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The Theory Of The Individual In Chinese Philosophy: Yang-Chou

Alexandra David-Néel

We have no idea, in Europe, of the diversity of philosophical theories which have already been formulated in China. The idea that Confucius encapsulates all of the thought of the yellow world has taken hold among us and, readily, judging the Chinese through the discourses of this Master, we believe them irremediably devoted to the “happy medium” and incapable of any extreme attitudes. This isn’t the case.

The Celestial Empire, shaking off the ancient torpor to which it had given in and forced by Western nations to leave behind its antique ideals of peace and tranquility, is seeking to shore up, on new foundations, its life and activities. A large number of Chinese, one cannot ignore, in their haste to transform themselves, seem to be throwing all of the philosophical heritage they have received from their forebears overboard. From a once manifest disdain for the Western “barbarians,” they are passing too easily, in the intellectual classes, to a perhaps exaggerated respect for their methods and their theories. However, such a centuries-old atavism as that

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of China does not go back on everything it once stood for in a few brief years. Too many generations were raised with a veneration for the antique wisdom for a large number of modern partisans of social reforms to not turn their eyes to the masters of the past. They should be praised for it. Without wanting to weigh the value of the philosophers we've adopted, the Chinese can find, in the thinkers of their race, all of the speculative and social ideas put forth by ours. There has been no lack of people, in China, who've realized it.

Whether it was born by this observation or by the persistent love of tradition, there exists, in China, an interesting and prominent movement to bring attention to certain philosophers whose theories seem to be appropriate for leading minds down the path of the social reforms and transformations that all enlightened men know to be indispensable and inevitable. If one is to make – unjustly, perhaps, in a certain regard – the official philosopher responsible for the stagnation China is suffering in its mentality, its civilization and its science, then one may turn, at times, to some of those excommunicated from the Confucian orthodoxy. These defeated ones, these cursed ones are brought back to light and, if not glorified, at least commented on with ardor.

It is in this way that many Chinese works have been, in recent times, devoted to **Meh-ti**. It would have been bizarre, in effect, that, frequently in Europe where the word “solidarity” is, for the moment, in great fashion, the lettered Chinese have not realized that they have, among their illustrious thinkers, the great ancestor of all solidarity thinkers.¹

But the apology of solidarity aside, aside from demonstrating its necessity for assuring the life and perpetuation of all social grouping, the Chinese intellectuals may have encountered, from us, a tendency toward individualism, toward the affirmation of the per-

¹ On **Meh-ti**, see: “Le Philosophe Meh-ti et l'idée de solidarité”, by Alexandra David-Néel (Luzac, London; Victorion, Paris), reprinted by Plon publishers in “Deux Maîtres Chinois”.

sonality with its own life more and more freed from external hindrances, a tendency that marks rather, the evolution of superior beings. In reading Max Stirner or other apologists of the intense and complete life, they will be reminded that, many centuries before we heard them, the bold lessons that today terrify many among us were given to them and the name **Yang-Tchou** will come alive again as does his contemporary, **Meh-ti**.

For us, spectators surprised by this reawakening of the Extreme-Orient that we thought, still but a few years ago, a sluggish prey ready to be carved up by western greed, the history of thought of the surprising yellow race is of exceptional interest. Better yet, and more sure than what can be drawn from superficial facts, it is capable of letting us glimpse into the destiny of a people whose spirit hides, full of surprises, behind a “great wall” a thousand times more impenetrable than the one enclosing their territory.

Our biographical information on **Yang-tchou** reveals little. It appears that he lived in **Daliang**, capital of the State of Wei, circa the fifth century BC. We have reason to believe that he was a landowner of a small rural area. It does not appear that he ever held public office, contrary to many other philosophers who were functionaries of a more or less high ranking. This particularity is, for that matter, in perfect accord with the general tendency of his doctrine.

We possess no work, or fragment of a work, that we can attribute directly, either to **Yang-tchou** or his immediate disciples. One chapter of a book by **Lieh-tse** is the unique source of our documents.

Lieh-tse was a part of the Taoist school. It is quite strange to find in his work this sort of enclave comprising chapter or book VII, which is devoted to very different theories from those he himself professed. We have no precise opinion on the way this heterogeneous addition took place.

