

# The Sage in Chinese Tradition: Wisdom and Virtue Personified

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## *Introduction*

The Sage (*sheng-jen* 聖人) is the Chinese symbol for a perfected human being with penetrating wisdom and all-embracing benevolence. The Confucian school adopted the ancient ideal of the Sage-king (*sheng-wang* 聖王), which appeared in *The Book of Odes* and *The Book of Documents*, and made it a universal ideal for every human being. The Taoist school interpreted the Sage as the person of *Tao* 道 who embodies non-action (*wu-wei* 無為) and thereby participates in the transforming work of *Tao*, the Taoists also used peculiarly Taoistic terms such as the true person (*chen-jen* 真人), the spiritual person (*shen-jen* 神人), the perfect person (*chih-jen* 至人) and the immortal person (*hsien-jen* 仙人). This is well shown in Chuang Tzu and Tao Hung-ching (陶弘景, 456-536), those two uniquely Taoistic characters. Actually in Lao Tzu it is 'the Sage' which is used consistently. Confucian terms such as the noble person (*chün-tze* 君子), the superior person (*hsien-che* 賢者) and the scholar (*shih* 士) are also subsidiary terms to signify people who have reached the lower stages of sagehood.

Even Chinese Buddhists adopted the symbolism of the Sage when they attempted to translate the notion of Buddhas and Bodisattvas. This adoption is clearly seen in Seng-chao's (僧肇 ca. 374-414) commentary on the *Vimalakirtinirdesa*. When the famous translator Kumarajiva translated the text in 406, Seng-chao held the brush and composed the Chinese text. When Seng-chao later wrote his own commentary on this sutra, he not only emphasized the original theme of the sutra, i.e., the Absolute cannot be known and the Bodisattva is not attached either to

samsāra or to nirvāna, but absorbed the Chinese concept of the Sage as well. In fact, in Seng-chao's mind the Bodhisattva and the Sage were the same: "Therefore, though the Sage is in reality, yet, in illusion, we enjoy the full benefit of his benign rule: without leaving the Supramundane realm the Sage is ever aware of what happens to us. This means that he belongs to existence and non-existence simultaneously and is never separated from either of them" (*The Book of Chao*, pp.107-8). While preserving the traditional image of the Sage, Seng-chao enriched its meaning by his inclusion of Buddhist enlightenment.

In this short article, however, I will not discuss the Buddhist view of the Sage. Rather I will focus my presentation on the two native traditions that represent Chinese insights on wisdom and virtue i.e., Confucianism and Taoism.

### *The Confucian Sage*

When one of his disciples Fan Ch'ih (樊遲) asks about benevolence (仁) and wisdom (知), Confucius answers in Analects 12:22: "Love others" (愛人) and "Know others" (知人). The identical questions are repeated by the same disciple in Analects 6:22, but here Confucius' answers are richer and more direct. Confucius explains that in order to love others one has to face the difficulty of overcoming selfish desires. In other words, only after cultivating oneself, can a person give peace to others (修己安人, 14:42). Confucius says that knowing others is wisdom, for one has to perceive the worthiness of other people correctly in order to place the right person in the proper place. Moreover, keeping the right distance according to propriety both in human relationships and with the spirits is an essential part of the right ordering of society.

For Confucius, therefore, wisdom is not just an accumulation of much knowledge. He made known to his disciples that there is one single thread binding the way together (一以貫之, 4:15). Because this single thread is loyalty to oneself (忠) and extension of this loyalty to others (恕), which is the main method to attain benevolence (仁之方, 6:30), in fact wisdom is nothing but knowing the way of benevolence (仁之道). Therefore it is not surprising that two poles, consisting of the way of benevolence, knowing and practicing the transmitted propriety (知禮, 3:22; 7:31) and knowing and accepting the mandate of Heaven (知天命, 2:4; 16:8; 3:11) comprise

the constitutive structure of wisdom in the Analects. In a word, wisdom is for the attainment of benevolence and in reality forms a part of benevolence. This exhibits the practical and moral character of wisdom in the Confucian tradition.

