

REVIEWS

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Images of Human Nature: A Sung Portrait by Donald J. Munro.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pp. xi + 322. \$35.00.

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Donald J. Munro, who wrote *The Concept of Man in Early China* in 1969 and *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* in 1977, has now in effect filled in the series with a book on early modern China, this time concentrating on the thought of the pivotal intellectual figure of the Sung dynasty, Chu Hsi (1130–1200). In addition to the narrower focus, this book differs from the previous two in its methodology. Munro attempts here to clarify Chu Hsi's intricate theory of human nature by identifying and analyzing certain key "structural images" (primarily metaphors and analogies) found in Chu's voluminous writings and recorded conversations. "An image," he says, "structures the relations between disparate facts to which a theory applies, calling attention to certain aspects of the relationship. And, because of its familiarity within the culture, it also elicits an emotional response to those facts, thereby uncovering a value that Chu Hsi wishes to affirm" (p. 23).¹ The images, each

¹ Munro avoids the terms "metaphor" and "analogy" because he wishes not to broach the complicated sets of philosophical issues associated with them. "The structural and emotive uses examined here emerge directly from the material, and the word 'image' conveys simply and directly the device Chu Hsi uses in explanations" (p. 24).

pair with a chapter devoted to it, are (1) the family and the stream as alternative pictures of the relationship of the individual to the social matrix, (2) the mirror and the body as epistemological constructs illustrating the possibility and value of engagement with the objective world, (3) the plant and the gardener as metaphors of the individual's stages of moral growth and self-cultivation, and (4) the ruler and the ruled as reflections of the authoritarian strand in Chu Hsi's thought. Woven through these sets of images are two polarities in Chu's thought that raise crucial problems in moral philosophy: (a) the polarity between hierarchical, family-based ethics, mainly associated with Confucianism, and the more egalitarian altruism associated with Mahayana Buddhism (but with Confucian roots also); and (b) the polarity between self-discovery of moral values, as taught by Mencius, and "obedience" to rules formulated by sages and other authorities, as taught by Hsün Tzu. Munro devotes his final chapter to these two polarities and their modern legacy, bringing the account right up to the 1980s. Reading this just after the tragic events of "Beijing Spring" was indeed a thought-provoking experience.

Throughout the book Munro's high level of methodological self-awareness is matched by the care and thoroughness with which he has read and reflected upon a large body of relatively unsystematic source material. He has drawn from all the major collections of Chu Hsi's thought, including letters, conversations, commentaries, and essays. On the whole he has succeeded admirably in contributing to our understanding of Chu's theory of human nature and some of the moral philosophical problems raised by that theory. Where his success is mitigated, it is largely because of an over-attachment to the method of inferring aspects of Chu's theory from the images he employs.

This weakness first becomes evident in Munro's assertion that the values associated with the image of the stream are "potentially incompatible" with those associated with the image of the family (p. 44). The unitary principle or pattern (*li* 理) connecting heaven, earth, and humanity in a single "stream" of life suggests the equal worth of all human beings and supports the value of altruistic behavior towards all, regardless of social role and relationship. The classic Neo-Confucian expression of this value can be found in the

opening lines of Chang Tsai's "Western Inscription" (Hsi-ming 西銘):

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.²

On the other hand, the image of the family as the paradigm of society suggests the value of fulfilling one's particular role or allotted place (*fen* 分) in a hierarchical system. Under this model, one's feelings and behavior toward others are properly proportional to their degree of relatedness. This principle was the basis of the classical Confucian objection to Mo Tzu's concept of "universal love" (*chien-ai* 兼愛). Love that is blind to social relationship flouts the fundamental Confucian (or Chinese) role of the family in defining personal identity. When the family model is taken in isolation, universal altruism is not specifically implied as a positive value.

Central to Munro's book is the problem of altruism in Chinese social thought since the Sung dynasty and in Chu Hsi's ethics in particular. In his final chapter he quotes a remark by Liang Ch'i-ch'ao, "In China there are duties of individuals to individuals. There are not duties of individuals to society," and one by Sun Yat-sen, "the Chinese people have only family and clan solidarity, they do not have national spirit" (p. 223), to suggest what may be a fundamental problem in Chinese society. Munro attempts to show that this way of thinking may be traced in part to the influence of Chu Hsi's theory of human nature, in which the family image and its ethical particularism became dominant over the stream image and its ethical universalism.