I simply do not want to be weighted down by questions of details that can only interest orientalists. I daresay that if the personality

of **Yang-tchou** had absolutely no real existence, it means little to us. We aren't worried about a man, but a theory, a special manifestation of Chinese thought. Nevertheless, **Yang-tchou** is truly a real figure. His name and his œuvre are cited quite clearly by such authors as **Meng-tse (Mencius)** and **Chuang-tse**. If we must be ignorant as to the peripeteias of his life, we cannot place, in any way, as they have to **Lieh-tse**, his real existence into doubt.

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Yang-tchou is not well known in Europe, outside of a limited circle of erudite orientalists.

Not a single study has yet been published on him in the French language. Abroad, the German sinologist Ernst Faber, gave us a translation of **Yang-tchou** embedded, as in the original Chinese, in the work of **Lieh-tse**. The English sinologue, James Legge, has published a few fragments in the prolegomena of his translation of **Meng-tse**. I can mention, if only for the record, a few lines of analysis dedicated to **Yang-tchou** by de Harlez. They are too simply brief to give an idea of this philosopher. Lastly, most recently, Dr. Forke published a very remarkable biography on this subject in English. His study is, by far the most interesting and the most complete; I would add that it seemed to me imbued by a philosophical spirit and a comprehension of the author it's translating which are, too often, lacking in many works in this genre.

I would be tempted to apply to **Yang-tchou** the denomination of anarchist. Unfortunately, the term is so denatured, so distorted, that one can barely hear the simple etymological signification. It is to this that we must return if we want to attribute this proud epithet, wasted on the ignorance of the masses, to our philosopher. From the privative *a*, and *archy*, commandment, we have *no commandment*, and this absolute negator of arbitrary commandment, of exterior law, of all precepts whose principle does not emanate from us and does not have us for object and end, is, par excellence, personified by **Yang-tchou**.

relations, another, more normal, way of being and, leaving, more fertile with joy.

If **Yang-tchou** can incite us to pursue this research, inspire in us this audacious – and more arduous to realize than one thinks – resolution to live the fullest life we might hold in our embrace by us and for us, to hold such a lesson of virile and intelligent energy in our heart and in our spirit will be, more than ever, useful and beneficial.

It would have been interesting to see how **Yang-tchou** understood the application of his theories in social life. But our curiosity will never be satisfied. While **Meh-di** wrote at length on how his law of solidarity should be understood and applied, **Yang-tchou** did not envisage, in any of his works, the social organization of the country. Is this gap due to the fact that the texts which address this question have not reached us, or did the philosopher truly leave it aside? We cannot profess to know. Doubtless, if **Yang-tchou** had entered this territory, we would not have seen him demonstrate that his law of egoism and free expansion of individual instincts fits with a society where, without hypocritical demonstrations, but practically, men would support one another mutually with more usefulness and benevolence. Did **Meh-ti** not establish, in this way, that intensive “Universal Love”, solidarity and altruism would serve, more than any other procedure, the interests of our egoism?

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A single exception, perhaps, among the thinkers of his time and place, **Yang-tchou** stands out almost as boldly, today, among our modern philosophers. While our contemporary societies, rejecting old dogmas on the one hand, and, clinging stubbornly to the educational systems and the moral formulas they issue on the other, debate one another in an incoherent confusion, we may find some interest – and maybe enjoyment – in listening to the lessons of this independent spirit.

When, considering, in its wake, the crowd of people heading for the tomb, bound by prejudices and sinking into the fatal chasm without ever having suspected what it means to live, we cry out with him: *How do they differ from criminals in chains?* Perhaps we would be closer to a real comprehension of existence, closer, at the very least, to finding whether there is, outside of the burlesque and tragic manner with which we conceive individual life and social

None has felt with more intensity than he the horror of constraint, of artificial morals, of codes imposing on individuals a behavior in flagrant contradiction with the imperative injunctions of the nature in them.

No commandments! Live your life! Live your instinct! Let your organism blossom and evolve according to its deep constitutive elements. Be yourself! ... Such is the language of **Yang-tchou**. He states it without anger, quietly and with the placidity which forms the basis of the Chinese character. More than the affirmations of this prince of “amoralists” themselves, the peaceful assurance with which he brushes the most ingrained principles aside, disposes of the most unquestionable duties, troubled his Christian translators. The singular simplicity of expression of this “negator of the sacred”, as Stirner would have said, appeared to them more appalling than the most thundering blasphemes. A breath of terror passed through their souls and they saw standing before them the ironic and terrifying face of the “Devil”. Maybe the old philosopher can still shatter more than one conscience among his new readers. I will not dare to guarantee the contrary.

