Notes toward a Comparative Study of the Concept Skill in Mencius 5B:1.7 and Its Implications for Self-Culture

Allan W. Anderson

San Diego State University

(Submitted to the Berkeley Regional Seminar in Confucian Studies, First Workshop, January 9-10, 1976)

(This is work in progress; it is not to be reproduced without permission.)

Mencius employs the concept Ch'iao, skill, in 5B :1.7 in the context of a multiple analogy.[1] He resorts to this rhetorical device in an effort to communicate two great virtues of Confucius, timeliness and self-fulfillment. The analogy implies that these two virtues are coordinately related. Mencius calls Confucius a complete musical concert during which all constituent and contributing elements are integrally related - an image of wholeness; as qualified by the character ch'eng, maturity (complete, in the sense of full flowering of potentialities), it suggests the man mature enough to bear arms and to act decisively. The times to begin and end the performance are also integral to the whole event. The ability to determine these correctly is a mark of timeliness, the parts of which virtue appear to be 1) wisdom to begin the harmony; and 2) sageness for terminating it.

Mencius likens chih, wisdom, to ch'iao, skill; and sheng, sageness, to li, strength. When aiming at a target, he says, one reaches it through his strength; but it is not through his strength that he hits the mark. In sum, the wisdom to begin the harmony is like skill and the sageness to conclude it is like strength.

This structure represents a dialectic of the will. When grasped correctly, decision-making comprises two 'moments' intemporally related: 1)discernment sufficient to determine the favorable opportunity and 2) the strength and staying power to seize and embrace it (2A:1.9). Strictly speaking, both these 'moments' are compresent in effective decision whether one decides to begin an activity or

or conclude it. An examination of the elements in Mencius' analogy will show this. It will appear that self-unification is the prerequisite for attaining to timeliness while, on the other hand, timeliness is the indispensable condition on which self-unification is based. Since the concepts involved in Mencius' analogy are dialectically related they are best studied in terms of their polarities: wisdom/sageness; beginning/ending; skill/strength. Against that background any one of the six concepts can be brought forward for particular examination. The following notes are in support of such a focus on the role of skill in self-culture.

> Chih, wisdom: Mencius observes that wisdom and discernment are not like embracing the favorable opportunity (2A:1.9). Wisdom as prudence is needed in a prince of a small country when serving a large one (1B:3.1). To learn without satiety is wisdom. Sufficient wisdom is needed to know the sage (2A:2.19,25). Wisdom discerns the need to choose freely benevolence and failing to do so is a sign of not being wise (2A:7.2). It is rooted in the heart of the chün tzu and if one would excell in gaining wisdom he must make a pure act of attention (7A:21.4 and 6A:9.3 respectively). That one requires sufficient wisdom to know the sage perhaps implies a power both to recognize and to understand him - at least in some degree.
>
> I was unable to find 智, chih, in the Book of Changes (text, Z. D. Sung) but 知, chih, only. Neither Legge nor Wilhelm is averse to translating 知, 'wisdom', in certain passages. Its use throughout the Ta Chuan indicates the following associations: 1) precognition (1.10.2); precognition or foreknowledge associated with immediate action (2.5.11); penetration to the important aspects of surviving and perishing (2.9.4) and the circumstances of the dark and the light, death and birth according to their cycle (1.4.2); the wise see Tao's movement and call it wisdom - literally, perhaps, wisdom recognizes itself in wisdom - (1.5.3); 2) wisdom oonfers loftiness of viewpoint (1.7.1) through wisdom the sages stored up the past, i.e., consciously funded experience (1.11.2); 3) sages discern the

processes of transformation (2.5.4); whoever knows the tao of change understands spiritual activity (1.9.10); 4) ch'ien knows the great beginnings - when things are germinal (1.1.5) and it knows where danger lurks as k'un knows where obstruction lies (2.12.1).

Four hexagrams associate wisdom prudentially with timing: 1) great wisdom grasps the right time to reveal itself, 2.3b; 2) it is a mark of wisdom for one to arrest his steps on seeing danger, 39, T'uan Chuan; 3) one discerns when his course is free or obstructed; 60.1b; 4) one is not wise when he cannot perceive the consequences of his actions, 64.1b.

These activities and descriptions of wisdom both in Mencius and the Book of Changes show two parts of the same: the power to see Tao's movement and to choose benevolence freely; the power to suit action to the purpose in relation to things that serve human good or ill. On the face of it it is difficult to see where this doctrine varies in principle from the western classical tradition. Aristotle distinguishes wisdom as such by refering it to a "consummated knowledge of the most exalted objects" and prudence as the right judgment about what to do wherein the doing of the end is none other than the act itself, namely, doing well [Nic. Ethics 6.7. 1141a21; 6.5. (1140b4) 13.7. 1145a7].

Sheng: sageness: Mencius chiefly characterizes the sage as one who exercises a transforming influence for the good (7B:25.7,8), whose principles accord with other sages (4B:1-3,4) and who rectifies men's hearts (3B:9.13) untiringly.

