

TAN SITONG

Tan Sitong (1865–1898) is one of the most striking figures of the reform movement. The nonconformist son of a high official, he loved both independent

10. Internal customs duties.

study and the active life — now delving in books and writing poetry, now practicing swordsmanship, serving as a military officer in the Far West, or traveling about as he pleased in search of historic sites and boon companions. He was disinclined toward an official career and might never have sought office had he not, from his unorthodox studies (embracing Christianity and Buddhism as well as Confucianism and Daoism), developed a passionate interest in the Western world and the modernization of China. Active leadership in the reform movement and study under Kang Youwei led eventually to participation at court in the Hundred Days of Reform. With its failure, he died a “martyr” at the age of thirty-three, risking death in hopes of rescuing the young Guangxu emperor from his enemies.

Not only his martyrdom but also his extreme idealism made Tan a far greater hero to the new generation of Chinese than his master, Kang, was. Accepting many of Kang’s basic ideas, he became an immediate and outspoken champion of some that Kang regarded only as future possibilities. He openly advocated republicanism instead of the monarchical system that Kang would have retained and merely reformed. Here Tan cited Huang Zongxi (as did other reformers and revolutionaries of the time) as native authority for his anti-dynastic views. As against loyalty to the Manchus he proclaimed Chinese nationalism, pointing in this case to Wang Fuzhi as its exemplar in the past. Tan also attacked directly and unqualifiedly the traditional Confucian virtues based on specific human relationships, which Zhang Zhidong had upheld as the essence of Confucianism and the Chinese way of life. It was these ideas — republicanism, nationalism, and opposition to the Chinese family system — that anticipated main trends in the early twentieth century.

THE STUDY OF HUMANITY

Tan’s chief work, *The Study of Humanity* (*Renxue*, 1898), might more accurately be called *On Humanitarianism*. It offers an eclectic philosophy with elements drawn ostensibly from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Christianity. The central conception of *ren* differs little from that of Kang: a generalized feeling of goodwill toward men, which suggests most the “liberty, equality, and fraternity” of the French Revolution, somewhat less Christian “charity” and Buddhist “compassion,” and perhaps least of all, the Confucian virtue of “humaneness” (*ren*). Though akin, in certain respects, to the Neo-Confucian concept of *ren* as a cosmic empathy that unites man to Heaven and earth, its ethical character is radically altered by Tan’s repudiation of the obligations of human relationship,¹¹ the relationships between ruler and minister, parent and child, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friends, which

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in the past had given practical significance to *ren* for Confucians and Neo-Confucians alike. Indeed, the “Confucius” of Tan Sitong bears little resemblance to the Confucius of the *Analects* but freely represents the sage in the image of a modern radical reformer.

When Confucius first set forth his teachings, he discarded the ancient learning, reformed existing institutions, rejected monarchism, advocated republicanism, and transformed inequality into equality. He indeed applied himself to many changes. Unfortunately, the scholars who followed Xunzi forgot entirely the true meaning of Confucius’s teaching but clung to its superficial form. They allowed the ruler supreme, unlimited powers and enabled him to make use of Confucianism in controlling the country. The school of Xunzi insisted that duties based on human relationships were the essence of Confucianism, not knowing that this was a system applicable only to the Age of Disorder. Even for the Age of Disorder, any discussion of the human relationships without reference to Heaven would be prejudicial and incomplete, and the evil consequences would be immeasurable. How much worse, then, for them recklessly to have added the Three Bonds (Mainstays),¹² thus openly creating a system of inequality with its unnatural distinctions between high and low and making men, the children of Heaven and earth, suffer a miserable life. . . .

For the past two thousand years the ruler-minister relationship has been especially dark and inhuman, and it has become worse in recent times. The ruler is not physically different or intellectually superior to man: on what does he rely to oppress 400 million people? He relies on the formulation long ago of the Three Bonds and Five Moral Relations, so that, controlling men’s bodies, he can also control their minds. As Zhuangzi said, “He who steals a belt buckle pays with his life; he who steals a state gets to be a feudal lord.”¹³ When Tian Chengzi stole the state of Qi, he also stole the [Confucian] system of humane-ness, rightness, and sage wisdom. When the thieves were Chinese and Confucians, it was bad enough; but how could we have allowed the unworthy tribes of Mongolia and Manchuria, who knew nothing of China or Confucianism, to steal China by means of their barbarism and brutality! After stealing China, they controlled the Chinese by means of the system they had stolen, and they shamelessly made use of Confucianism, with which they had been unfamiliar, to oppress China, to which they had been strangers. But China worshiped them as Heaven and did not realize their guilt. Instead of burning the books in order to keep the people ignorant [as did the Qin], they more cleverly used the books to keep the people under control. Compared with them, the tyrannical emperor of the Qin dynasty was but a fool! [A:37a–38a]

12. The Han dynasty conception otherwise known as the Three Mainstays: the relations of ruler/minister, parent/child, husband/wife.

