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Philosophy of History

THIS ANALYSIS of the political philosophy propounded in *The Art of Rulership* begins by examining the way in which its author chooses to construe his historical tradition. By focusing on the manner in which a philosopher construes history, it is possible to identify the aspects of human experience he invests with the greatest importance. History, far from being an objective account of incontrovertible fact, is a highly interpretative undertaking. The way in which philosophers interpret it often reveals their most fundamental presuppositions and the project that their philosophical speculations are meant to serve. Marx's economic interpretation of history in terms of dialectical materialism, for example, reveals both his fundamental philosophical categories and his ultimate concern: the realization of the classless society. Bertrand Russell's idiosyncratic interpretation of the development of Western philosophy is perhaps most informative of his own philosophical presuppositions and commitments—at least those of the 1946 Russell. Similarly, we can expect that the important disparities distinguishing the Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist attitudes toward their historical tradition will point to conspicuous differences in their respective philosophies that can serve us in determining the orientation of *The Art of Rulership's* political theory. The project here, then, is to determine how representative figures in each of the three main pre-Ch'in philosophical traditions construed historical change. Did they believe that human society had developed and progressed with the passage of time? Did they believe that it had certainly changed but had neither improved nor regressed? Or did they believe that it had degenerated from some earlier ideal?

CONFUCIUS AND THE CONFUCIAN CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

Confucius believes that a person's potential for achieving moral righteousness (*yi*) in various situations is a vital component of his or her natural

endowment. It is the cultivation of rightness through the dynamics of interpersonal conduct and its realization in the social and political orders which enables people to integrate themselves into the cosmic order and to participate in an essentially moral universe—this then is the “Way” of human beings. The process of attaining and consummating this Way in government and society must begin at the top with the ruler’s commitment to self-realization. That is, Confucius advances a notion of education through emulation which is tied closely to his belief in the efficacy of the ruler’s “moral potency” (*te*). It is because of the ruler’s essential position in the chain of influence that Confucius as a trustee of the Way directs his efforts at winning over the ruler to the notion of administration by moral edification and transformation. Because the powers-that-be were recalcitrant and the times were set against realization of the Way, however, Confucius and small pockets of like-minded individuals, denied the arena of government service, took it as their life’s work to cultivate themselves and transmit their moral insights to later generations. While succeeding generations may have found the times more or less conducive to the achievement of moral rightness in the various aspects of human life, and while the amount of energy invested in the coextensive projects of personal, social, and political realization would surely vary, the pursuit of personal realization through assiduous moral and intellectual effort is in itself unchanging.

Confucius believed, moreover, that all people are by nature similar,¹ and that their disparity is a matter of instruction and discipline—in other words, they vary in the degree to which learning and authentication in action have resulted in moral growth. Since the natural endowment of each person is reasonably consistent, it follows that at least in terms of individual capacity people have the same possibility of realizing the Way in their social relationships and government from one generation to the next. And yet in the *Analects* it is apparent that some historical periods are accredited with having attained the Way² while the age in which Confucius himself lived, for example, is viewed as falling far short of this ideal. The *Analects* conveys the general impression of an upward trend in the development of human society from ancient times until the early Chou peak, when it enters a period of steady decline. If the natural capacity of people to realize the Way has been constant and the possibility for them to achieve an integrating rightness in their actions has remained unchanged, what then has determined their degree of success in past ages? For Confucius, one of the most significant variables is “cultural tradition”—the institutionalized moral insights of past generations which can not only nurture but elevate the human experience.³ Ultimately it is the quality of the tradition and the effort the present heir is willing to make in embodying, modifying, and superseding it that deter-

mines the degree to which a society supports or retards the project of becoming human. It is significant that this project is open-ended and encourages perpetual self-transcendence (*Analects* 32/15/29): "It is the human being that can extend the Way, not the Way that extends the human being." The Way as the method for realization remains the same, but the human ideal is a distant, indistinct fiction that is constantly pursued but never reached.

Yao and Shun, the sage rulers of high antiquity, accorded with the Way in their governments, as did the early Chou rulers, and yet Confucius looks to the latter as his primary exemplars. The potential for pursuing the realization of the human moral nature has been a constant factor in the course of history—it was there in high antiquity and is still here in the present day. Why then does Confucius favor the Chou rulers over Yao and Shun? The answer again lies with the cultural tradition.

Because Confucius is convinced that the sage-rulers cultivated the Way in their personal conduct and in their stewardship of the empire, and had captured and articulated the Way in their teachings and cultural contributions, he treats their words as scripture⁴ and their culture as a sacred trust.⁵ It is in this respect that he asserts his love for the past⁶ and denies any personal contribution to the cultural tradition he is transmitting.⁷ He sees ancient culture as a creative construction and institutionalization of past moral realizations which has always provided a formal guide for personal development and socialization (*Analects* 14/8/8): "The Master said: 'Man is inspired by poetry, takes his stand on social norms, and is rounded out by music.' "

It is for this reason that there is a recurring emphasis on learning in the Confucian texts—an emulation of the ancients' exemplary model. But learning is not simply being programmed by the acceptance of some external set of criteria for human behavior and blind conformity to these criteria in one's conduct. Rather, it refers to the process of first ingesting social norms through enacting them. This is *formal* learning. The practical function of these formalized moral insights in the process of learning is obvious. Next, through conscious reflection and introspection one strives to understand the moral content embedded in the form. This entire process is referred to as transformation through education. It is only when a prescribed social action is informed by an intuited grasp of the moral content of the action that a person is truly living in accordance with the Way. And as one's perception of the moral content of social norms clarifies and one's capacity to act authentically human grows through the process of disciplined living, one "learns" to be moral in all one does. The passage describing Confucius himself in this process of learning immediately comes to mind (*Analects* 2/2/4): "The Master said: 'At fifteen I was committed to learning, at thirty I took my position, at

forty I was of one mind, at fifty I understood the unfolding of nature, at sixty I followed my instincts, and at seventy I could follow my heart's desire without going astray.' "

Given the important practical function of the formal aspects of Confucian learning, there is a profound respect for reputation and achievement in the tradition.⁸ At the same time, however, Confucius was by no means suggesting that his contemporaries should attempt to reconstitute the ancient way of life in modern times. In fact, he specifically rejects this attitude in *Hitting the Mark in the Everyday (Chung-yung)* 28: "The Master said: 'To be stupid yet fond of relying on oneself, to be in a low position yet fond of exercising authority, to be born into the modern era yet attempt to return to ancient ways—a person like this will suffer disaster in his own lifetime.' "

Rather, Confucius sees civilization as cultural growth, born in the past and groomed through time to the present day. Although Yao and Shun can be extolled for having followed the Way, the scant remnants of their culture are by and large insufficient to serve as guides to present experience. However, where aspects of this culture have been preserved—the Shao dances of Shun, for example—Confucius is certainly not averse to taking full advantage of them.⁹ Even the more recent Hsia and Shang cultures cannot be utilized directly in the absence of information concerning the customs.¹⁰ The Chou culture, on the other hand, is not only preserved in Confucius' own state of Lu,¹¹ but further, coming after the Hsia and Shang, has had the benefit of absorbing what was of abiding value from these two earlier traditions (*Analects* 5/3/14): "The Master said: 'The Chou surveys the two preceding dynasties. How resplendent is the culture! My choice is with the Chou.' "

Perhaps the first priority that we find in this Confucian philosophy of education is the notion of education by example: both the inherited cultural tradition and those who best reflect an understanding of it have a paradigmatic function. In Confucius' efforts to propound a viable social and political system which will not only lift society out of its present difficulties but will create an environment congenial to human moral development, he takes as a practical beginning the inheritance of a formal model to which modern society can look for direction. It is not altogether surprising that he chooses the unambiguous Chou model over the faintly defined and insubstantial antique alternatives.

