

## Backgrounds of the Chinese People

Fung Yu-Lan (冯友兰) 1948

### Geographic Background of the Chinese People

China is a continental country. To the ancient Chinese their land was the world. There are two expressions in the Chinese language which can both be translated as the world. One is “all beneath the sky” and the other is “all within the four seas.” To the people of a maritime country such as the Greeks, it would be inconceivable that expressions such as these could be synonymous. But that is what happens in the Chinese language, and it is not without reason.

From the time of Confucius until the end of the last century, no Chinese thinkers had the experience of venturing out upon the high seas. Confucius and Mencius lived not far from the sea, if we think in modern terms of distance, yet in the *Analects*, Confucius mentions the sea only once. He is recorded as saying: “If my way is not to prevail, I shall get upon a raft and float out to the sea. He who will go with me will be [Chung] Yu.” Mencius’s reference to the sea is likewise brief. How different were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who lived in a maritime country and wandered from island to island!

### Economic Background of the Chinese People

The ancient Chinese and Greek philosophers not only lived under different geographic conditions, but different economic ones as well. Since China is a continental country, the Chinese people have to make their living by agriculture. In an agrarian country land is the primary basis of wealth. Hence, throughout Chinese history, social and economic thinking and policy have centered around the utilization and distribution of land.

In the social and economic thinking of Chinese philosophers, there is a distinction between what they call “the root” and “the branch.” “The root” refers to agriculture and “the branch” to commerce. The reason for this is that agriculture is concerned with production, while commerce is merely concerned with exchange. One must have production before one can have exchange. In an agrarian country, agriculture is the major form of production, and therefore throughout Chinese history, social and economic theories and policies have all attempted “to emphasize the root and slight the branch.”

### Idealization of Nature

The farmers are always in contact with nature, so they admire and love nature. This admiration and love were developed by the Taoists to the fullest extent. They made a

sharp distinction between what is of nature and what is of man, the natural and the artificial. According to them, what is of nature is the source of human happiness and what is of man is the root of all human suffering. As the final development of this trend of thinking, the Taoists maintained that the highest achievement in the spiritual cultivation of a sage lies in the identification of himself with the whole of nature, i.e., the universe.

### **Family System**

The farmers have to live on their land, which is immovable, and the same is true of the scholar landlords. Unless one has special talent, or is especially lucky, one has to live where one's father or grandfather lived, and where one's children will continue to live. That is to say, the family in the wider sense must live together for economic reasons. Thus there developed the Chinese family system, which was no doubt one of the most complex and well-organized in the world. A great deal of Confucianism is the rational justification or theoretical expression of this social system.

For the same reason, ancestor worship developed. In a family living in a particular place, the ancestor worshiped was usually the first of the family who had established himself and his descendants there on the land. He thus became the symbol of the unity of the family, and such a symbol was indispensable for a large and complex organization.

### **Maritime Countries and Continental Countries**

The Greeks lived in a maritime country and maintained their prosperity through commerce. They were primarily merchants. And what merchants have to deal with first are the abstract numbers used in their commercial accounts. Hence Greek philosophers took the concept by postulation as their starting point. They developed mathematics and mathematical reasoning.

Merchants are also townsmen. Their activities demand that they live together in towns. Hence they have a form of social organization not based on the common interest of the family so much as on that of the town. This is the reason why the Greeks organized their society around the city state, in contrast with the Chinese social system, which may be called that of the family state, because under it the state is conceived of in terms of the family. In a city state the social organization is not autocratic, because among the same class of townsmen, there is no moral reason why one should be more important than, or superior to, another. But in a family state the social organization is autocratic and hierarchic, because in a family the authority of the father is naturally superior to that of the son.

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