The Books of Changes refers extensively to the sage in the Ta Chuan; T'uan Chuan of eight hexagrams; and in the Shuo Kua.

Ta Chuan: On the whole this treatise presents the sage as anxious for the common good which he serves industriously first by exalting his own nature which extends his field of action (1.5.4; 1.7.1). Sages search out the depths exhaustively and grasp

the beginnings of all things (1.10.5). They are the makers of things for practical use that benefit all under the sky, e.g., they substituted houses (buildings) for caves (1.11.7; 2.2.11) and invented written documents to replace knotted cords (2.2.13). Shuo kua: This discussion on the trigrams of the Book of Changes describes the sages as making this oracle and determining the three taos: heaven, earth and man.

The following eight hexagrams employ the character sheng: 1.6b, the sage discerns how to move forward and how to draw back, to support and to let perish without violating his nature; 4, T'uan Chuan, the sage effects work that results from effort to nourish the young and to correct (expressions of their nature); 16, T'uan Chuan, the sage is gracefully obedient to movement (that suits the purpose, i.e., Tao); 20, T'uan Chuan, sages undertake a spiritual way in this instruction; 27, T'uan Chuan, sages nourish men of worth to reach the populace; 31, T'uan Chuan, the sage influences (moves, touches) the minds (hearts) of men effecting harmony and rest; 32, T'uan Chuan, the sage remains always in his course and all under the sky are transformed and brought to ch'eng, maturity; 50, T'uan Chuan, sages cooked their offerings to present them to Shang Ti (Lord God) and made feasts to nourish the wise and able.

The above descriptions of sageness are almost all concerned to state an activity which is efficiently related to its object. The emphasis is on the moving power of the sage to effect by influence and invention a transformation of his environment. This is done, however, non-coercively toward the human society of which he is a member. It is noteworthy that with very few exceptions each description of the chün tzu stated in the Image of each hexagram points to his operation - to what he does, not what he is. Sageness appears to be the underlying efficient energy that supports and executes the vision and intention of wisdom.

Shih, beginning: There are at least two passages in the Mencius which employ shih in its radical sense of a generative movement as distinguished from a mere start. Thus Legge translates from 2B:10.7, "--- took its rise from ---." In 3A:3.2 the character is used in the context of seasonal sowing of grain.

> The Book of Changes emphasizes the notion of generation in its use of Shih: Ta Chuan 1.4.2: Going back to the shih, generation, of things and following them to their chung, completion, (the sage) discerns the lessons of life and death. The coupling of chung, completion, with shih, generation occurs in four hexagrams: 1, T'uan Chuan, all things owe their generation to the Creative (in its role as efficient cause in contrast to the Creative as 元 , the primordially originating power and final cause - though not as independent of the Receptive who shares in the same attributes); the sage understands chung, completion and generation. In three other hexagrams chung and shih are coupled: 18, completion, therefore generation. Hex. 32 repeats this virtual formula. 54, The marrying maiden is man's completion and generation. 54, Image, the chün tzu understands the transitory through the ongoingness of completion.

The coupling of chung and shih indicates the complete course of an affair - a cycle of time that is fulfilled within the greater flow of being.

> Chung, completion with reference to a span of time: At least six texts in the Mencius express chung in this manner. 5B:4.6, Confucius never completed a residence of three years in any state; 7A:39.4, complete the whole period; 5B:3.4, he stopped (completed) and went no farther (this in relation to an expression of friendship for a time period proper to the occasion which when completed did not admit of any initiatives belonging to a different class of actions; 3B:1.4, whole day; 4A:9.5, failure to provide in time for an exigency cannot be compensated for during a whole life-time; 4B:28.7, the chün tzu has life-long anxiety (painstaking concern?).
>
> The Book of Changes and Lao Tzu each conjoin chung and shih in sentences of similar meaning and construction: Ta Chuan 2.11, chu I chung shih; Lao Tzu 64, shen chung chih shih. These function as virtual maxims, (use) awe before completion and generation; caution in completion, discernment in generating. (Legge, Waley, Duyvendak, Wilhelm do not make the distinction between shen and chih in their translations of this passage from Lao Tzu).

The commentary on the Words of the Text of Hex. 2, line 3 provides an instructive distinction between chung and ch'eng in which chung is employed in a way that further clarifies its meaning: Earth's way makes no display of ch'eng, work fulfilled, but to bring things to

chung, completion. Clearly, the emphasis here on the Receptive's relation to chung refers it to a supportive role indicating a persevering effort to assist things to develop within the time span allotted them by Tao - and to take no credit for their eventual flowering. Hex. 15.3: The chün tzu of modesty and toil yu chung, has completion (i.e., completes the time period). Compare the phrase shih wu chung - unfinished, abortive. The effort required for consciously bearing the movement of Tao recalls the descriptions of the sage.