Although Confucius idealizes the early Chou period as a golden age in the development of Chinese civilization,¹² his ideal state is by no means a simple revival of early Chou institutions and culture. Rather, it is a coming together and blending of many diverse elements (*Analects* 31/15/11): "Yen Yüan [Yen Hui] asked how to administer a state. Confucius replied: 'Use the calendar of Hsia,¹³ ride about in the state carriage of

Yin,¹⁴ wear the ceremonial cap of Chou, and as for music there are the Shao dances [of Shun]. Ban the sounds of Cheng music and keep sycophants at arm's length because the sounds of Cheng are wanton and sycophants are dangerous.' ”

Though Confucius professes sincere interest in the formal and ceremonial aspects of culture, what he really strives to understand and transmit to later ages are the moral insights embodied in the earlier institutions and human examples (*Analects* 40/19/22):

Kung-sun Ch'ao of Wei asked Tzu-kung: “What has Confucius learned from?” Tzu-kung replied: “The Way of Kings Wen and Wu has not yet fallen into oblivion. Because those of superior character record the significant elements while those without such qualities work on the minor aspects, everyone embodies in some respect the Way of Wen and Wu. What is there that the Master has not learned from? Further, what fixed teacher can there be for this?”

While repeatedly asserting that the ways of the ancients must be preserved,¹⁵ Confucius tempers this respect for antiquity with the practical consideration that this inherited knowledge must be made relevant to prevailing circumstances (*Analects* 3/2/11): “The Master said: ‘He who in reviewing the old can come to know the new has the makings of a teacher.’ ”¹⁶ A person must labor assiduously to acquire the knowledge transmitted from ancient times, but even more crucial, one must be able to take it one step further in applying it to present conditions (*Analects* 25/13/4): “The Master said: ‘If a man can recite three hundred of the *Odes* and yet when given a government post cannot fulfill it, or when sent out to distant quarters cannot speak for the government without waiting for instructions, then although he knows a lot, what good is it to him?’ ” This notion of “practical application” is at the heart of the distinction Confucius draws between “learning” (*hsüeh*) and “thinking” (*ssu*) (*Analects* 3/2/15): “The Master said: ‘He who learns but does not think remains in the dark; he who thinks but does not learn will strain himself.’ ”

In short, Confucius believes that culture—the social refinements developed primarily to encourage and articulate proper moral feelings—is cumulative and generally progressive.¹⁷ Whereas people living in high antiquity had the capacity for developing their moral nature, they were lacking in the cultural institutions and formal guidance necessary to maximize this capacity. That Yao and Shun were able to nurture this moral nature in their conduct and administration and, in doing so, were able to make a signal and lasting contribution to China's emerging civilization, was due more to their own personal excellence than to the congeniality of their environment. By the early Chou period, however, the development

of Chinese culture had culminated in a sophisticated pattern for social intercourse—fertile ground indeed in which to encourage human kind's moral nature. The cultural institutions and conventions established by the earlier sages who themselves had “lived” the Way were adapted to structure society and guide contemporaries toward a comparable level of humanity. For Confucius, the early Western Chou period marks a high point in the evolution of Chinese society. Unfortunately, however, this high point was short-lived. Having achieved the golden age of early Chou, people were gradually deflected from the Way by growing political strife. By the end of Western Chou, the political institutions had been drained of substance and the Chou kings had become puppets manipulated by ambitious feudal lords. In the process of degeneration, the glory that had been the early Chou culture was divested of its underlying moral content; only the name and the ceremonial shell remained intact. In response to this process of spiraling decline, Confucius advocated a return to the Way of Chou and a revival of the fertile and substantial culture which had fostered this golden age.

While Confucius' emulation of the past is much noticed, little has been said about his belief in the future. Given his faith in the potential of human nature to progress and his devotion to education as the foremost means of encouraging natural fulfillment, it can be inferred that Confucius would at least accept the possibility of social progress. Again, as we have seen, there are passages in the *Analects* which describe a notion of progressive and cumulative culture. Confucius harks back to the early Chou as the high water mark in the course of history— not a high water mark that has come and gone but a height which can again be attained and even surpassed.¹⁸

LAO TZU AND THE TAOIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

As in the Confucian tradition, the criterion applied by the Taoists to evaluate historical change is the degree to which an era was conducive to the development of human kind's original nature. Again the *Lao Tzu* literature of the Taoist school,¹⁹ similar to the Confucian *Analects*, suggests that there was a time in the past which provided an environment more congenial to the realization of human nature than that of the present day. As is readily apparent from the following description of the Taoist utopia, several features distinguish this idealization of the past from the golden age of the Confucian tradition (*Lao Tzu* 80):

Make your state small, make your people few.
Even though you have military equipment,

Have no recourse to use it.
Cause the people to regard dying [in their native place] as no light matter
And thus make them loath to move far away.
Although you have boats and chariots,
You should have no reason to mobilize them;
Although you have armor and weapons,
You should have no reason to parade them.
Cause the people to restore the practice of knotting ropes
And to implement this system.
They can take relish in their foodstuffs,
Beautify their clothing,
Find contentment in their dwellings,
And take pleasure in their customs.
Although neighboring states be within seeing distance of each other,
And the sounds of their chickens and dogs can be heard from one to the
other,
The people of one state will reach old age and pass away
Without ever having had contact with the people of another.

In the *Lao Tzu's* description of the ideal state, certain features are notable. First, the ideal Taoist state is small both in size and population. In this respect it is diametrically opposite to the Confucian ideal of empire: an idyllic representation of agrarian China in ancient times.²⁰ The agrarian society of ancient China was composed of innumerable self-governing and self-administering villages, each constituting a self-sufficient economic, social, and political unit. The relative weakness and vulnerability of the ideal Taoist state can be construed as a theoretical challenge to the concepts of strength, size, power, and expansion that dominated the political thinking of Eastern Chou China.

Second, it is often assumed that the Taoist ideal is a raw primitivism wholly devoid of the conveniences of civilized society. This tribal style of life gives rise to practical doubts regarding health, sanitation, and life expectancy. But in the society depicted here, it is not that the people do not have modern conveniences—surely “boats and chariots” and “armor and weapons” are symbols of what is conventionally considered civilized society. Rather, their natural and unembellished style of living and, in particular, their uncontaminated system of values make labor-efficient devices and the notion of protection wholly unapplicable.

Finally, this ideal society is anarchic. Although it has a “government” which follows a policy of *wu-wei* (noncoercive activity) and broods over the people, treating “them all as infants,”²¹ this government is a natural condition and is nonauthoritarian.