13. *Zhuangzi*, ch. 10. Trans. from Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, p. 110.

At the beginning of the human race, there were no princes and subjects, for all were just people. As the people were unable to govern each other and did not have time to rule, they joined in raising up someone to be the prince. Now “joined in raising up” means not that the prince selected the people [as for civil service]¹⁴ but that the people selected the prince; it means that the prince was not far above the people but rather on the same level with them. Again, by “joined in raising up” the prince, it means that there must be people before there can be a prince: the prince is therefore the “branch” [secondary] while the people are the “root” [primary]. Since there is no such thing in the world as sacrificing the root for the branch, how can we sacrifice the people for the prince? When it is said that they “joined in raising up” the prince, it necessarily means that they could also dismiss him. The prince serves the people; the ministers assist the ruler to serve the people. Taxes are levied to provide the means for managing the public affairs of the people. If public affairs are not well managed, it is a universal principle that the ruler should be replaced. . . .

The ruler is also one of the people; in fact, he is of secondary importance as compared to ordinary people. If there is no reason for people to die for one another, there is certainly less reason for those of primary importance to die for one of secondary importance. Then, should those who died for the ruler in ancient times not have done so? Not necessarily. But I can say positively that there is reason only to die for a cause, definitely not reason to die for a prince. [B:1a–b]

In ancient times loyalty [fidelity] meant actually being loyal. If the subordinate actually serves his superior faithfully, why should not the superior actually wait upon his subordinate also? Loyalty signifies mutuality, the utmost fulfillment of a mutual relationship. How can we maintain that only ministers and subjects should live up to it? Confucius said, “The prince should behave as a prince, the minister as a minister.” He also said, “The father should behave as a father, the son as a son, the elder brother as an elder brother, the younger brother as a younger brother, the husband as a husband, the wife as a wife.” The founder of Confucianism never preached inequality. [B:2b]

As the evils of the ruler-minister relationship reached their highest development, it was considered natural that the relationships between parent and child and between husband and wife should also be brought within the control of categorical morality.¹⁵ This is all damage done by the categorizing of the three bonds. Whenever you have categorical obligations, not only are the

14. Tan’s account has some resemblance to Huang Zongxi’s, but Huang speaks of the sage rulers of antiquity only as men who stood forth to undertake a heroic, self-sacrificial role as servants of the people. As such they were accepted by the people, but not raised up in the sense of being elected.

15. Under the influence of Buddhism and perhaps utilitarianism, Tan viewed the traditional moral values as mere “names” or empty concepts (*ming*) in contrast to reality or actuality (*shi*).

mouths of the people sealed so that they are afraid to speak up but their minds are also shackled so that they are afraid to think. Thus the favorite method for controlling the people is to multiply the categorical obligations. [B:7b–8a]

As to the husband-wife relationship, on what basis does the husband extend his power and oppress the other party? Again it is the theory of the Three Bonds that is the source of the trouble. When the husband considers himself the master, he will not treat his wife as an equal human being. In ancient China the wife could ask for a divorce, and she therefore did not lose the right to be her own master. Since the inscription of the tyrannical law [against remarriage] on the tablet at Kuaiji during the Qin dynasty, and particularly since its zealous propagation by the Confucians of the Song dynasty — who cooked up the absurd statement that “To die in starvation is a minor matter, but to lose one’s chastity [by remarrying] is a serious matter” — the cruel system of the Legalists has been applied to the home, and the ladies’ chambers have become locked-up prisons. [B:7–8]

Among the Five Moral Relations, the one between friends is the most beneficial and least harmful to life. It yields tranquil happiness and causes not a trace of pain — so long as friendships are made with the right persons. Why is this? Because the relationship between friends is founded on equality, liberty, and mutual feelings. In short, it is simply because friendship involves no loss of the right to be one’s own master. Next comes the relationship between brothers, which is somewhat like the relationship between friends. The rest of the Five Relationships that have been darkened by the Three Bonds are like hell. [B:9a]

The world, misled by the conception of blood relations, makes erroneous distinctions between the nearly related and the remotely related and relegates the relationship between friends to the end of the line. The relationship between friends, however, not only is superior to the other four relationships but should be the model for them all. When these four relationships have been brought together and infused with the spirit of friendship, they can well be abolished. . . .

People in China and abroad are now talking of reforms, but no fundamental principles and systems can be introduced if the Five Moral Relations remain unchanged, let alone the Three Bonds. [B:9b–10a]

[From *Renxue*, *Tan Liuyang quanji* A:37a–b, B:1a–10a — CT]