or tribes; any man whose behavior was virtuous might be noticed by Heaven and elevated to the ruling position. The Chou house made good use of this idea in their attempts to legitimize their claims of conquest over the Shang, but this expedient use did not detract from the lasting strength that the idea took on in early China. Since Heaven was considered impartial, and since merit was the criterion for occupying the top position, one could infer that the same should hold true for all other positions.

The social conditions behind the general rejection of hereditary privilege are a good deal more complex. Basically, there seem to have been two factors involved: the gradual weakening of the tight clan system once dominant in China, and the appearance of

new posts open to men of lower rank. Obviously, there was considerable interrelationship between these two factors, but they can be distinguished for purposes of analysis.

The Breakdown of Tight Clan Ties

In the Shang period (1751–1111 B.C.) there was a fairly strict practice of exogamy. It was believed that sickness would visit those who violated the prohibition: "Those of the same clan do not marry" (*t'ung hsing pu hun**).[6] The expression "same clan" (*t'ung hsing*) possibly included the meaning "same blood."[7] In Shang times the royal house generally practiced exogamy, although there were some exceptions.[8] Much of the realm was ruled by nobles who belonged to the same clan as the king; however, other clans, whose leaders had been enfeoffed by the Shang king, were accepted as part of the Shang group.[9]

By the early Chou period, internal disorders and the consequent population movement may have weakened the blood tie somewhat; many knew only to which family (*[a]shih*) they belonged, not to which clan (*[a]hsing*).[10] Well into the Spring and Autumn period, however, the social structure was still one based mostly on clans, which were fairly strictly organized. Noble clans generally traced their descent to a god or a deified ancestor. The Shang house, for example, was founded by a person hatched from a swallow's egg at the command of a deity; and Prince Millet, the founder of the Chou royal family, came into this world after his mother walked on a toeprint made by the Lord-on-High. Clan life centered on the ancestral temple, where all important ceremonies were carried out, and where significant events affecting the clan were reported to the deceased.

The peoples of China at the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period can be divided into three groups. One group was a confederation of Chou states, whose inhabitants lived in walled cities; people of a given area often bore the same surname (i.e., were at

* Characters for most expressions given in romanization will be found in the Chinese Characters section, pp. 198–202. When two different expressions have the same romanization, they are distinguished by superscript italic letters.

least nominally descendants of a common ancestor), and married people of different surnames from other areas. The second group, the non-Chou states of Ch'u, Wu, Yüeh, Pa, and Shu, were at first outside the Chou cultural area, but were gradually drawn into it. The third group, tribal peoples like the Jung and Ti in the north, the Man and Yi in the south, roamed the grasslands of the Yellow River Basin and the jungles of the Yangtze Valley.[11]

During the late Spring and Autumn period there was incessant warfare between the aristocratic clans and between the clans and the rulers of states. At this time we find signs of a general weakening of bloodline clan barriers, notably an increase in marriages between members of the same clan and a new phenomenon of people born of the same bloodline but belonging to different clans.[12] One scholar feels that in time even the meaning of *°hsing* changed, from denoting exclusively bloodline to denoting also an esteemed rank;[13] *hsing* was increasingly used to distinguish the clans of the king and nobles who were his kin from those of the chief ministers, and the original meaning of *hsing* was taken over by *°shih*.[14] There are references from the Warring States period to mendicant knights released from former clan ties who were taken in by local feudal lords seeking to gain power.[15] The regional feudal unit, obviously more capable of admitting outsiders than a clan unit, replaced the bloodline group as central.[16] With the loosening of clan barriers during this period, family links became less important in securing office, even high office.

More than 130 states are mentioned in Chou documents. In the West Chou a sizable number of the states in the Yellow River Valley were ruled by lords with some blood tie to the Chou king. The regional rulers were addressed by the king in familial terms; for example, those of the highest rank and with the same surname as the royal house were addressed as paternal uncles.[17] Somewhat later, after the decline of the Chou house, the hereditary principle was applied in awarding the higher posts in individual states. In the early Spring and Autumn period, chief ministers were often brothers of the state rulers; younger sons of the ruler also received high ministerial positions, and their sons in turn were given

somewhat lower offices. Ministers of the *ᵒch'ing* grade were rulers' sons who had been enfeoffed; those of the *tai fu* grade were other sons of the ruler or children of a *ᵒch'ing*-grade minister. Sometimes the *tai fu* position became hereditary.[18]

By the middle of the Spring and Autumn period certain families had achieved the power to pass on ministerial positions exclusively to their own kin.[19] Their power had often been increased by the award of lands for success in military campaigns; and, of course, the stronger these families became, the weaker became the state ruler. According to Hsü Cho-yün, no ruler's son served as a chancellor after 513 B.C., and no sons of rulers who reigned after this time were able to set up powerful enclaves.[20] In sum, in the middle of the Spring and Autumn period the hereditary principle was still in operation, only in a new form: the family-state had given way to a multitude of aristocratic families, each with its own power center.

In time, however, the constant warfare destroyed the great hereditary clans. Over 110 states disappeared in the bloody wars of the Spring and Autumn period, and when they fell their noble families lost power, some to the point of accepting plebeian status; it was these aristocratic families that had perpetuated the hereditary assignment of offices. By the fourth century B.C. only the state of Ch'u had its chief ministers furnished by hereditary noble families.[21]

New Paths Upward

Before turning to the new channels of upward mobility during the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, a word about the social strata prior to that time. For years there has been a steady stream of partisan works on this subject by Chinese writers. Those eager to affirm a quasi-Marxist portrait of Chinese history, such as Kuo Mo-jo and Ch'en Meng-chia,* have been at pains to prove that the society of the Shang and early Chou was

* Although Ch'en's historical interpretations sometimes reflect a Marxist viewpoint, he has never been identified closely with the party, and in 1957 he was declared a "rightist."

a slave society. The evidence offered to support this view is threefold. First, certain characters on oracle bones are interpreted as "slave." Kuo considers *chung* ("multitude," also appearing as *chung jen*) to be a picture of three men working under a sun (slaves toiling).[22] Among the other characters mentioned are *ch'en* (a "subject" of a ruler) and *nu* (today translated as "slave"). Ch'en admits that there were also freemen commoners, termed *jen* or *hsiao jen*. Second, we are told of skeletons, some headless, that show signs of having been killed for ritual burial along with prominent nobles, and certain expressions on oracle bones are said to refer to human sacrifice. Third, there are various phrases on oracle bones, such as "The *chung* ran away" and "The king goes to repress the disorders of the *chung*," that supposedly indicate the existence of a slave class.[23] Several equally distinguished scholars have rejected the slave society thesis: Tung Tso-pin, Hu Hou-hsüan, and Shima Kuniyo.[24]

For our purposes it is enough to recognize that in the Shang and early Chou there were at least two broad classes, the ruling and the ruled (the third type of evidence—the *chung* running away and the king repressing their disorders—without question refers to a subject people). The majority of the "ruled" were peasants who did not own land but were attached to it and would be tied to the land when it changed hands. They were mostly agricultural workers, except in time of war, when they could be conscripted as foot soldiers to accompany the aristocrats' chariots. Slaves in the strict sense of the term doubtless existed, but they do not seem to have amounted to a large percentage of the population.

By the fifth century B.C. a number of states, having defeated their weaker neighbors, were consolidating their rule and seeking the means to build strength and stability within their boundaries. In these circumstances, new opportunities for advancement became open to the lowborn. Talent brought its own reward, and one of the important places where it was rewarded was the battlefield. By the end of the Spring and Autumn period, the aristocrats' chariots—having proved ineffective in hilly areas and before city