Since the way of benevolence is not visible, it has to be embodied in a concrete human person. The Sage is the best embodiment of benevolence for Confucius (Analects 6:30; 7:34 etc.), even though much more frequently he presents the image of the noble person (君子) as a sojourner on the way toward benevolence. Confucius urges everyone to cultivate benevolence because people are all born with moral virtue (*te* 德) endowed from Heaven (Analects 7:23). This conviction of Confucius is theoretically systematized by Mencius in his theory of the four starting-points of the human heart (四端, Mencius 2A:16; 6A:6). And it was Mencius who not only popularized the image of the Sage but exalted Confucius as the Sage par excellence. Mencius commented that Confucius truly embodied all the necessary qualities of the Sage, integrity (清), harmony with others (和), taking responsibility (任), and timeliness (時). Actually the timeliness of sagehood (聖之時者, 5A:40; 5B:1; 6A:8) synthesizes the other qualities and makes a person able to discern when to proceed and when to withdraw. Timeliness or Timely Mean (時中) is the epitome of Confucian virtue because it requires both wisdom and virtue; wisdom leads a person in the right direction, while virtue offers strength to continue and reach the goal.

Hsün Tzu offers a progressive pattern of human maturity: the Scholar (士)-the Noble person (君子)-the Sage (聖人). Hsün Tzu describes the Sage as one whose emotions are stabilized in propriety and whose wisdom is as bright as his teacher's (chap, 2). Again virtue and wisdom are intimately related in the formation of the Sage. Hsün Tzu's unique contribution to the image of the Sage is his emphasis on cultural propriety. Culture is an integral part of human perfection in Confucianism, for it is conceived as the carriage through which the command of Heaven is transmitted. Hsün Tzu presents the concept of the Triad (三才), Heaven, Earth, and the Human, and links them with the concept of the Sage: "Heaven has its time and so it is able to give birth to all things; Earth has its riches, so it is able to rear them; people have their rule and so they perfect what Heaven and Earth started" (chaps, 17:19). The Sage's participation in the nurturing works of the Triad is further developed in the Commentaries to the *I Ching* (易經) and later developments of Confucianism.

Chu Hsi (朱熹, 1130-1200), who elevated the concept of benevolence from the benevolent practice of life to a universal principle of the universe, presents the Sage as the very embodiment of the principle of Heaven (天理):

The Sage is truly a man who has become one with the law (of Heaven); he has become one with Heaven (Yu lei 61). The Sage is nothing but a piece of the principle of Heaven (Yu lei 61). The Sage is nothing but a piece of the principle of Heaven standing in blood and bones (Yu lei 31).

As the living personification of the principle of Heaven the Sage is able to help everything to grow as it is destined to be and thereby completes the works of Heaven and Earth. In spite of this unity, however, there is one distinction between the Sage and Heaven in their performances of transformation; the former works with heart (有心), the latter, without heart (無心).

The relationship between sagehood and kingship is subtly handled in Chu Hsi. The Classical image of the Sage was the ideal king, exemplified in Yao and Shun. But the Confucian Sage is not identified with the Sage-king; rather the ruler should employ Sage-like officials. The Sage and the king may co-incide in one person, which will bring about the ideal society of great peace. However, by the Sung period people were well aware that in fact, this seldom happens. As the universal appeal for sagehood has been recovered by the Neo-Confucians, Confucius and Yen-hui became the two favorite examples.