> Ch'iao, skill: Apart from the perjorative sense of this word to mean contrivances, plots and schemes - a plain straightforward meaning - the word is used by Mencius to indicate a quality that is indicated rather than specified by the word: Kung-shu's skill of hand without compass and square is insufficient to form squares and circles (4A:1.1.), yet a carpenter or carriage-maker may give a man those tools but cannot make him skilful in their use (7B:5). This hinting, this indirectness, is vivid in 5B:1.7 with the analogy from archery - that one reaches the mark by reason of strength but it is not owing to strength that one hits it. This illustration is offered to illuminate the analogy, wisdom: skill:: sageness: strength.

A ready inference tempts one to supply skill as that which hits the mark. A full reflection cautions against it and suggests that Mencius is not indulging in mere calculative exercises.

Strength and skill are necessary but not sufficient conditions for hitting the mark. Strength without skill misses it completely and skill without strength cannot even reach it. The union of both is required. Indeed, more strength is needed than merely to reach the mark since without extra momentum the arrow could not penetrate the target. Skill is vain without a moving cause to apply it and impermanent without constant practice to maintain it.

More critically, the union, as such, of strength and skill is not,

strictly speaking, something already possessed but subject to a continual acquiring. No precise duplication of a former shot is possible since in the meantime conditions in one or more respects have changed. Meeting such changes adaptively requires patience and staying-power - strength - qualities preeminently present in the sage who teaches according to the state of readiness in his pupils and untiringly contributes to the common good. Adaptive in his strength and firmly ordered in his skill he maintains his fixed direction while changing with the times; and so he keeps on going well.

Continuity in change is the hallmark of the chung shih cycle. Chung and shih obtain universally in both non-human and human activities. In human activity chung calls for modesty and utmost caution and shih for heedfulness and a pure act of attention. Operatively, chung and shih reciprocally reinforce each other. Heedfulness nourishes modesty and caution rectifies attention.

A similar dialectical structure obtains between wisdom and sageness. Wisdom is spiritual discernment nourished by experience and sageness is humane practice informed with the vision of Tao.[2] While one is practicing humanity, jen, his spiritual discernment is increasing and while the vision of Tao prevails his passage is continually rectified.

Skill rather than strength points to the mystery of their union since skill, analogous to shih, generation, opens out on the hidden, the profound and germinal. More precisely, skill points always to the half potential, half actual in the flow of being. If a thing changes continuously it reaches a between, a midway, before reaching its completion or that to which it reaches last (Aristotle, Physics, 5.3.

226b23). This midpoint is the signature of finite being, namely, being that is subject to change. Here beginning and ending pass into one another and when, in all respects, in human activity starting and stopping are timely- each at the right time - one observes them as both features of rest. They are grasped as generation and completion - one abiding cycle. Skill comes into its own at this midway point in passage between potentiality and actuality where movement is most vulnerable to diversion from its course. Skill reaches for and rests in the incalcuable, a power not its own.

The reluctance of Mencius to reduce skill to an analytical definition is consonant with his not specifying in what the difference consists between man and animals (4B:19.1,2). Legge takes him to task for regarding the difference as slight. In his note Legge adduces a commentator who finds the key to this passage in the distinction between 'the mind prone to err' and 'the mind of reason' (literally, of Tao) - expressions in the Shu-ching 2.2.15. Legge sees the difference as between knowledge of righteousness and the want of it. (Such a notion is a commonplace in the history of western culture, though it would be hard to support it biblically).

Perhaps Mencius saw the difference as consisting in ways of being rather than of knowing. If so, his point can be sustained. Man's nature is qualified by a negative power - 'the mind prone to err' - which enables him to negate his proper relation to the Way. Yet this power, when exercised, is unable qualitatively to create or add being. Therefore, seen from the point of view of being, it is slight. It is indeed a matter of clinical magnitude that one can null the good and oppose well-being but it is beside the point which Mencius is making, namely,

that Shu_n, in walking along the path of humanity and righteousness had no need to pursue them since while so walking he was continually acquiring them. His activity was satisfied by its own exercise. The power to negate well-being is no mark of real knowledge but of potential stupidity. When exercised, it can yield information but not understanding. Actualized, it produces a condition Confucius perhaps in part referred to when he says that only the most intelligent and the most stupid do not change (Analects 17.3). Had Legge grasped this he would not likely have said of Mencius 2A:6.7: "How is it that after all his analyses of our nature to prove its goodness, the application of his principles must begin with an IF?"

The power to negate well being is itself a gift of human nature and the conscious refusal to exercise this negation establishes in act the humane character of human finite freedom and autonomy. Mencius shows himself aware of this in 2:A6.6: 'When men say of themselves that they cannot develop the four principles, they play the thief with themselves.' (Legge).

Like skill, this negative human power when correctly ordered opens out on mystery and Tao. Its discovery and proper function are matters of practice and continual acquiring - not permanent possession. If this is correct, then Mencius, who grasped the nature of the will so well and at forty attained to an unperturbed mind (2A:2.1.) must have from that time forward been always skilfully joining the end to the beginning. (To be continued).

Footnotes

1. A similar structural correspondence is employed in Psalm 85:10-13.

2. Cf. John 3:21, 'The one who is doing the truth is coming to the light. The relation between one activity and ~~an~~other is intemporal.