I have no objection to Munro's discussion of ethical particularism in Chinese social thought. Nevertheless, his specific argument with regard to Chu Hsi is problematic, for one cannot attribute the dominance of family-based ethics in China to Chu Hsi's choice of metaphors. It is part of a much deeper, pervasive, and historically rooted social pattern. Chu Hsi is a symptom of the problem, not the contributing factor Munro attempts to show him to be.

² Wing-tsit Chan, trans. and comp., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 497. Cf. Munro, p. 221.

Furthermore, the potential incompatibility of these values derives from the imagery, not from the theory. As Munro admits:

Philosophically, there is no necessary incompatibility between the ideals associated with the two images, the family and the stream (p. 44, cf. p. 113). . . . Everything—whether part of the past, present, or future—is part of one integrated, extended family. The feelings [of love, respect, and obedience learned in the family] themselves will depend on the objects' respective positions in the hierarchical order. Establishing contact with any living thing, and certainly with strangers, is therefore the occasion for classifying the new relationship in terms of the gamut of prescribed family relationships. . . . [But] in the context of the family analogy, it remains only a pious message. The vital missing element is a prescription for *how* to extend one's range of concern beyond one's own family (p. 54).

Here Munro is compelled to modify his claim that there is a significant contradiction between family-based ethics and universal ethics in Chu Hsi's theory of human nature. In focusing on the imagery he has somewhat overstated its constraining effect on thought. Granting that "explanatory images may inhibit the thinker from considering adequately facts that have no precise counterpart in the image" (p. 142), we must still acknowledge that images do not exhaust the meaning of a theory. And, while it is indeed difficult to reconcile the image of the family with the image of a stream of water, it is not difficult at all to see both images as explanatory devices illustrating complementary aspects of a coherent theory. It is surely an overstatement to say that the two images result in "two opposing ways of thinking about person-to-person connections" (p. 143). Thus, to the extent that a good portion of this book is an attempt to reconcile aspects of Chu's theory that are complementary, not conflicting, Munro is a victim of his own methodology. This seems to be the case also in several places where Munro overstates the intentionality of Chu's selection of images, as in: "The image of light is intended to generate in the reader an emotional reaction to his present state of understanding" (p. 94), and "The plant image . . . was meant to elicit, from readers who accept the lessons of the plant image, the acceptance of new values: completion of growth and nurturance" (p. 113).

Munro claims that, despite the intelligibility of the notion of graded compassion—according to which ethical behavior is an expression of human feelings which are naturally stronger between

individuals with closer relationships—Chu Hsi's explicit discussions of altruistic behavior are framed only in terms of "nurturing people educationally and economically" (p. 144). They therefore can be applied only by those in superior positions of wealth and power, i.e. by "superior men" (*chün-tzu* 君子). "Altruism is presented in terms that make it remote from the actual circumstances of most people. The result is that they will likely attend to the sets of roles they realistically can occupy, namely, the actual family roles" (p. 146). Chu's discussions of altruistic and philanthropic activity, according to Munro: "lack concreteness" and "lack specificity. . . . Perhaps Chu assumed that the literati to whom his message was directed already knew that they had duties to the family, the community (*hsiang* 鄉), and the state, and those were the only categories that mattered. But often none of this is spelled out" (p. 147).

Much of this is an argument from silence, the premise deriving from certain Western philosophical expectations that Munro imposes on Chu Hsi's theory. He seems to be searching for a fully-developed theory of *role-neutral* ethical behavior in an intellectual context in which society and the natural world are viewed *relationally*.³ The Confucian functional equivalent to the Western model of altruism and philanthropy would be the nourishment of other people's capacities to fulfill their own roles, their positions in the *tao*, by treating them humanely in accordance with the behavioral norms (*li* 禮) proper to the particular relationships one has with them. The universalism of this model is that all people should be treated with humaneness (*jen* 仁); it remains particularistic in that the expression of humaneness depends on the relationships. The ultimate value in this model is not individual freedom and autonomy but fulfillment of one's particular "allotment" of talent and potential, and organic participation in the life of the whole.