We arrive, then, at a singularly important question in traditional commentary: is the political state recommended in the *Lao Tzu* characterized

by a popular and widespread realization of the *tao* by all the people, or is this Taoist enlightenment a characteristic of the ruler alone? Is the *Lao Tzu* a handbook on how to stupefy the people and achieve political control, or is the objective of the Taoist sage-ruler, like that of his Confucian counterpart, to lead his people toward their own fulfillment?

The ambiguity of the *Lao Tzu* is such that it can quite comfortably accommodate both interpretations. While the notion that the political philosophy of Lao Tzu is “purposive” has a wide following,²² the alternative interpretation—that the sage-ruler in his relationship to the people is analogous to the *tao* in its relationship to the myriad things—has the positive feature of establishing consistency between the metaphysics and the political philosophy of the text. In chapters 10 and 51 a similarly worded passage is used to describe the sage and the *tao* respectively. Neither the *tao* nor the sage-ruler is interested in control, possession, or the realization of some selfish end. Rather, their “purpose” is to provide the myriad things and the people with an environment and circumstances congenial to self-realization.²³

The *Lao Tzu* frequently uses metaphor in describing a human being’s uncontaminated nature, variously likening it to the “uncarved block,”²⁴ the innocence of a spewing infant,²⁵ and the seeming distance of a moron.²⁶ The original nature is a constant. Although its pristine simplicity has been smothered by layer upon layer of the “knowledge” and “desire” generated in a contrived and unnatural society, this encrustation of social norms, values, and conventional erudition can be pared away through a cultivation of the Taoist Way and a return to the beginning (*Lao Tzu* 48):

In pursuit of learning,
One daily expands his sphere of activity,
But in the pursuit of the *tao*
One must daily reduce it—
Reduce it and reduce it again
Until one attains a state of “nonactivity.”

We are all capable, then, of repudiating the distorting influences of civilization and recovering our original nature. While the simplicity and purity of human nature are constant inasmuch as they still exist and can be restored, it is the cultural tradition which stands between the potential of the ideal person and his actualization. Contrary to the *Analects*, the *Lao Tzu* literature idealizes antiquity not *because* of its culture but rather the lack of it. For Confucius, the transmission of the ancient culture which embodies and expresses human moral achievement is at the root of his pedagogic emphasis.

By contrast, the disdain which the *Lao Tzu* directs at this same culture leads to its insistence that one must unlearn conventional knowledge and reject all artificially established values before one can return to a natural and uncontaminated state. The cultural snowball which over the centuries has gathered around and given expression to the moral possibilities inherent in human nature is, to the Confucians, a source of intense pleasure and pride. For the *Lao Tzu* theorists, this cultural accumulation around one's original nature—this unnatural carving of the “uncarved block”—represents a real deterioration of the human condition. In Confucius' interpretation of history, culture is both beneficially cumulative and progressive; for the Taoists, it is harmfully cumulative and retrogressive. Again, where the Confucian tradition credits history with a positive element of cultural evolution, the *Lao Tzu* tradition sees only a devolutionary slippage from a past utopian lifestyle.²⁷

Although this discussion has been based on the antique utopia depicted in the *Lao Tzu* 80, the notion of historical decline is one of the most popular and consistent themes in this kind of early Taoist literature. There are elaborations on this same *Lao Tzu* description in the “Primitivist” portion of the *Chuang Tzu*.²⁸ In chapters 28 and 29 of the “Individualist” section of the *Chuang Tzu* text, there are also lengthy utopian passages. Again, beyond the Primitivist and Individualist areas of the *Chuang Tzu* the entire “Restoring the Original Nature” (*Shanhsing*) chapter, as the title implies, is devoted to a description of the corruption and fall of “natural” man.

SHANG YANG AND THE LEGALIST CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

From the preceding discussion of the Confucian and Taoist conceptions of history it is clear that both traditions look to an antique model as an example to which the modern person can in some sense aspire. The idealized representation of a golden age serves these schools both as a device for communicating their philosophical systems—an “educational aid,” as it were—and as a historical sanction to lend authority to their ideas. In the Legalist texts,²⁹ this notion of renaissance based on a past model is repudiated and an entirely new attitude toward the unfolding pattern of history is expounded.

Certainly the iconoclastic and antitraditional attitude of Legalist thought precludes any notion of reviving a past ideal. Historically speaking, the doctrines of this school contain a strong revolutionary element inasmuch as they construe the established order as the foremost obstacle to the successful implementation of the Legalist political program. The

Legalist principle of a universally applicable system of laws, for example, was a direct challenge to the hereditary privilege of the powerful families who had hitherto considered law as a personal device for controlling underlings and who saw themselves as being immune from such regulation. Moreover, the concept of “political purchase” (*shih*) and the various policies subsumed under the rubric “techniques of rulership” (*shu*), all of which were directed at checking the power vested in any one minister, were an affront to the ambitions of men who preferred to leave their political prospects open-ended. The policy of suppressing intellectuals and their rival doctrines raised the ire of the intelligentsia. The principle of limiting “merit” and its commensurate rewards and honors to agrarian and military accomplishments could only arouse resentment among the mercantile rich. In fact, that virtually all the vested interest groups stood to lose ground in the successful implementation of a Legalist regime is evidenced in the rise and sudden end of this school’s earliest powerful proponent, Shang Yang.³⁰

In Shang Yang’s ascent to power under the patronage of Duke Hsiao of Ch’in, he systematically siphoned the previously diffused powers of the old order into the central court, making Ch’in strong by consolidating its strength under one man. That Shang Yang had succeeded in offending every pocket of power in Ch’in is the essential message of his would-be mentor, Chao Liang: “Once the King of Ch’in, taking leave of his guests, no longer attends the court [that is, when he dies], the reasons for the state wanting to get hold of you are ample indeed! You will be dead in the bat of an eye!”³¹ In devising and effecting the Legalist system of government, Shang Yang created such powerful opposition that when Duke Hsiao, his single support, died, the taut spring of resentment snapped back on him like a mousetrap. Although Shang Yang himself fell victim in his campaign against the established order, his attitudes toward tradition, culture, and power-sharing were retained as an essential element in the doctrine which eventually led to the unification of China under Legalist rule.

Inasmuch as Legalist policies were new and revolutionary, they could not count on the authority and sanction of history. On the contrary, the traditional attitudes and the political precepts and values of the old order represented alternatives to their concept of “one standard” and unified rule—alternatives which could not be safely entertained. In the construction and operation of their political machine, the interference of traditional standards was intolerable and had to be eradicated. In disposing of these traditional attitudes, the Legalist theorists, rather than arguing against their intrinsic validity, quite cleverly devised a rational and very persuasive argument (*The Book of Lord Shang* 2/10b, p. 32):

The sage neither imitates antiquity nor follows³² the status quo. To imitate antiquity is to be behind the times; to follow the status quo is to be bogged down in the face of changing circumstances. The Chou did not imitate the Shang and the Hsia did not imitate the ways of Yü. These three ages were characterized by different circumstances and yet they were all able to rule the world.

The *Han Fei Tzu* 341:3 makes a similar point:

Therefore the sage deliberates on the size and shape of things, discusses them, and then administers his government accordingly. Thus where penalties are light it is not because of compassion and where punishments are severe it is not because of perversity. He simply carries them out as dictated by the demands of custom. Circumstances are determined by the age, therefore, and measures for dealing with things correspond to the circumstances.

