CONFUCIUS.

(551–479 B. C.

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KUNG-FU-TZŬ, or 孔子 (Kung-tzŭ), popularly known as Confucius, was neither a philosopher nor a founder of religion; he was a moral teacher, or more properly a statesman, whose maxim was that the people should be governed by the ethical law of sympathy,[1] rather than by the jurisprudential principle of right and duty. Therefore those ontological and epistemological problems which led Greek and Indian minds into a maze of metaphysical speculation did not claim much attention from the Chinese sage, nor did the deep and pessimistic religious feelings which occupied the heart of the Semitic prophet stir in him any aspiration for God or kingdom of heaven.

Meng-tzŭ, or Mencius,[2] one of the most prominent leaders of Confucianism, spoke of him as one who collected ancient traditions and brought them to perfection. Confucius himself once said that he propounded the old doctrine of ancient sages and did not proclaim anything new and original.[3] This spirit of conservatism and common sense being the spirit of Confucianism as well as the national character of the Chinese, Confucius, who was living at the time when the Chou dynasty was separating into smaller dukedoms or kingdoms known as the *Ch'un ch'iu* and *Chan kwo*[4] period, naturally desired to rescue the dynasty from disintegration and to actualise again if possible the administration of Yao and Shun, the two most reverenced sage-kings of China.

Confucius, accompanied by his disciples, wandered from one

[1] In Chinese 仁 (*jên*).

[2] He lived about a hundred years after Confucius and was a contemporary of Chwang-tzŭ, the best known follower of Lao tzŭ, though they did not know each other.

[3] A liberal translation of "*shu êrh pu tso, hsin êrh 'hao ku.*"

[4] *Ch'un ch'iu* means "Spring and Fall," and *chan kwo* "war country."

place to another till he was sixty-five years old, trying to persuade the feudal lords to adopt his method of administration and to make a practical application of his ethical teachings. He did not think of propagating his doctrine of sympathy directly among the masses, and expected to reform the people through the government solely; but he encountered many disasters and much suffering and was at last obliged to retire from the world and to find comfort in the contemplation of his doctrine which now became the principal subject of his dialogues with his disciples. The *Lun Yü*, one of the canonical books of Confucianism, is the record of the "sayings and conversations" of this latter phase of his life, and must be deemed of paramount importance for the students of Confucianism as being the only authentic statement of Confucian ethics.

In Confucius and in his doctrine are solidly crystallised the essence and the ideal of the Chinese people. When we understand Confucius we understand the Chinese. The greatest man who has acquired unshakable national renown and reverence in a long course of time can be looked at as the perfect mirror of the nation, in which their prominent characteristics are revealed in their brightest and clearest colors.

What reflexions of the Chinese mind, then, can we see through Confucius? They are a lack of imagination and a tendency to positive conservatism, utilitarianism, practicality, and optimism. These elements are deeply rooted in every tissue of the Chinese mental constitution.

The most metaphysical book of Confucianism is the ancient *Yih King*, or *Book of Changes*, on which Confucius is said to have written a commentary known as the *Hsi tz'ŭ ch'uan*, and this fact is confirmed by the tradition which says that by his constant study and handling of the book its leather binding-string was thrice worn out. Though this proves to a certain degree that he had a speculative mind, we observe even there the predominance of ethical elements which put aside all abstruse philosophical arguments and soaring poetical imaginations. How sober, positivistic, and in a sense agnostic he is, when compared with his elder contemporary Lao tzŭ whose mind, transcending this phenomenal world, wanders in the eternity of the 道 (Tao)! It is true, Confucius occasionally makes mention of 帝 (*Ti*), the Lord, or *Shang Ti*, the Lord on High, or *Tien*, Heaven, which some Christian Orientalists would like to render *God* or *Heaven*, but he, even if there might have been in his practical mind some vague conception of the All-Containing-One, did not assume any such attitude towards it as Christians do.

When he was wandering about almost in a state of exile, unable to find any royal listener, he ascribed his misfortune to the iron hand of fate (*ming*) but he did not personify it, nor did he exclaim, "Thy will be done."

His *Tien* or *Tien ming* is not animated; it is merely another name for nature or natural order. Of course, he tried every means in his own power to realise what he thought good, but when he had done all in his power he calmly resigned himself and suffered the law of causality to take its own course. When his disciples were exasperated with their misfortunes, he consoled them by simply saying, "A superior man calmly endures misfortune."[1]

Confucius was therefore an advocate of realism; he did not dare to propound definite speculations about the beyond. When he was asked his opinion of death, he said: "How can one know death when one does not know life?" and when questioned regarding supernaturalism he replied, "A superior man does not talk about mysterious powers and supernatural spirits." This keeping within the limits of experience is throughout characteristic of Confucianism, and it is the very reason why his doctrine has acquired such a controlling and enduring influence over Chinese minds as we observe to-day. Even such philosophers as Chou-tzŭ (1022–1073), Chu-tzŭ (1130–1200), Liu-hsiang-san (1139–1192), and Wang-yang-ming (1472–1529), all of whom were greatly influenced by the highly-speculative philosophy of the Mahâyâna Buddhism, could not forsake their native agnostic teacher nor shake off the fetter of their national peculiarity. While they borrowed many things from Buddhism, they still continued faithfully to transmit and to interpret the doctrine of Kung-fu-tzŭ.