I am not suggesting the relativistic position that we cannot criticize the values of another culture. But, as Munro is well aware, we need to take care not to assume that Western models exhaust all

³ There is a bit of irony in this, since Munro has written eloquently about the fundamental differences between the Western individualistic social model and the Chinese relational/holistic one. See, e.g., Donald Munro, ed., *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan, 1985), pp. 16-17.

possibilities. As he admits, there *is* support for altruism in Chu's theory, associated with the stream image in Munro's formulation. Munro himself defines *jen* 仁 as "love of fellow humans that begins in the family" (p. 229), suggesting the continuum or harmony of family-centered love and love of humanity. The lack of specificity on how an ordinary person (i.e., not a literatus) should practice altruism is clearly related to the fact that the audience for whom Chu was writing and to whom he was speaking was composed entirely of literati! The Four Books contained ample and familiar textual support for inferring other forms of altruism by analogy with educational and economic nurturance (e.g., *Analects* 6:28), and for conceiving moral self-cultivation on a continuum with the betterment of society (e.g., the "eight steps" of the *Great Learning*). As for the fact that the more universal aspects of Chu's theory eventually came to be dominated by family-based ethics, this is due, as mentioned earlier, to the age-old centrality and pervasive role of the family in Chinese society. Thus neither Chu's "weak practical guidance" (p. 11) in public-spirited activity nor the historical legacy of his theory of human nature are, strictly speaking, weaknesses in the theory itself.

Despite these reservations, Munro's method is well-chosen and generally results in fine insights. His discussion of Chu Hsi's theory of mind and knowledge in Chapter 3 (The Mirror and the Body), for example, is a superb clarification of an extraordinarily difficult topic. The difficulty, which is not always recognized by Western investigators, is caused by the utter absence of a categorical mind/body distinction in Chinese thought. We routinely point out that *hsin* 心 means both mind and heart, and that *ch'i* 氣 means both matter and energy, but the fact that mind is composed of *ch'i* in Confucian thought is not always fully explained. Munro's discussion of the mind as a source of light, and cognition as the mind's "illumination" (*ming* 明 or *chao* 照) of external objects, is an important contribution toward bridging the gap between modern Western and traditional Chinese epistemological assumptions. The evidence he includes of traditional Chinese notions that mirrors produce their own light, like lamps (pp. 81–84), is particularly helpful. His treatment of the relationship of knowledge and action (pp. 86–97) and the related concept of the embodiment (*t'i* 體) of abstract knowledge

are also excellent, especially in the context of Chu's disagreement with Buddhism concerning the value of engagement with the outside world. I only wish Munro were more explicit concerning how literally we are to take Chu's metaphor of the light of the mind. I suspect that in this case we are dealing with more than merely a metaphor, i.e., with a quite literal image. If mind is composed of *ch'i*, then it would seem that, according to Chu's theory, mind itself actually does flow out of the body, like a beam of light (which is also *ch'i*), to illuminate objects.

In Chapter 4 (The Plant and the Gardener) there is another discussion of the mind, focusing on its natural phases of growth and maturation. This, according to Munro, is how Chu Hsi reconciles the values of family-based and universal ethics: public duty and altruism are expected only of those whose minds have matured to the point of overcoming selfish desires. The reconciliation fails, according to Munro, for the reasons given (and refuted) above. It should also be noted that Munro's discussion of the phases of the mind (pp. 114–23) covers much of the same ground that Thomas Metzger dealt with more clearly and in more detail over a decade earlier in *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture*.⁴

The image of "the ruler and the ruled" plays a prominent role in Chu Hsi's theory of mind and human nature, and in general Munro uses it to good effect. Chu describes the task of "rectifying the mind" in terms of the "Tao mind" (*tao-hsin* 道心) exerting "mastery" or "rulership" (*chu* 主 or *chu-tsai* 主宰) over the "human mind" (*jen-hsin* 人心), an image that comes naturally in a highly stratified society.⁵ Munro argues that the ruler image tends to confirm the legitimacy of external authorities, including past sages and rulers, present rulers, "true Confucians," and canonical texts. This authoritarian strand in Chu's thought stands in opposition to the Mencian theme of personal discovery of moral values inherent in human nature. And it is the authoritarian strand that has generally been seized upon by rulers throughout East Asia as justification for the status quo.

⁴ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), pp. 85–99.