The assertion that the intelligent ruler must make his political measures appropriate to the changing times is really the essence of the Legalist's conception of history. Different periods have different problems, and different problems require new and innovative solutions. Old principles of government, even when proved effective in their own historical context, are more than likely obsolete. And the primary concern of the ruler when carrying new political measures into effect has to be their successful implementation and efficacy (*Han Fei Tzu* 87:6): "Those who know nothing of proper government are certain to say: 'Don't change old ways! Don't alter regular practices!' As for changing or not changing, the sage is not interested. His only concern is proper government. This being so, whether or not he changes old ways or alters conventions depends on whether they will meet the present contingency."

Antiquity stretches across a long period of time, of course, and many different sage-rulers have used many different methods to maintain peace and stability in their respective times (*The Book of Lord Shang* 1/2a-b, pp. 3-4): "Kung-sun Yang said: 'Since previous ages have not shared the same doctrines, which 'ancients' do we imitate? Since these emperors and kings did not repeat those gone before, which social norms do we follow? . . . Therefore, I say, there is no one way to rule the world, and so long as something is expedient to the state, it need not be an imitation of antiquity.' "

In addition to the primary principle that political solutions must answer the times, the Legalist texts advance a secondary although less convincing argument against the use of an antique model. In the preceding discussion of Confucius' conception of history, one of his reasons for giving preference to the Chou model is because it remains clear and intact while the others have gradually eroded with the passage of time. Han Fei

Tzu goes one step further, suggesting that not only is the “orthodox” interpretation of these past models themselves the subject of constant wrangling, but even the “correct” understanding of their place in the teachings of Confucius himself has given rise to altercation among his followers (*Han Fei Tzu* 351:8):

Although Confucius and Mo Tzu both take their “Way” from Yao and Shun, what they take and what they discard is not the same, and yet both claim to represent the authentic Yao and Shun. Since Yao and Shun cannot be brought back from the dead, who is going to decide which of the Confucians and Mohists is right? From Yin and early Chou times it has been over seven hundred years, and the Shun era and Hsia dynasty go back more than two millennia. If we cannot determine who is right between Confucians and Mohists, how can we hope to be clear about the Way of Yao and Shun some three thousand years earlier!

Thus the Legalist thinkers insist that since historical models are open to subjective interpretation by their advocates, there is no objective standard on which to base acceptance or rejection of proposed policies. The models, or at least the modern versions of the models, are simply unreliable.

In the teachings of Confucius, we have seen that culture is regarded as cumulative and generally progressive, and inasmuch as it reflects past moral development, it is considered highly conducive to the continued growth of human kind’s moral nature. In the *Lao Tzu* tradition, this same culture is rejected as an unnatural interference in the growth and maturation of a person’s original nature. While the Legalists follow the Taoist school in rejecting culture, their motivation is to keep the people in a state of ignorance in order to impose their own exclusive and absolute standard of conduct. Unlike Confucius and the *Lao Tzu*, their purposes have nothing to do with cultivation of personal life or its societal implications. Rather, their concern is effective political control, and culture is rejected as inimical to this end.

Several recent Chinese scholars,³³ perhaps influenced by Ch’en Ch’i-t’ien’s analysis of Han Fei’s political doctrine,³⁴ suggest that in contrast to the Confucian devolutionary conception of history, the Legalists posit an evolutionary interpretation. Ch’en Ch’i-t’ien states:

Philosophy of history is a kind of attitude toward history. From the time when Huang Ti established the state down to the Warring States period, China already had more than two millennia of history. Each of the pre-Ch’in schools was dissatisfied with the conditions of the Ch’un-ch’iu and Warring States period. Because the viewpoints of their philosophies of history differed, however, there developed two main streams on how to reform

the conditions. The first stream considered that history is “devolving” and that to reform conditions we must simply imitate the ancients (*fa ku*). This stream is represented by the Confucian school. Their banner of “imitating the ancients” is “inherit and transmit the teachings of Yao and Shun, emulate and glorify those of Wen and Wu.” [From *Hitting the Mark in the Everyday (Chung-yung)* 30]

The other main stream considered that history is “evolving” and that to reform conditions we simply innovate. This stream is represented by the Legalist school. Their banner of “innovating” is “deliberate on the affairs of the age and make the necessary arrangements.” [From *Han Fei Tzu* 339:10]

This interpretation of the early Chinese philosophies of history is simplistic and, at best, misleading. While there is considerable support for the “imitating the ancients” (*fa ku*) principle as one aspect of Confucius’ interpretation of history, this assertion without substantial qualification does a great injustice to the progressive element in the Confucian position. In fact, the Confucian position properly understood is more evolutionary than devolutionary.

The Legalist theorists go to great lengths to insist that political measures have had to change as new problems have arisen. What is appropriate and successful under one set of circumstances is in all probability inappropriate to another. The Legalist attitude toward particular historical periods tends to be generally descriptive rather than critical and evaluating.³⁵ In any case, they refuse to attach value judgments to specific political solutions, always returning to the notion that a political solution is only as good as it is appropriate to its historical context. The policies of Yao and Shun, if applied today, would lead to certain disaster. Because the value of political measures can only be ascertained relative to the times, there can be no absolute good and the concept of evolution cannot be applied. In the Legalist conception of history, there is only change—change *without* progress or evolution.

THE HUAI NAN TZU’S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

Before turning to *The Art of Rulership’s* interpretation of history and attempting to place it in relation to these earlier traditions, it will be instructive to take a brief look at several of the other philosophies of history represented in the *Huai Nan Tzu* text as a whole. This excursion will provide additional examples of the essential differences underlying the Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist positions and demonstrate further the extent to which a creative syncretism is a characteristic to be reckoned with not only in *The Art of Rulership* but throughout the text.

The first two treatises of the *Huai Nan Tzu* are based on the *Lao Tzu* and the *Chuang Tzu* respectively.³⁶ It is therefore not unexpected that they both contain a fundamentally Taoist attitude toward historical change. There is, for example, a lengthy chronological account of deteriorating conditions in the world, from an ideal “age of superlative virtue” down to the decline of Chou, brought about by a gradual and increasing neglect of the original nature and the Way—deterioration from unity and oneness to plurality and distinction (2/8b–9b):

In the age of superlative virtue, man dozed contentedly in a realm of boundless vacuity and roamed about in a world of vast expanse; he dealt with the cosmos and abandoned the myriad things. With the Hung Meng plain as his sundial, he rambled freely on the border of the perimeterless. Thus the sage breathed the vapors of the *yin* and *yang*, and all the multifarious living things, reverently esteeming his virtue, were harmonious and compliant. At this time, with nothing superintending things, they all mysteriously unfolded and matured of their own accord. Chaotic and surging, the pure stuff of their natures had not yet separated. Coalescing as one organism, the myriad things abounded. Thus even if one had had the acumen of an Yi there would have been nowhere to apply it.³⁷

. . . By the time the House of Chou had fallen into decline, they had diluted their original stuff and squandered their natural substance. As they became estranged from the Way in their actions and put on the appearance of virtue in their conduct, the buds of cleverness and erudition began to sprout. When the House of Chou had declined and the Way of the True King had fallen into disuse, the Confucians and Mohists then began to formulate their Ways and debate over them, dividing up into factions and quarreling among themselves. Thereupon, studying a broad range of things, they mimicked the sages and used this tinsel and pretense to browbeat the people. Strumming, singing, drumming and dancing, and lacing their rhetoric with the *Book of Odes* and *Book of History*, they purchased a reputation from the world. They amplified the social graces obtaining among superiors and subordinates to the extent that an assemblage of the entire populace would still be unable to perform them in all their permutations and embellished ceremonial robes and caps to the extent that an accumulation of their wealth would be insufficient to defray the expenses. Thereupon people generally began to forget the proper path and lose their way, each wanting to apply his knowledge and craft to make his way in the world and stake out his reputation and fortune. Thus the people spilling everywhere like unchecked floodwaters lost their grip on the root of the Great Ancestor.