The amorality of **Yang-tchou**, the invitations he addresses to us to live our life completely, to walk “as our heart guides us,” are based on, in part, the brevity of our days and on the absence, in his works, of speculative theories regarding *post mortem* existence. **Yang-tchou** refused to go beyond tangible truths. — What is there above the dissolution of the elements forming our individual sensibility? ... The philosopher can say nothing to us about it. One can observe that Chinese thinkers have, in general, kept prudently silent on our destinies across the tomb. It is only among inferior classes of the population where fantastical descriptions of heaven and hell thrive. The cultured Chinese is rationalist by temperament. Yet, while this question, by a sort of tacit agreement, was set aside from the philosophical discourses and played no role in the determination of normal and reasonable conduct one should offer man, **Yang-tchou** made it, as it were, the lynchpin of his teaching. All

of the advice he gives us looks toward an individuality that is eminently transitory, that tomorrow will be “dust and decay” with nothing remaining, if not a good or a bad memory, a few words of praise or blame that it will never hear.

The other guiding principle of **Yang-tchou**’s teachings, less openly expressed, perhaps, but easy to draw from numerous discourses, is an absolute faith to the law of *Causality*. Our philosopher is a convicted determinist. Not in the tepid and illogical way that most Westerners who adorn themselves with this title – all the while conserving in them the remainder of atavistic ideas, delighting in the belief of the divine, the free arbitrator, the arbitrary, going by a disguised name – but with the rigorous rectitude of reasoning and deduction. And that’s the explanation of his glorification of life: intense, complete, and absent of all artificial barriers. Our instincts are the voice with which the law proper to the elements whose agglomeration constitutes our person expresses itself. They come from the very essence of the molecules that produce them. That which is, is that which cannot not be. It even seems that Yang-thou, attaching each and every one of these isolated manifestations to the one and only law, adopts all of them, even the most divergent, into one grand act of faith in the harmony, in the beauty of the universal order. The World, he says to presumptuous moralists, is not concerned with your solitudes, your virtues, the reforms which you claim to make upon it, the barriers which you, under the pretext of making it better, oppose its spontaneous manifestations. The World is Perfect. Your own order, dwarfed by narrow vision, is but disorder. Let nature do what it will and all will be fine.

The same considerations serve to prop up the famous discourse on “the hair”. This discourse is historic; it must have had, in its time, a huge impact, and **Meng-tse** mentions it with indignation: “If in sacrificing one of your hairs you could benefit to the whole universe, you must not sacrifice it.” Some unexpected and striking developments came about around this paradoxical theme. It is very

regrettable that the controversies, the apologies, the commentaries, which were certainly numerous, to which this sensational doctrine must have given birth, are unknown to us.

It has nothing to do with here, as one might think, a coarse and banal egoism, but with logically rationalized theories. Whatever one might say, it is not a call to frenetic enjoyment that comes out of the theories of **Yang-tchou**, but the indication of a rule of thought and action that the philosopher holds to be rational.

Yang-tchou does not get lost in the pride of metaphysical dissertations. Certainly, he is inclined to believe that the diverse movements through which our instinct guides us are coordinated by the universal order. The hypothesis is plausible, probable; he adheres to it, readily, but, in sum, problems of this genre exceed our scope and cannot but tickle our fancies. The reasonable man knows it. He also knows that, whatever this infinite universe around him might be, practically, he is himself the center and his only end. He is aware of the outside world only through himself and, when his consciousness fades, his universe will sink with it. It is for this reason that I believed I could recall the declaration of Max Stirner in regards to **Yang-tchou**: “Nothing is, for me, above me.” It seemed to me to be capable of summing up an entire aspect of his doctrine. I have, moreover, while accounting for the difference in expression, found a profound resemblance between the old Chinese thinker and the modern German philosopher.

Another connection seems to become apparent: that between **Yang-tchou** and Epicurus. Translators of **Yang-tchou**, cited above, stopped themselves here, without entering, for that matter, into any development on this subject. Does the possible comparison between the two philosophers go below the surface and can it be taken all the way to the basic conceptions that form the bases of their theories? ... I believe, for my part, that there are certain notable divergences, but I won’t dare to venture to sketch them out in a few lines.