⁵ See Chu Hsi's preface to his commentary on the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Chung-yung chang-chü* 中庸章句) (SPPY ed.), pp. 1a–1b.

The theme of obedience calls to mind another distinguishing feature of Munro's methodology: his attempt to integrate the generally philosophical approach to Neo-Confucian studies characteristic of Anglo-American, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong scholarship, with the Marxist-influenced approach practiced in the People's Republic of China for the past ten years or so. The latter is characterized by the refusal to separate philosophy from the patterns of power and authority in which it has always been embedded in China. Munro spent several months in Beijing in 1983 working on this book in close cooperation with a number of Chinese scholars (pp. ix-x). Without detracting from the originality of Munro's approach, one might discern some of their influence in, for example, his concern for Chu Hsi's alleged failure to address the moral needs of the common people.

Munro's attempt to integrate these approaches is thoroughly admirable but less than fully successful. For example, he greatly overstates the role of the emperor as a moral teacher. The emperor was not on a par in this respect with the Classics and the sages of the past. In fact, Chu Hsi and other literati lectured the emperor on moral philosophy, not vice versa. Despite his nearly absolute political power, the emperor did not have a critical role, either in fact or in theory, in the self-cultivation of the *chün-tzu*. Rather, according to Confucian theory, the emperor was supposed to be an inspiring model for the whole populace, not as a teacher but as the key figure in the moral and social order, which in turn enabled people to develop their own potentials.

Munro's emphasis on the role of "obedience" to external authority is misleading. For instance, in explaining the Confucian view of reciprocal relationships he says, "If they are commoners, they bend before their superior's commands like grass bending before the wind" (p. 145). This is surely a misinterpretation of *Analects* 12:19, the meaning of which is that the superior rules not by the force of command (implying the threat of punishment) but by the force of his moral example. In general, Munro seems to rely on a kind of Newtonian model of power, with individual agents exerting forces on one another. A more accurate picture of the Confucian social worldview would be closer to the physical model provided by quantum theory, in which entities interact in a more organic way as local

manifestations of a continuous field. External authorities such as sages, classics, and teachers can be described accordingly as embodiments of a cultural or religious tradition, and instead of individual autonomy and its limits we can speak of the value of self-identification with that tradition by means of model emulation. The mechanism by which social order is preserved is not, according to the Confucian-Mencian theory, obedience to commands but rather spontaneous attraction to the inspiring examples of sages and teachers. The attraction and emulation occur because human nature is inherently good and naturally resonates or responds to moral exemplars.

Chu Hsi, though, had a less optimistic view than Mencius, saying that the “physical nature” (*ch’i-chih chih hsing* 氣質之性) tends to obscure the good “original nature” (*pen-hsing* 本性), making it difficult to know and act on one’s inherent goodness. He therefore attempted to balance internal discovery and external authority by relying on *both* spiritual nurturance of one’s moral nature and on learning the values taught by the sages and embodied in the cultural tradition. Where Munro claims that Chu’s reliance on external authority inhibits self-discovery, he appears to ignore the complementarity that Chu attempts to give them and to misinterpret the type of influence exerted by the authorities.

The question of moral autonomy raises the familiar Western philosophical problem of free will (or choice, to be more precise in the Chinese context). Munro’s discussion of this issue (pp. 171–81) is excellent. He concludes that there is moral choice and responsibility in Chu Hsi’s system, but it is less important than exerting effort to rectify the mind and learn the Way. The “intuitive moral sense” (*i* 義) gives one the potential ability to “weigh” (*ch’üan* 權) situations and make correct moral choices. However, in general only sages have minds clear enough to do this reliably. Ordinary people should primarily rely on the external authority of *ching* 經, the “constant principles” embodied in the Classics.

In actuality, Chu would say that the individual does not choose to follow the heavenly principles (the supreme authority). He exerts effort to know them through study or model emulation or introspection, and they move him to act accordingly, to the degree that he perceives them. Exerting effort is not the same as “freely choosing” in a Western sense. Some writers refer to the famous phrase “to

establish the will” (*li chih* 立志) as an indication of Chu’s belief in free will. But it means to adopt a goal for one’s life, such as to be a sage; it suggests more an aspiration and a commitment to it (p. 171).