Book Eight, *The Fundamental Constancy (Pen-ching)*, is from beginning to end wholly given over to this Taoist notion of decline from a natural utopia. Like Book One, *Tracing the Tao (Yüan-tao)*, there is much here to compare with the *Lao Tzu*.³⁸ The departure from human kind's original nature gave rise to erudition, morality, artificial contrivances,

and all such components of modern civilization. As people became more and more estranged from their natural course of development, their society became correspondingly complex and artificially contrived. This spiral of human decline has led to the degradation of the present day. Of particular note in this treatise is its overt criticism of the current government. Not only does the author condemn this government for oppressive economic policies and its general abuse of the people but, further, he goes so far as to suggest that in ancient times, given a similar situation, the people would have moved against such tyranny (8/10b-11a):

In antiquity, the emperor had a territory one thousand *li* square and the various nobles had one hundred *li* square. Each maintained his allotment without encroaching on that of the others. When there was one among them who did not practice the Way of the True King, who on top of tyrannizing the people, contending over and seizing upon the territory of others, and setting the administration in chaos, would not come when summoned, would not carry out what was dictated, would not cease doing what was prohibited, and would not change his ways when instructed, they would mobilize their troops and punish him. They would execute the ruler, eradicate his faction, build tombs for his victims, sacrifice at the national shrine, and select a person from among his heirs to replace him.

A lengthy section of Book Six, *Perceiving the Imperceptible (Lan-ming)*, gives a chronological account, mainly descriptive, of the society with and without the Way (6/6a-9b). Nü Wa brought the Way to a land of fire, water, and predatory animals and transformed it by repairing the physical world and bringing peace and contentment to the inhabitants. The state of the people under the capable rule of Nü Wa is very Taoistic in tone (6/7a):

At this time the people lay down blankly and awoke in a daze. One moment they thought they were a horse and the next an ox. They tottered along and looked about bemused. With perfect genuineness they all attained a state of contentment, but none knew from whence it came. Drifting and wandering they had no idea what they were looking for; shrouded in shadows they did not know their destination.

From this antique highpoint of fulfillment and general contentment, conditions gradually worsened. Chieh of the Hsia having lost the Way caused havoc in the spheres of both man and nature. More recently, the age of the Seven States, similarly without the Way, is described as a period of war, human carnage, and degradation. All through the Three Dynasties (Hsia, Shang, and Chou) the people have suffered because of war and divisiveness. But with the present emperor (Wu Ti) on the throne, the whole world comes together to form one, and the Way of the Five Emperors of antiquity has been restored.

While the interpretation of history in *Perceiving the Imperceptible* (*Lan-ming*) generally conforms to the Taoist pattern of decline, it differs from *The Fundamental Constancy* (*Pen-ching*) account in two significant respects. First, while describing the contented people of high antiquity in unambiguously Taoist terms, *Perceiving the Imperceptible* does not share the enthusiasm of *The Fundamental Constancy* for repudiating Confucian virtues and values. It simply says nothing. Second, *The Fundamental Constancy* condemns the current government with considerable candor. In *Perceiving the Imperceptible*, this criticism is replaced with perhaps less honest but certainly more prudent adulation for Wu Ti and his restoration of the Way.

Book Eleven, *Equalizing Customs* (*Ch'i-su*), describes the decline from a state of pristine ignorance and spontaneous relationships—a decline characterized by the proliferation of Confucian virtues. These virtues are symptomatic of an age having lost the Way and the people having abandoned their infant bliss (11/1a-b):

Conducting oneself by following one's original nature is called the Way; acquiring one's heavenly endowment is called virtue. When one's original nature has been lost, he then esteems benevolence; when the Way has been lost, he then esteems rightness. For this reason, when benevolence and rightness are established, the Way and virtue have been supplanted; when social norms and music are set on display, the pure and the simple has dissipated; when right and wrong appear, the people are in a state of befuddlement; when pearls and jade are prized, the world is torn by contention. Generally, these four are innovations and instruments of a period in decline. Now, social norms are a means of differentiating the venerable from the lowly and the honorable from the base. Rightness is a means of harmonizing the relationships between sovereign and minister, father and son, elder and younger brother, husband and wife, and friend and friend. Since those who practice social norms in the present age boast reverence and respect while being injurious to others, and those who practice rightness boast generosity while placing others under obligation, the sovereign and ministers come to censure each other and those of the same flesh and blood harbor resentments about each other. These then are persons who have lost sight of the roots of social norms and rightness. Hence they are frequently condemned as dissemblers. Now, just as when water collects it gives rise to fishes which eat each other, and when earth is accumulated it gives rise to animals which dig themselves into it, when social norms and rightness are established, they give rise to hypocritical and deceitful persons. Now to blow on ashes and yet hope to avoid getting them in the eyes, or to wade across a river and yet hope to avoid getting wet—these are impossible expectations.

In antiquity the people were as ignorant as infant children. Their appearance did not go beyond their feelings; their words did not overstep their actions. Their clothing was only for the sake of warmth and was without

adornment; their weapons were dull and blunt and without a sharp edge; their songs were simply for the sake of pleasure and were free of complication; their crying was inspired by grief alone and was free of any contrived wailing. Digging out wells they drank from them; ploughing their fields they ate. Without any means of making their merits known, they did not seek after anything. Among family members there was no praise or blame; among friends there were no favors or resentment.

With the rise of social norms and rightness and the value which came to be placed on material wealth, deceit and hypocrisy sprouted and flourished, praise and condemnation became muddled, and resentment and the bestowal of favors became rife. Whereas this certainly gave rise to the merits of Tseng Ts'an and Hsiao Chi, it also spawned the wickedness of Tao Chih and Chuang Ch'iao.

Hence if there is the imperial carriage, the dragon banners, the feathered canopy, the dangling tassels of the headpiece, the team of four steeds, and the mounted escort, there will certainly be the wickedness of tunneling thieves, lockbreakers, grave robbers, and burglars. If there is fine brocade, embroidery, glossed silk, and sheer silk, there will certainly be thatch sandals, irregular footwear, and rough, tatty, and coarse garments. The fact that "high and low lean upon each other, short and long form each other" is very clear indeed.