Morality goes side by side with peace, and peace means order, a necessary product of conservatism. How then can Confucianism be other than conservatism? Besides, Confucius was born, as said before, in a time of disorder and transformation, and all he wanted was a reform of the evils of his age. He proposed to restore the moral relations of human society as they were in the bygone golden age. And to effect this, he found the guiding principle in sympathy (*jên*) and benevolence (*shu*). The basis of his doctrine, "Do not do to others what you would not have done to you by others," has a striking similarity to the golden rule, the saying of Christ. Lao-tzŭ also speaks about compassion (*tz'ŭ*) as one of the three treasures, but he entirely disregards the form by which this inner principle might become manifest to others. His

[1] *Chün tzŭ ku ch'iung.*

whole emphasis fell upon our subjective attitude, while Confucius, being more of a Chinese than Lao-tzŭ, considered it necessary to have a proper way of manifesting what is going on in one's mind. To this end he repeatedly appealed to the observation of the ancient habits and customs and of the traditional rules of propriety. His disciples therefore minutely describe in the *Lun Yü* how the teacher appeared and behaved on certain occasions.

When reading the accounts of the *Lun Yü*, we have a very vivid impression of him, stately and dignified in every respect, yet full of benevolence and piety. This could not, however, restrain Lao-tzŭ from making him a subject of ridicule and from laughing at his artificiality. Lao-tzŭ appears as a rugged mountain thickly covered with wild trees and with huge boulders scattered here and there, whereas Confucius may be compared to the cultivated aspect of a velvet lawn smooth and in perfect order and with everything arranged according to the law of symmetry.

The main object of Confucius, however, was the promotion of national welfare and the amelioration of social conditions. He taught the doctrine of sympathy and benevolence, not that the people might be fairly rewarded in the future or reborn in heaven, not that they might thus be released from the bond of material existence, not that they might save their hypothetical souls from eternal damnation and the curse of the last judgment, but that they might live righteously in this present life, be in peace with their neighbors, and enjoy the happiness of a good conscience,—this was the ideal of the Chinese sage.

Not being a religious teacher, he made no effort to teach the masses and to awaken them from ignorance; he on the contrary wished to follow the example of Chou-king, his ideal statesman, because he thought it the best way of actualising his benevolent administration and of making the people happy materially as well as morally. The political condition of the time seems to have been so precarious as to induce even the apparently world-abandoned author of the 道德經 (*Tao-teh-king*) to dwell on the policy of governing a state. Speaking in general, the most cherished idea of the majority of Chinese philosophers and moral teachers is to enforce the practical application of their views through the authority of the administration.

The practical turn of the Chinese character is clearly shown in the biography of Confucius as recorded by his disciples and followers. Their memoirs are singularly free from the clouds of miracles, superstitions, and impossibilities which usually gather around the

life-histories of religious sages. There are no legends about him. He stands before us as a plain human being who said and did what any other mortal could say and do. Look, for example, how the imagination of Indian and Semite, overleaping the natural limits of probability and possibility, heaps up the tinsel glory of miracles on the heads of their spiritual leaders! Is it not indeed surprising to notice in what plain language the life of the Chinese sage is described, and yet before his statue the proudest kings reverentially bow down, and in his analects, however fragmentary, millions of human beings for more than a score of centuries have found wisdom and consolation?

Confucius was not indeed the leader of a religious movement in any sense, nor could Chinese minds conceive any such spiritual reformation. Deeply immersed in practicality, they could not see any significance in things beyond this life. What they most cared for was the betterment of social conditions,—that kings should be benevolent, subjects loyal; that parents should be loving, sons filial; that husbands should be affectionate, wives devoted; that friends should be faithful to one another; that brothers and sisters should be mutually attached. When these virtues are practised by every individual in the empire, peace will prevail on earth; then the aim of our life is attained, and there is nothing left beyond to be desired.

The utilitarian phase of Confucianism may be further illustrated by an example furnished, not by Confucius himself, but by one of his most distinguished followers. As Buddhistic monarchism was not known in China at the time of Kung-tzŭ, we cannot exactly say what personal attitude he would have assumed towards it, but most probably his positivistic tendency would not have approved it. When Buddhism attained its most flourishing stage under the Tang dynasty, it greatly annoyed Han-yü who was one of the famous Confucian sages of the time and who boasted himself to be a second Mencius. He wrote an article entitled *Yüan Tao*, i. e., "Fundamental Principle," in which he bitterly attacked Buddhism, exclaiming: "While the doctrine of the ancient sages teaches us to promote our social welfare by co-operation and division of labor, what rôle do the followers of Buddha play, who remaining in idleness consume all that is produced by other classes of the people?" It must have been an assault least expected by the Buddhists, who, having lived in abundance of food and clothing in the most favored quarter of the globe, were probably not prepared to hear such a practical complaint, although their theoretical

weapons must have been well sharpened to meet and crush opponents. But these two characteristics, practicality and speculativeness, may be considered to be the most striking marks of division between Confucianism and Buddhism.

At all events, Confucius was the Chinese ideal of a perfectly developed virtue. How could he otherwise command the national admiration, reverence, and worship? It is the law of evolution that those who are best adapted to their inner and outer surroundings alone can survive. Lao-tzŭ and Confucius are doubtless the two greatest minds ever produced on the soil of China, but the latter was more native and thus his doctrine was better fitted to send deep roots down into the hearts of his countrymen to develop and prosper all over the land of his birth. Those who are capable of finding some admirable traits in the people of the celestial kingdom beside their conservatism and odd traditions, will also be able to appreciate the high moral tone and the spirit of practicality in Confucius as well as in Confucianism.