



Taoism and Confucianism (I)

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For the most part, ancient peoples bothered little about establishing a strict chronology for their history; some even used only symbolic numbers, at least for the most remote epochs, and we would be seriously mistaken in taking these as dates in the ordinary and literal sense of that word. In this respect, however, the Chinese constitute a remarkable exception and are perhaps the only people to have taken constant care, from the very origin of their tradition, to date their annals by means of precise astronomical observations, including the description of the state of the heavens at the moment when the events recorded took place. Thus we can be more definite regarding China and its ancient history than in many other cases, and know that the tradition we may properly call Chinese originated around 3,700 years before the Christian era. By a rather curious coincidence, this same epoch is also the beginning of the Hebrew era, although for this latter it would be difficult to say what event really marks its starting-point.

However remote such an origin may appear when one compares it with that of the Greco-Roman civilization and with the dates of so-called 'classical' antiquity, it is in fact still fairly recent. What was the state of the yellow race, which at that time probably inhabited certain regions of central Asia, before 3,700 BC? In the absence of sufficiently explicit data it is impossible to say with any precision; it seems that for an indeterminate length of time this race went through a period of obscurity, and was roused from this slumber at a moment also marked by changes important for other sectors of humanity. It is then possible – and indeed is the only thing that can be affirmed outright – that what appears as a beginning may in reality have been the awakening of a much earlier tradition, which, moreover, had to be put in another form at that time to adapt to new conditions. However that may be, the history of China, or of what is so named today, only begins with Fu-Hsi, who is regarded as its first emperor; and it must immediately be added that the name of Fu-Hsi, to which is linked the whole body of sciences that make up the very essence of the Chinese tradition, in reality seems to designate a whole period lasting for several centuries.

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To fix the principles of the tradition, Fu-Hsi made use of linear symbols that were both simple and at the same time as synthetic as possible, that is, the continuous line and the broken line, respectively signs of *yang* and *yin*, that is, of the two principles, active and passive, which, proceeding from a sort of polarization of the supreme metaphysical Unity, give birth to the whole of universal manifestation. From the combinations of these two signs in all their possible arrangements, are formed the eight *kua* or 'trigrams,' which have always remained the fundamental symbols of the Far-Eastern tradition. It is said that 'before tracing the trigrams, Fu-Hsi looked at the Heaven, then lowered his eyes to the Earth, observed its details, considered the characteristics of the human body and of all external things.'¹ This text is especially interesting in that it contains the formal expression of the 'Great Triad': Heaven and Earth, or the two complementary principles from which all beings spring, and man, who, by his nature partaking of both, is the middle term of the triad, the mediator between Heaven and Earth.² Here we should specify that we refer to 'true man,' that is, he who having reached the full development of his higher faculties 'can assist Heaven and Earth in the maintenance and transformation of beings, and by that very fact constitute a third power along with Heaven and Earth.'³ It is also said that Fu-Hsi saw a dragon emerge from the river, uniting in itself the powers of Heaven and Earth, and bearing the trigrams inscribed on its back, which is another way of expressing the same thing symbolically.

Thus the whole tradition was first contained essentially and as if in germ in the trigrams, symbols marvelously adapted to serving as support for an indefinitude of possibilities; it only remained to draw from them all the necessary developments, whether in the domain of pure metaphysical knowledge itself, or in its diverse applications to the cosmic and human orders. To this end Fu-Hsi wrote three books, of which only the last, the *I Ching*, or 'Book of Changes,' has survived. The text of this book is so synthetic that it can be understood in many senses, nonetheless perfectly concordant among themselves, according to whether one keeps strictly to the principles themselves or applies them to this or that determinate order. Thus, besides the metaphysical sense, there are a multitude of contingent applications of unequal importance which constitute as many traditional sciences. In this way it can be applied to logic, mathematics, astronomy, physiology, social organization, and so on; and there is even a divinatory application, which, however, is considered the most inferior of all, and the practice of which is left to wandering minstrels. Besides, it is characteristic of all traditional doctrines that from the outset they contain within themselves the possibilities of all conceivable developments, including those of an indefinite variety of sciences of which the modern West has not the slightest idea, and of all the adaptations that might be required by later circumstances. There is thus no cause to be astonished that the teachings contained in the *I Ching*, which Fu-Hsi himself claimed to have drawn from a past very ancient and difficult to date, should in turn have become the common basis of the two doctrines in which the Chinese tradition has been maintained to the present, and which, by reason of the completely different domains to which they relate, seem at first sight to have no point of contact, namely Taoism and Confucianism.