The stages toward sagehood which Hsün tzu first formulated were also revived by the Neo-Confucian scholars. Chou Tun-i writes: "The Sage looks up to Heaven; the worthy man (賢) looks up to the Sage; the scholar (士) looks up to the worthy man" (Complete works, p.145). Chu Hsi adds here two more steps: the ordinary person, the scholar, the worthy person, the noble person, and the Sage. Moreover, Chu hsi places three historical figures. Confucius, Yen-hui, and Mencius at three different levels: Confucius is the Sage par excellence; Yen-hui is near to the Sage, i. e., the Noble Person; Mencius belongs to the scholar or at best the worthy person. Chu Hsi's judgment on Mencius and Yen-hui offers a hint as to what kind of personality he had in mind for the Sage. Yen-hui's constant effort to practice the way of benevolence was the perfect model for Chu Hsi.

As Chu Hsi repeats, it is difficult to become a Sage and so one should place all his energy into doing it: "Even the Sage (Confucius) worried;

how much more a scholar should (take it to heart)?” (*Comm. to the Analect* 4:16). Chu Hsi emphasized the importance of effort, for he realized the duality of knowing and doing in human life: “To understand humanity and to make it a part of oneself are two different things. To understand it is to know it, and to make it a part of oneself is to possess it” (Yü lei 95). For the actual practice, Chu Hsi recommended a traditional Confucian method, i.e., extension from what is near (filial piety and brotherly respect) to the far (fulfilling one’s mandate). Consequently, Chu Hsi even warned his students not to make the Sage into a kind of target that one is anxious to attain. Even the highest goal, the Sage itself, can become a hindrance in the true progress of one’s life. Chu Hsi’s investigation of things becomes important, for investigation of things is in the end the same as extending one’s nature by knowing one’s mandate (*ming* 命) from Heaven.

Chu Hsi’s delicate and well-structured image of the Sage has continued to live in the hearts of earnest Confucian scholars. Though the rigorous method and duality of knowledge and action which Chu Hsi presented were attacked by the Lu-Wang School, the symbol of the Sage as the personification of the Principle of Heaven has remained in Confucian tradition.

### *The Taoist Sage*

Since the *Tao* (道) cannot be defined with words, it is mainly through the figure of the Sage that the qualities of the *Tao* are portrayed. The concluding chapter of *Lao Tzu* makes a parallel between the way of Heaven and the way of the Sage: “The way of Heaven (天之道) benefits and does not harm; the way of the Sage (聖人之道) is bountiful and does not contend” (chap. 81). The Sage follows and takes over all the characteristics of the *Tao*, i.e., nurturing without words, and saving all people without partiality or self-interest. It is interesting to note that Lao Tzu’s Sage does not look intelligent but rather stupid and blockish. Lao Tzu says that he is like a baby that has not yet learned to smile (chap. 20).

The concept of knowledge in Taoist tradition is dynamic in its initial negation, and its subsequent elevation, of knowledge to a high level. Chuang Tzu divides wisdom into two categories; the small knowledge (小知) that distinguishes according to social standards and the great knowledge (大知) that follows the primal non-distinction of the *Tao*. One has to relativize the ordinary differentiation between the beautiful and the

ugly, the good and the bad in order to acquire the naturalness of the *Tao*.

Therefore Lao Tzu commented that only those capable of not knowing anything restore people to their original naturalness (chaps. 3, 20). This kind of not-knowing brings a higher stage of wisdom. Lao Tzu uses two antithetical terms, knowledge (*chih* 智) and enlightenment (*ming* 明), to signify the ordinary knowledge and knowing the *Tao*. since the *Tao* is innate in human nature, knowing oneself is the key to this kind of enlightenment: “he who knows others is clever (*chih*); He who knows himself has discernment (*ming*)” (chap. 33). To know oneself, is to understand what is constant, i.e., *Tao* within the self (chap. 55). Therefore the Sage knows the entire world without going outside.