Equalizing Customs follows the Taoist tradition in laying the blame for the fall on the gradual encrustation of culture which has coated and smothered man's original nature (11/4a-b):

If we examine man's original nature, that it is overgrown and polluted and does not achieve its clarity and brilliance is probably due to some external thing defiling it. When the babies of the Ch'iang, Ti, Po, and Ti are first born they all make the same sound. On their reaching maturity, we cannot communicate with them even given a team of interpreters because their education and customs are different. Now, if a three-month-old baby has been born in our country but then is moved to another, he will be unable to know his native customs. Viewing it from this perspective, clothing, social norms, and customs are not the original nature of man but are received from without. Now, the original nature of bamboo is that it floats; but if one splits it up into writing slips, bundles them up, and tosses them into the river, they will sink. This is because the bamboo has lost its original physical form. The original nature of man is free from depravity, but if he is steeped in customs over a long period of time, this will be changed. Changing and forgetting his origins, he is compromised by other natures. Thus, although the sun and moon want to shine brightly, the floating clouds obscure them; although the waters of the Yellow River want to be clear, silt and rocks pollute them; although human nature wants to be calm, passions and desires injure it. Only the sage is able to divorce himself from external things and return to himself.

Now, a person who loses his way on board a ship does not know which

direction is which, but on seeing the pole star his confusion is dispelled. The original nature, then, is the pole star of a human being. If one has a clear perception of his own self, he will not lose sight of the true nature of external things. If, however, he does not have this perception of himself, moving along with things he will become confused and disconcerted. This is just like swimming to the west of Lung Mountain—the more one kicks the faster he sinks.

Equalizing Customs states quite clearly that to realize the self is to realize the Way (11/7b):

To be enlightened does not mean seeing other things, but simply seeing oneself; to be discerning does not mean hearing other things, but simply hearing oneself; to be penetrating does not mean knowing other things, but simply knowing oneself. Therefore one's own person is that on which the Way depends. If one's own person is realized, then the Way is realized. If one realizes the Way, when he looks he is perspicacious, when he hears he is discerning, when he speaks he is heard everywhere, and when he acts he is followed.

The culture which obscures the true and original self has been developed by taking natural human sentiments and embellishing them with artificial customs and ceremonies. These customs and ceremonies become so elaborate that the link is lost between the natural emotion which originally gave rise to them and the customs themselves (11/6b):

In ancient times it was not that they did not know how to proliferate the ceremonies of the court or how to arrange themselves for the *ts'ai-ch'i* and the *ssu-hsia* music, but rather that they considered these to be a waste of time and a vexation to the people without being of any practical use. Thus they inaugurated ceremonies which were simply adequate to support the realities of the situation and express their basic meaning. In ancient times it was not that they were unable to set out the bells and drums in rows, to make an extensive display of flutes and pipes, to brandish shields and battle axes, and to wave streamers and banners, but rather that they considered these to waste resources and disrupt the political administration. Thus they composed music which was simply adequate to share their pleasure and make known their intentions. In ancient times³⁹ it was not that in funeral ceremonies they were unable to exhaust the nation, crush the people, empty their treasuries, and deplete their resources, placing pearls in the mouths of the dead, dressing them in garments of jade mail, and binding them with silk and braided ropes, but rather that they considered these to exhaust the people and interrupt the business of life without being of any particular benefit to the bleached bones and rotting flesh of the dead. Hence their burials were simply adequate to gather up and inter their dead.

Standing in stark contrast to the treatises that view history as a process of human decline are the Confucian-oriented sections of the text. These

treatises describe the historical development from primitive society to civilization with pride and an undisguised sense of achievement. Book Nineteen, *Striving with Effort (Hsiu-wu)*, describes this evolution in the following terms (19/1a–2a):

In antiquity, people fed on grass and drank water, gathered the fruits of trees and bushes, and ate the meat of wasps and clams. At this time there were frequent cases of illness and poisoning. Thereupon Shen Nung came and taught the people to sow the five grains and examine the congeniality of the ground—its irrigation, fertility, and contours. He tasted the flavors of the myriad plants and the sweetness of the spring water, enabling the people to know which to use and which to avoid. At this time, in a day Shen Nung would encounter seventy noxious plants.

Yao established the principles of filial piety, compassion, benevolence, and love and treated the people like his own sons and younger brothers. In the west he instructed the Yao people and in the east the Black Teeth people. To the north he gave a helping hand to the Yu-tu people; to the south he guided the people of the Chiao-chih. He exiled Huan Tou to Ch'ung-shan, banished the San-miao to San-wei, transported the minister of waterways to Yu-chou, and executed Kun at Yü-shan.

Shun built houses, erected walls, thatched roofs, cleared the land, and planted grains. He persuaded the people to abandon their cave dwellings and to have family houses. While marching a punitive expedition to the south against the San-miao, he died at Tsang-wu.

Yü, with the rain drenching him and the gales combing his hair, diverted the course of the Yangtze, led the flow of the Yellow River, dug out Lung Pass, and opened a passage through Yi-ch'üeh Mountain. He built dikes on the P'eng-li marshlands, made use of four kinds of vehicles, and, cutting back mountain forests, he brought the water and the land under control and stability to the eighteen hundred states.

T'ang arose early and retired late into the night to contribute his full powers to the tasks at hand, lightened the taxes and exactions to make the lives of the people more congenial, spread his virtue and magnanimity widely to relieve the poor and distressed, mourned the dead and asked about the sick in order to look after the orphaned and widowed. The people came to love him, and his policies and commands prevailed everywhere. Then marshaling his troops at Ming-t'iao and pursuing Chieh of Hsia to Nan-ch'ao, he called him to account for his crimes and banished him to Li-shan.

The single most significant factor in the transition from primitive squalor to sophisticated and comfortable civilization has been the careful accumulation and dispensation of knowledge through education (19/8a):⁴⁰

In ancient times Tsang Chieh devised the written word, Jung Ch'eng contrived the calendar, Hu Ts'ao developed clothing, Hou Chi originated domestic farming, Yi Ti created wine, and Hsi Chung invented the carriage. . . . Since the establishment of the House of Chou, there have been none

who could match the abilities of these six men, and yet all have continued to refine their contributions. How is it that these later people, not having the talents of even one of the six, have been able to understand the ways of these six outstanding men? It is because the teachings of the six have been continuously passed on and their knowledge and ability have been transmitted down to succeeding generations. If we look at it from this perspective, it is clear that learning cannot be dispensed with.⁴¹

Corollary to the importance of education is unrelenting effort in the pursuit of knowledge (19/9a):

Those who have not been able to reach this level live in quiet retreat, meditate, strum the zither, and read the ancients. They look back and examine antiquity; they study and debate with men of superior character and station, enjoying themselves day after day. They gather in the affairs of the world and differentiate white from black, beneficial from harmful. Weighing its feasibility, they determine whether or not a project is propitious. Setting up standards and rules, they can devise laws and regulations, investigate all aspects of the Way, and make an exhaustive study of the basic nature of affairs. They establish what is right, repudiate what is wrong, and then make it clear for posterity. On dying they pass on their work, and even while alive they have glory and reputation. This, then, is what man's ability is capable of attaining. That none are able to achieve this, however, is because, being indolent and idle, they are too much at leisure.⁴²

It is the combination of education and sustained effort which has been responsible for the ascent of mankind and progress in human society (19/9a-b): "Viewing it from this perspective, the moron who is fond of learning is better than an intelligent man who does not exert himself. There has never been a person from the ruler and ministers of state down to the ordinary people who has been successful without diligence. . . . Reputation can be made by hard work; achievement can be gained through diligence."

