

THE DAY CONFUCIUS WENT TO THE UNITED NATIONS: CHINESE INFLUENCE ON THE DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

By Nick Gier

Lead the people with virtue and regulate them with the rules of propriety,
and they will have a sense of shame, and, moreover, set themselves right.

--Confucius, *Analects* 2:3



P. C. Chang with Eleanor Roosevelt (left); Confucius (551-479 BC)

On December 10th sixty years ago the UN General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration proclaims that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," and that they have "the right to life, liberty and security of person." Slavery, torture, and other inhumane treatment are strictly forbidden.

Among the 30 articles are found the right to seek political asylum; the right to own property; the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; the right to medical care and necessary social services; and the right to a free elementary education.

Some critics of the Declaration claim that it is far too Eurocentric, and it does not do justice to African and Asian ideas of human flourishing. These detractors may be ignorant of the common moral ground shared by ancient cultures. Recent studies about the writing of the Declaration itself may lead them to reconsider their objections.

Chinese philosopher P. C. Chang has now been identified as "the towering intellect" of the committee that sent the final draft the General Assembly in 1948. Chang received a Ph.D. from Columbia University, became President of Nankai University, and established himself as a major philosopher of education. Chang, more than any other representative on the drafting committee, stressed the importance of combining ethics and rights in the Declaration.

Far too many people exercise their rights without much moral consideration or concern for others. John Adams and other classical liberal thinkers believed that personal liberty without virtue becomes license to do whatever we want, and we certainly see the negative effects of this self-indulgence in today's society. Confucius would say that we have no sense of shame.

Ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy began with the same assumption that people are basically social beings, and that they thrive only when they develop virtues such as courage, justice, and benevolence. The Greeks and Chinese believed that we learn virtues from models in our communities: parents, teachers, saints, and sages (if we are lucky to have the latter two).

Even more than the Greeks, the Chinese saw the necessity of balancing the self-regarding virtues--such as courage, patience, and industry--which have led to success in commerce and the professions; and the other-regarding virtues--such as justice, generosity, and compassion--which hold families and society together.

In an early draft of the Declaration, P. C. Chang attempted to insert the Confucian virtue of benevolence in the first article. The basis for Confucian ethics is contained in a brilliant pun of just two words *ren ren**. These two words sound the same, but the Chinese characters are different (hence the asterisk).

The first *ren* means a physical person, and *ren** is the virtue variously translated as humaneness, benevolence, or love. *Ren** literally means "two people," because it is *ren* with the number two added to it. The meaning of the pun is that people can be truly humane only by working together.

For the Declaration's first article the drafting committee chose the word "conscience," a universally shared moral knowledge, to capture the meaning of *ren**, and they also added "the spirit of brotherhood" to emphasize the social relations that Chang thought were so important.

Chang's role in drafting all 30 articles was profound. He played a mediating role in Article 18, convincing the Saudis not to press their objections against the right to change one's religion. The issue about Muslims converting to other religions is still a contentious one for conservative Muslims.

In the discussion of Article 29, Chang convinced the delegates to balance individual rights with duties to the community. Chang argued that only by putting aside "selfish gains" and devoting themselves to their communities could humans "increase their moral stature." This is a fundamental principle of Confucian ethics.

Later UN conventions continued to balance individual and collective rights. The 1989 Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples trumped the right of European powers to own native land because only they, according to John Locke's concept of private property, had "mixed their labor" with the land while the natives had not. The other basic implication was that communities as well as individuals have basic rights.

Although the Chinese have not always practiced what their sages have preached, Chinese wisdom has something to say about the ecological crisis as well. The ancient sages were said to be one with heaven and earth, and, this cosmic vision, as Sumner Twiss suggests, is "clearly intended to advance the welfare of the entire holistic community of interdependent beings."

It is significant to note that the Confucian philosopher Mencius was also prescient in insisting that the virtuous person cares for animals as well as human beings. In his praise for King Xuan, Mencius said that his deep feeling for the suffering of animals was enough to qualify him as king. "This is how *ren** works," Mencius said, because it meant that the king had the capacity to care for his people.

P. C. Chang described Confucian ethics as the "art of living." The Chinese classic *Book of Poetry* describes the development of the virtuous person as the polishing an uncut gem, and even today we say that the people we admire are real "gems." Just like expert craftsmen, virtuous people create their moral lives in unique and beautiful ways.

In his discussion of the development of the virtues, Mencius switches from stones to plants. He believed that we all have virtue sprouts that must be carefully nourished and tended. If they are not, then the virtues shrivel up and die, just as they have done in our contemporary culture.

Some have wondered why P. C. Chang did not press his issues harder and leave no doubt that the Declaration was meant to be a universal statement speaking to all peoples and all cultures. Sumner Twiss' answer is that Chang saw both Asian and Euro-American cultures evolving gradually together towards a natural convergence. Chang may have also learned the lesson of the Farmer of Song, who, being so eager that his grain should grow faster, went out at night and tugged on the shoots with disastrous results.

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights let us all be grateful for the contributions of P. C. Chang, world citizen and Confucian philosopher par excellence, who insisted that human rights have no meaning without a solid moral framework.

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