The Sage in Chuang Tzu also has a foolish look, makes no attempt to leave a name, to achieve anything or realize self. A unique characteristic of the Sage in Chuang Tzu is playfulness (遊) or carefreeness. While Lao Tzu’s Sage is serious and participates in the suffering of people, Chuang Tzu’s Sage enjoys playfully the natural transformations of the universe. If Lao Tzu talks about the lastingness of the Sage, Chuang Tzu’s Sage transcends both life and death, and enjoys complete freedom from all attachments. However Chuang Tzu’s methods of cultivation, such as the “fasting of the mind” (心齋) and “sitting down and forgetting” (坐忘), show that the same total commitment and effort are needed to empty oneself as in other religious pursuits.

In a word, the Taoist Sage is a person of non-action (*wu-wei*) who negates all socially recognized values such as riches, beauty, success, good name, and propriety in the search for the absolute value/norm that embraces both the poor and the rich, the ugly and the beautiful, the bad and the good. In other words, the Taoist Sage aims at an equal society where everyone is accepted without differentiation and all live in peace. This Taoist social ideal is probably most concretely formulated in *the Classic of Great Peace* (太平經), written in the second century C.E. by the first religious sect of Taoism, which continues to provide social ideals for both rebellions and political stability.

### *Conclusion*

The image of the Sage in china and East Asian culture has had paramount importance because the way of Heaven is conceived of as silent (天道無言). Since Heaven does not speak or give orders directly, people have to look at the examples and teachings of the Sages in order to know and

practice the mandate of Heaven. Both ancient Sage-kings and contemporary Sages embody one and the same principle. Hsün Tzu preferred contemporary Sages, for they are nearer to us and so easier to follow. The moral and social influence which Confucian and Taoist traditions attributed to the Sage is idealistically high. In short, a human community cannot be formed or maintained without the Sage, the very embodiment of truth, order, and humanity. This humanistic concentration on the Chinese Sage is perhaps a most distinctive character in comparison to the Jewish righteous person or Christian saint who always are seen as servants of a personal God, who is revealed through historical events.

Secondly, in the Chinese image of the Sage, poetic quality is usually subsidiary to moral quality. Wisdom is needed to be a Sage, but it has to be purified from secular values of riches, fame, power, and beauty. Ordinary knowledge and differentiation of values are challenged by the way of benevolence and the *Tao*. A similar negation or challenge can be seen in the prophetic condemnations by the prophets of Israel as well as in the beatitudes of Gospel. Poetic quality has to be transformed by the fear or love of God or total commitment to the *Tao*. Through this transformation, wisdom is incorporated into the moral formation of a person or a society. Therefore the Sage is a person who not only understands the way but has acquired it by moral cultivation. The righteous person and the saint are the same, except for the active role God plays in their transformation.

Thirdly, the concept of mandate holds the most religious character in the symbolism of the Sage. At first glance the Confucian Sage seems to be a self-made person with cultural help through education. But when we look in depth, the Sage's virtue is originally given by Heaven and their calling in life as well as all their success and failure, sickness and death are considered as the command of Heaven (天命). Therefore, a person cannot become a noble person or a Sage without knowing the command of Heaven. Even the Taoist Sage is said to be delivered and compassionately protected by Heaven (*Lao Tzu* chap. 67). Heaven or *Tao* is closely related to the life of Confucius, Chu Hsi, Lao tzu and Chuang Tzu. Here lies the biggest difference as well as common point between the Jewish and Christian understanding of the human relationship with God and Chinese understanding. In Jewish and Christian traditions, the righteous and the saint are seen as chosen and most favored by God; but in Chinese tradition the Sage just participates in Heaven or *Tao* that works without heart. In spite of these different conceptions of divine-human relationship,

however, we can perceive one converging point that the relationship between the human and the Absolute is fundamental.

Because of its strong emphasis on what is human, the East Asian insight and symbolism of the Sage should be much more appealing to our contemporary age. But it needs to be clarified and modernized in order to show its original shape which Confucius and Lao Tzu presented. The way of benevolence and the way of Heaven have to regain their proper position, if the authenticity of the Sage is to be safeguarded.