Perhaps the dominant theme of Book Thirteen, *Perennial Discussions* (*Fan-lun*), is that the attitudes and methods of government must change in response to the times (13/11b):

Therefore the sage, in contemplating the course of an affair, gears his response to the changes in external circumstances without applying any fixed standard. At times advancing and at times retreating, he is soft and pliant like a reed and yet it is not from fear or faintheartedness; he is firm, strong, and formidable and his determination reaches the skies, and yet it is not boastfulness or vanity. In all cases he takes the tide and responds to change.⁴³

While both Legalist and Confucian conceptions of history accept this principle that customs and culture must change to meet new circumstances, the amoralistic Legalist doctrine is profoundly uninterested in the Confucian conviction that the ultimate meaning of human existence lies in creative moral achievement. *Perennial Discussions* gives clear voice to this Confucian commitment (13/4a–b):

Thus the path which the sage follows is called “the Way”; what he does is called his “affairs.” The Way is like the percussion instruments—once tuned they do not change. Affairs are like the zither and lute—each time you string them, they need tuning. Therefore laws and social norms are the tools of government, but they are not that on which government is based. Thus it is that benevolence and rightness constitute the framework. These have been unchanging for all time.

Again, it is the welfare of the people rather than a mechanical devotion to convention which is the foremost concern of good government (13/3a):

If the regulations of the former kings are not suitable, put them aside. If something of recent times works out well, make use of it. It is for this reason that there has never been anything constant in social norms and music. Thus the sage controls social norms and music rather than being controlled by them. There is something constant in the governing of a state, the basis of which is benefiting the people; there is a regular pattern in political instruction and education, the most important element of which is the carrying of orders into practice. If something is beneficial to the people, it need not be in imitation of the ancients; if something always works out well, it need not be consistent with established practices.

Although the conception of history expounded in *Perennial Discussions* shares the Legalist principle of changing the methodology of government to accommodate the times and contains many allusions to Legalist texts,⁴⁴ in its essential concern for the welfare of the people it is unquestionably closer to the Confucian position. True to the spirit of Han eclecticism, even the Taoist philosophy of history does not go unrepresented in this one treatise (13/3a–b):

The various streams while having different sources all pour into the sea; the various philosophies while pursuing different aims all address themselves to proper order. When the Way of the True King was wanting, the *Odes* arose; when the House of Chou was in decline and social norms were degenerate, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un-ch'iu*) arose. While the *Odes* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* are masterpieces of literature, they are both the compilations of degenerate ages. The Confucians on the basis of these works instruct and guide in the world, and yet how can they compare with the

heights of the Three Dynasties! If, taking the *Odes* and *Spring and Autumn Annals* as the Way of the ancients, we are to esteem them, what about the time prior to their compilation! It is better to take the Way when it was whole rather than when it was incomplete. Hearing the actual words of the former kings is better than reciting their odes and writings. And realizing what is behind the words is better than hearing their words. What is behind the words, however, cannot be articulated. Thus “the Way which can be spoken of is not the constant Way.”

This survey of the several interpretations of historical change to be found in the *Huai Nan Tzu* underscores the composite nature of the text and illustrates the degree to which traditionally disparate doctrines have been brought together and reworked. As a result the text is at the same time syncretic and original. The spirit of bringing together the old to fashion the new, perhaps the most striking feature of *The Art of Rulership*'s entire political philosophy, can be seen in these interpretations of historical change.

THE ART OF RULERSHIP'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

There are treatises in the *Huai Nan Tzu* anthology—*The Fundamental Constancy (Pen-ching)*, for example—that are devoted almost entirely to an exposition on historical change. *The Art of Rulership* is not one of these. It is devoted to a statement of political theory and in fact concerns itself with history only to the extent that historical examples can be used to illustrate general principles of government. It would be a distortion to say that the philosophy of history which *The Art of Rulership* expounds in the course of outlining its political theory is one of its more conspicuous features. Even so, a careful examination of relevant passages can provide important insights into the author's attitude toward historical change, insights that help to reveal the sources and orientation of his political philosophy.

In discussing the process of historical change and comparing the past with the present, *The Art of Rulership* combines elements that we have found characteristic of the Taoist and Confucian philosophies of history. The outstanding feature of the Taoist interpretation of history—the notion of decline from an ancient and primitive ideal—is present in the chapter from the outset. In the following passage a contrast is drawn between the idyllic rule of Shen Nung and the degenerate government of recent times—a contrast that is reminiscent of the strongly Taoistic portions of the *Huai Nan Tzu* text, notably the *Tracing the Tao (Yüan-tao)*, *The Beginning Reality (Ch'u-chen)*, and *The Fundamental Constancy (Pen-ching)* treatises (9/1b-2a):

In ancient times when Shen Nung governed the world, his spirit did not gallop out from his breast, his wisdom did not extend beyond the four directions, and he cherished the benevolent and sincere mind. The sweet rains fell at the proper time and the five grains flourished. In spring they would sprout forth, in summer they would grow, in autumn they would be harvested, in winter they would be stored up. With monthly examinations and seasonal evaluations, at the year's end the record of accomplishments would be offered up, and tasting the grain at the proper season, sacrifice would be made in the Ming T'ang. . . .

His intimidating presence was awesome yet not put to the test, punishments were there yet he did not have to invoke them, and his laws were few in number and not overwhelming. Hence his transformation of the people was godlike. In his territory stretching from Chiao-chih in the south to Yutu in the north, T'ang-ku in the east and San-wei in the west, there was no one who would not submit to his rule. At this time the laws were liberal, the punishments were tolerant, and the prisons were empty. The world was one in custom and none were of a wicked mind.

The government in a declining age is a different matter: those above are fond of taking without any conception of proper limit while subordinates are self-assertive and wholly given over to avarice. The people, impoverished and distressed, contend angrily, and working themselves to the bone, never achieve anything. Cleverness and deception sprout forth, bandits and thieves are increasingly evident, ill-will appears between superiors and subordinates, and edicts and orders are not implemented.

The authorities do not devote their efforts to returning to the right path. Going against the roots, they cultivate the nonessentials; cutting back on their bounty, they increase their punishments. And yet by doing such things they are trying to establish proper order! This is no different from holding a catapult and hoping to attract a bird, or wielding a cane to tame a dog. It will just make matters worse.

Yao too represents an ideal government of antiquity. The description of an orderly world under a sage-king is contrasted with the decline of more recent times (9/10b-11a):

In accepting the empire it was not as if Yao coveted the wealth of the myriad peoples or the ease of being ruler. Seeing that the common people struggled among themselves, the strong dominating the weak and the many oppressing the few, Yao then personally comported himself in accordance with moderation and frugality, and elucidating the virtue of mutual love he brought the people together in harmony. Thus it was that his roofing thatch was not trimmed, his rafters were not cut and finished, his royal carriage was not ornamented, his mats were not hemmed, his pottage was not seasoned, and his grain was not polished. Going on his royal progress and spreading his guidance, he labored assiduously in the empire and traveled to each of the five sacred peaks. Surely it was not that the lifestyle of the emperor would be

anything but enjoyable but that he took the whole empire for the sake of the empire and not because he derived any personal benefit from it. When he became old and weary and abdicated in favor of Shun, it was just like stepping back and kicking off his sandals.