¹ The Book of the Rites of the Kingdom of Chou.

² See *The Great Triad*, especially chap. 3.

³ Ch'ung Yung, chap. 22.

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What were the circumstances that after roughly three thousand years rendered a readaptation of the traditional doctrine necessary, that is to say, a change not in the foundation, which in itself always remained strictly the same, but as it were in the forms into which this doctrine was incorporated? This is another point that it would doubtless be difficult to elucidate fully, for in China and elsewhere such things scarcely leave a trace in recorded history, where exterior effects are much more apparent than the profound causes. What seems certain in any case is that the doctrine such as it had been formulated in the time of Fu-Hsi had generally ceased to be understood in its most essential aspects; and doubtless, too, the applications which had been drawn from it in the past, especially concerning social matters, no longer corresponded to the racial conditions of existence, which must have been changed perceptibly in the interval.

It was then the sixth century before the Christian era, and it is notable that this century saw considerable change among almost all peoples, so that it would seem that what happened in China at that time should be attributed to a cause, perhaps difficult to define, that affected the whole of terrestrial humanity. What is remarkable is that in a general way the sixth century can be considered as the beginning of the properly 'historical' period. When one goes farther back, it is impossible to establish even an approximate chronology, except in a few exceptional cases, as, for example, precisely that of China. On the other hand, beginning with this epoch, dates of events are everywhere known with a fair degree of accuracy, which is assuredly a fact deserving our attention. Moreover, the changes that took place at the time present different characteristics according to the country. India, for instance, saw the birth of Buddhism, that is, a revolt against the traditional spirit going as far as the negation of all authority, even to veritable anarchy in the intellectual and social orders; in China, on the contrary, the two new doctrinal forms, which were given the names Taoism and Confucianism, were constituted simultaneously and strictly within the line of tradition. The founders of these two doctrines, Lao Tzu and Kung Tzu (whom Westerners call Confucius) were thus in fact contemporaries, and history tells us that one day they met:

'Hast thou discovered Tao?' asked Lao Tzu. 'I have sought it twenty-seven years,' replied Kung Tzu 'and I have not yet found it.' Whereupon Lao Tzu gave his visitor these few precepts. 'The sage loves obscurity; he does not throw himself at every comer; he studies times and circumstances. If the moment is propitious, he speaks; otherwise, he keeps silent. Whoever possesses a treasure does not display it before the whole world; in the same way, one who is truly a sage does not unveil his wisdom to the whole world. That is all I have to say to you; make what profit you can out of it!' On returning from this interview Kung Tzu said, 'I have seen Lao Tzu; he is like the dragon. As for the dragon, I know not how it can be borne by winds and clouds and raise itself to Heaven.'