I agree with Munro that it is a mistake to look for the notion of free will in the Chinese context, because it is too tightly embedded in concepts the Chinese were not particularly concerned with (such as causation, a blameless God, and the will as a concrete part of the mind). However, the notion of “establishing the will” does suggest choice: one must choose to exert effort, both initially and throughout the process of self-cultivation. In one of Mencius’s dialogues with King Hsüan of Ch’i, for example, he says, “Hence your failure to become a true King is due to a refusal to act, not to an inability to act.”⁶ Chu Hsi’s comment on this line is, “It is just that he himself is not willing (*k’en* 肯) to act.”⁷ There does seem to be moral choice—or perhaps moral decision—involved here. But, as Munro says, it pertains not to specific moral situations but rather to the commitment or decision to pursue the Way, a decision that must continually be renewed because of the difficulty of self-cultivation. Once one is on this path, morally bad actions result from failure to see moral principles clearly rather than failure to make correct moral choices. This is a valuable clarification.

I did not systematically check the accuracy of Munro’s translations from the Chinese, but those passages I did look up were well rendered. I noticed only two editing errors. On page 203 and in the character glossary “Ming Tai-tzu” 明太子 should be “Ming T’ai-tsu” 明太祖. And on page 63, in a passage translated from Chu Hsi’s conversations, Munro apparently did not recognize that Chu was quoting and commenting upon the opening lines of Chou Tun-i’s *T’ung-shu* 通書. The passage should read as follows:

“Great is the *ch’ien* beginning. Everything begins by means of it.”⁸ It is the source of integrity.” This is to refer comprehensively to one single flowing source. “The *ch’ien* changes and each thing gains its proper nature.” Integrity flows forth and each thing has its own settling place. When it is a person, it is also this integrity.

⁶ *Wang chih pu wang pu wei yeh, fei pu neng yeh* 王之不王不為也。非不能也。 Translation from D.C. Lau, *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), I.A.7 (p. 56).

⁷ Chu Hsi, *Ssu-shu chi-chu* 四書集注 (SPPY ed.), *Meng-tzu* 孟子 1:9a.

⁸ [Reviewer’s note:] Chou Tun-i here is quoting the *T’uan* 象 commentary on hexagram 1 (*Ch’ien* 乾) of the *I Ching*.

When it is a thing, it is this integrity. Therefore [Chou] says, "Integrity is thus established." It is like water. Its emergence involves just one source. After it flows forth and branches into myriad outlets there is still only this [single] water.⁹

In conclusion, *Images of Human Nature* is an original, insightful, not always successful but nonetheless valuable study of the most influential Chinese philosopher since the Classical period. Its flaws are more than compensated by the freshness of its approach. Like Herbert Fingarette's *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, also written by a professional philosopher (and also excellent but flawed), I suspect *Images of Human Nature* will become a landmark in the Western study of the Confucian tradition.

Pools of Water, Pillars of Fire: The Literature of Ibuse Masuji
by John Whittier Treat. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988. Pp. x + 294. \$30.00.

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As Professor Treat points out in this important study of an important writer, Ibuse Masuji is, among many other things, very much a survivor. This is not just a matter of physical endurance; Ibuse's active career, which was preceded by an exchange of correspondence with Mori Ōgai and began when Izumi Kyōka and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke were still very much alive and writing, currently stands at seven decades and counting. And he was already into the fifth decade of that career when he produced *Kuroi ame* (*Black Rain*), certainly his most celebrated work and arguably, if such a thing can be said to exist at all, the Great Japanese Novel of the (now mercifully ended) postwar period.

The fame of this novel and the overwhelming nature of its subject matter, the incineration of Hiroshima and its aftermath, have made it easy to categorize Ibuse as a Bomb Writer, or even as The Bomb Writer, and commensurately difficult to associate him with themes

⁹ [Author's note, modified:] *Chu Tzu ch'üan-shu* 朱子全書 (Taipei: Kuang-hsüeh she, 1977), 52:25a; also in *Chu Tzu yü-lei* 朱子語類 (Taipei: Cheng-chung shu chü, 1962), 94:21a.

[Reviewer's note:] The lines Chu Hsi is quoting can be found in Chang Po-hsing 張伯行, comp., *Chou Lien-hsi chi* 周濂溪集 (Ts'ung-shu chi-ch'eng ed.), p. 74.