When the age is in decline, however, it is a different matter. The ruler, having once gained the wealth of possessing the empire and having occupied the purchase attendant upon his position, will then exhaust the energies of the common people in catering to his own desires. His mind is wholly preoccupied with buildings, pavilions, ponds, gardens, ferocious animals, precious stones, and exotic objects. Consequently, the poor people do not even have husks and chaff to eat and yet the tigers, wolves, and bear fill themselves on fine meats; the common people are sparsely clothed in coarse rags and yet palaces and halls are draped with silk and embroidery. The ruler gives priority to those undertakings which serve no useful purpose, and the people of the empire become haggard and gaunt. Thus it is that he causes the people of the empire to become discontented with their lot in life.

In *The Art of Rulership*, one repeatedly encounters two features: a contrast drawn between the ideal ruler and his decadent counterpart⁴⁵ and adulation for the contributions and competent administration of former kings.⁴⁶ The early period in which the ancients ruled the world is generally depicted with admiration as an age of enlightened government (9/20a):

Of old, when the emperor would hold court, the high ministers would proffer honest admonition, the learned scholars would chant the odes, the music masters would sing their criticisms, the common people would communicate their opinions, the court historians would chronicle errors in judgment, and the court chefs would reduce the number of dishes at meals, but still this was not considered enough. Thus Yao set up a drum for those offering bold admonition, Shun established a notice board for criticisms, T'ang instituted an independent judicial authority, and King Wu provided a small drum to forewarn him against rashness. Before an error could show itself there was already a safeguard against it.

Although *The Art of Rulership* expounds a devolutionary theory of history consistent with the Taoist tradition, this doctrine of decline has been so modified by the introduction of Confucian attitudes that its interpretation can only be described as syncretic. In discussing the early Taoist and Confucian conceptions of history we have seen that their conflicting attitudes toward culture mark a sharp divergence between the two schools of thought. While the Taoists pointed to the accumulation of culture and the development of civilization as the essential cause of social decline, the Confucians regarded this same culture as the expression of moral achievements and its transmission as the essential impetus behind

social progress. *The Art of Rulership*, far from rejecting cultural heritage, singles out rulers of antiquity and praises them for their ability to influence both their own times and the subsequent course of history through their efforts in personal cultivation. These rulers, for example, developed music and ceremony in order to represent their innermost feelings (9/17b):

The ruler of antiquity was concerned about the hardships of his subjects to the extent that if there were people starving in his state, at each meal he would have only one single dish, and if there were people freezing in winter he would not attire himself in fur garments. Only when the harvest was good and the people had plenty would he then set up the bells and drums and display the shields and axes, and with ruler and subject, superior and subordinate, all enjoying these together, there was no sorrowful person left in the whole state.

The use of metal, stone, pipes, and strings by the ancients was to express their joy. Weapons, armor, battleaxes, and broadaxes were to give a more polished expression to their anger. The ceremonies of libations and offerings were to represent their gladness. Funeral garments and sedge footwear, beating of the breast, and weeping were to demonstrate their grief. These are all instances of the general truth that what fills one inside will be given formal expression outside.

The substance of their personal cultivation was formalized as social norms and music, and these have been transmitted as a cultural legacy from ancient times (9/4a):

With the sage-kings of antiquity, when the most essential vapors were embodied within, likes and dislikes did not lie on the outside. Their words were spoken to express what was truly on their minds and they issued commands to show their purposes. Setting these out in social norms and music and recounting them in song and verse, their deeds have been known to each succeeding generation and have spread to every corner of the world. They could even shape and transform birds, beasts, and insects. How much more so could they administer the law and implement edicts.⁴⁷

It is this cultural heritage which is most efficacious in transforming the people and achieving enlightened government. While *The Art of Rulership's* devolutionary theory of history might be associated with the Taoist writings, the respect for traditional culture as a formal representation of ancient moral values is an ingredient which can only be traced to the Confucian camp. In this treatise, the ancients are exalted not for maintaining a village utopia but for their innovative contributions to human civilization.

In *The Art of Rulership*—a treatise which superficially appears to

describe a Legalist system of political control—the Legalist interpretation of historical change is not represented. There is no portion of the text which conveys the Legalist rejection of historical examples as irrelevant or its insistence that new problems require new solutions. Rather, the conception of history is basically a Taoist devolutionary theory modified by a thoroughgoing respect for the cultural contributions of past eras. These two seemingly conflicting positions are reconciled in the suggestion that the deterioration of the human condition is the result of a failure to appreciate the substance and spirit behind the institutions which fortify human society. Above all it has been the failure of the ruler, the hinge between political order and chaos, to master the art of rulership and thereby realize the Way of the True King that has led to this unfortunate result.

At the outset of this chapter, I suggested that by examining the way in which representative philosophers of the Confucian, Taoist, and Legalist schools construe historical tradition it would be possible to discover their fundamental philosophical concerns. From the attitudes of Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Shang Yang, therefore, certain characterizations may be drawn.

Confucius, for example, begins from a positive conception of human nature and takes as his major concern a method for pursuing universal self-realization. The metaphysical ground which can be reconstructed from the *Analects* and which informs the organismic structure of Confucius' philosophical system serves one primary project: the personal, social, and political attainment of the *tao*. Importance is invested in the creative moral achievement of personhood by first disciplining oneself in the formal structures of the cultural tradition and then seeking rightness in the uniqueness of one's own situation. It is significant that for Confucius natural action is fundamentally moral and, moreover, that the achievement of this rightness integrates human being in a harmonious universe.

Lao Tzu similarly begins from a positive conception of human nature and takes as his major concern a method for pursuing universal self-realization. The conceptual structure that can be generated from the *Lao Tzu* serves the ideal of universal self-realization: the personal, social, and political attainment of the *tao*. Importance for Lao Tzu is invested in the creative achievement of personhood by first disciplining oneself in the natural functions of the cosmos and then expressing just-so-ness in the uniqueness of one's own situation. For Lao Tzu, the inherited cultural tradition is an artificial encumbrance that distracts people and distorts their natural expression. Natural human action, on the other hand, is coextensive with the natural operations of the cosmos.

Shang Yang and the Legalists generally have little interest in fundamental philosophical concerns such as human nature and its potential for self-realization beyond those insights that can be turned to account in pursuing the ruler's purposes of political control. The cultural tradition is similarly interpreted only to the extent that it can serve this political end. Importance for the Legalists is invested entirely in the construction of a political apparatus that will enable the ruler to effect and sustain his totalitarian control.

Thus *The Art of Rulership's* interpretation of history is basically a synthesis grounded in the Confucian-Taoist concern for universal self-realization. History, then, is evaluated by determining the extent to which it has been conducive to this end. In the chapters that follow, I explore the fundamental ideas that structure *The Art of Rulership's* political philosophy. From the analyses of these concepts, and from the integrated picture that emerges out of their juxtaposition, it will become clear that the fundamental concern sustaining this political treatise is universal self-realization based on a positive conception of human nature. If this conclusion is in fact correct, it means that although there are certainly Legalistic characteristics in the presentation of this political philosophy, at a fundamental level it shares a common ground with the Confucian and Taoist traditions.