Hsun Tzu's Theory of Li

Abstract

Hsun Tzu (fl. 298-238 B.C.) is generally regarded as representative of naturalistic Confucianism in ancient China. He contends that human nature is originally evil. And to nurture man for perfection, Hsun Tzu underscores the necessity of the "li" (禮).

Hsun Tzu also discusses the concept of 'li' in relation to his discourses on Heaven (天). He argues that Heaven is merely Nature (自然); that is, its function is only to provide for the raw materials of life and in no way does it play any active part in determining the destiny of man whatsoever. Given these provisions, the vocation of Man is to organize and utilize them according to a set of social rules (li) for his well being.

In actuality, his theory of 'li' is an extension of his predecessors' in the Confucianist School. In Confucianism, 'li' is a very comprehensive concept which comprises ceremonies, rituals and rules of social conduct. Hsun Tzu gives the concept a more realistic base and advocates it as a means of personal cultivation as well as a means of social control. Being rules of social conduct, 'li' regulates the satisfaction of desires and through ceremonies and rituals, 'li' gives refinement and purification to man's emotional expressions.

All in all, Hsun Tzu has strong beliefs in a class society. Indeed, being an advocate of social control, Hsun Tzu's philosophy
is somewhat close to that of the "Fa Chia" (法家). However, he is mainly regarded as a Confucianist.

I am grateful to Dr. Keong Taw Yong (高道運師), who despite his busy schedule has kindly guided and encouraged me during the process of writing this Academic Exercise. His patience and often constructive criticisms and comments on my original draft is greatly appreciated. Needless to say, I alone am responsible for any shortcomings.