This anecdote, reported by the historian Ssu-Ma-Chi'en, perfectly delineates the respective positions of the two doctrines, or rather of the two branches of the doctrine, into which the Far-Eastern tradition would henceforth be divided: the one essentially consisting of pure metaphysics, to which are joined all the traditional sciences of which the scope is strictly speaking speculative, or rather 'cognitive'; the other, confined to the practical domain and keeping exclusively to the field of social applications. Kung Tzu

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himself admitted that he was not at all 'born to Knowledge,' that is, that he had not attained to knowledge par excellence, which is that of the metaphysical and supra-rational order; he was acquainted with traditional symbols, but he had not penetrated their deepest meaning. That is why his work was necessarily to be limited to one particular and contingent domain, which alone was within his competence; but at least he was careful not to deny what lay beyond his understanding. His later disciples did not always imitate him in this, and at times some of them exhibited a narrow exclusivism – a defect widespread among 'specialists' of all kinds – and this brought forth various ripostes of scathing irony on the part of the great Taoist commentators of the fourth century such as Lieh Tzu, and more especially Chuang Tzu. However, it must not be inferred from such disputes that Taoism and Confucianism are rival schools, for this they never were and never could be, since each has its proper and clearly distinct domain. Their coexistence is thus perfectly normal and regular, and in some respects their distinction corresponds fairly exactly to what in other civilizations is that between the spiritual authority and the temporal power.

We have already said, moreover, that the two doctrines share a common root, namely the earlier tradition. Neither Kung Tzu nor Lao Tzu ever intended to expound conceptions of their own, which, as such, would have lacked all authority and any real influence. 'I am a man who has loved the ancients and who has bent all his efforts toward acquiring their sciences,' said Kung Tzu;¹ and this attitude, which is the very opposite of the individualism of modern Westerners with their pretensions to 'originality' at any cost, is the only one compatible with the establishment of a traditional civilization. The word 'readaptation' which we have used before is therefore the one that indeed fits here; and the social institutions that resulted from it were endowed with a remarkable stability, for they lasted twenty-five centuries and survived all the periods of disorder that China underwent until recently. We have no wish to dwell further on these institutions, which moreover are fairly well-known in broad outline; but it is worth recalling that their essential characteristic is to take the family as foundation and from there to extend itself to the race, which is the totality of families belonging to one and the same original stock. One of the special characteristics of the Chinese civilization is in fact that it is founded on the idea of race and the solidarity that unites its members among themselves, whereas other civilizations, which generally include men belonging to diverse or poorly-defined races, rest on completely different principles of unity.

Usually when one speaks in the West of China and its doctrines, it is almost exclusively Confucianism that comes to mind. This is not to say that it is always interpreted correctly, for some make of it a kind of Eastern 'positivism,' whereas in reality it is something totally different, first by reason of its traditional character, and then also because, as we have said, it is an application of superior principles, whereas 'positivism,' on the contrary, implies a negation of such principles. As for Taoism, it is generally passed over in silence, and many seem to be ignorant of its very existence, or at any rate to believe that it disappeared long ago and today presents only an historical or archaeological interest. In what follows, we shall see the reasons for this mistake.

¹ *Liun-Yu*, chap. 7.

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Lao Tzu wrote only one treatise, which, moreover, was extremely concise, called the *Tao Te Ching* or 'Book of the Way and of Rectitude'; all other Taoist texts are either commentaries on this fundamental book or later versions of various complementary teachings that originally had been purely oral. The *Tao*, which is translated literally as 'Way,' and which gave its name to the doctrine itself, is the supreme Principle envisaged from a strictly metaphysical standpoint; it is both the origin and the end of all beings, as is very clearly indicated by the ideographic character that represents it. The *Te* – which we prefer to render as 'Rectitude' rather than 'Virtue,' as is sometimes done, so as not to seem to give it a 'moral' meaning that is not at all in keeping with the outlook of Taoism – is what could be called a 'specification' of the *Tao* with respect to a determinate being, such as the human being for instance; it is the direction which that being must follow in order that its existence in its present state shall be according to the Way, or, in other words, in conformity with the Principle. Thus, at the outset Lao Tzu takes his stand in the universal order and then descends to an application; but although this application is specifically made to the case of man, it is in no way done from a social or moral point of view; what is always and exclusively envisaged is the connection with the Supreme Principle, so that in reality we never leave the metaphysical domain.