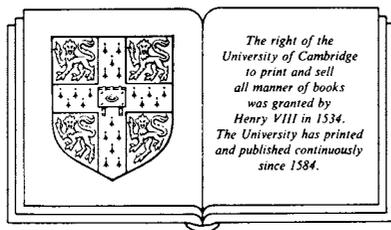

The thought of Chang Tsai (1020–1077)

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INTRODUCTION

After several centuries of political fragmentation and turmoil, the political and administrative stability established by the founding Sung (960–1279) emperors led to developments in many fields. For example, agriculture flourished as new land was brought under cultivation and new techniques, including a strain of early ripening rice allowing for double and triple cropping, were introduced and disseminated.¹ Advances were made in industry as well.² Regional specialization and inter-regional trade increased as the economy became more commercialized.³ The volume of money in circulation increased, and in the late eleventh century may have reached twenty times the maximum amount in circulation during the T'ang; the government also introduced paper notes during the first half of the eleventh century.⁴

There were major developments in the cultural sphere as well. In literature, the eleventh century witnessed the rise of the 'old text' (*ku wen*) movement, a rejection of ornate writing in favor of a simple, direct expression of moral principles and emotions. Although the prose of this period is better known, Sung writers also produced a great corpus of poetry, and they developed a new genre, the *tz'u*, a kind of lyric song. One scholar has written, 'Poetry that was so full of description and philosophizing, so taken up with themes of everyday life, so socially conscious as that of the Sung, had never been known before in China.'⁵ A series of great artists raised landscape painting to new heights of grandeur and philosophic expression. Porcelain making, which began in the T'ang dynasty, became much more refined in the Sung dynasty as new innovations made possible almost all forms, textures and colors. Some of the greatest calligraphers in Chinese history, such as Su Shih (1036–1101) Mi Fu (1051–1107) and Huang T'ing-chien (1050–1110) were active during this period. Scholars also produced some of China's greatest works of history in the eleventh century, including Ssu-ma Kuang's (1019–86) famous *Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government* and Ou-yang Hsiu's (1007–72) histories of the T'ang and the Five Dynasties.

A poem by Su Shih illustrates sentiments shared by many during this period

Days when the world is at peace,
Times when life is good,
And here we have the glory of the flowers again –
How can you bear to go on scowling?⁶

This was an age of optimism, when all seemed within the realm of possibility. Many believed that they could recreate the Golden Age of the past, which was idealized in the writings of Confucius and his disciples fifteen hundred years earlier. And indeed, this was a sort of golden age: some of the most outstanding figures in Chinese history, men like Su Shih, Ou-yang Hsiu, Fan Chung-yen (989–1052), Wang An-shih (1021–1086) and Ssu-ma Kuang all lived at this time. These men were unable to recreate the political harmony they ascribed to the past, but they were the leaders of the new Sung culture, one of the most productive and creative in all of Chinese history. They produced outstanding works of prose and poetry, painting and calligraphy, and history and philosophy. It is for such cultural achievements as theirs that the Sung dynasty is most famous.

My concern here is with developments in philosophy, by which I mean systematic thinking about man and the universe. Chang Tsai's 'Kuan' school and the 'Lo' school of Ch'eng Yi (1033–1107) and Ch'eng Hao (1032–1085) were the most influential philosophical schools in late eleventh-century China.⁷ Each of these schools developed a comprehensive philosophy to resolve problems that concerned many eleventh-century Confucian scholars, philosophies which were different from anything that had come before. It is not possible to identify the specific social, psychological and historical factors which caused this new departure in philosophy; nevertheless, certain general developments did set the stage.

After the An Lu-shan rebellion (756–63), China entered a period of political fragmentation and warlordism which persisted through the remainder of the T'ang dynasty (618–906) and culminated in the almost continuous fighting and turmoil of the Five Dynasties era (907–960). During this half-century, in which short-lived regional 'dynasties' struggled with each other to become the successor to the T'ang, there were no less than four army revolts which placed generals on the throne, as well as other unsuccessful coup attempts.⁸ The last of these revolts was carried out by the most powerful unit of the Chou palace armies, under the command of Chao K'uang-yin. This revolt marked the end of the Chou dynasty; Chao, known posthumously as T'ai-tsu, was the founding emperor of the Sung dynasty.

Most of T'ai-tsu's efforts were devoted to completing the task of

reunifying China through conquest or diplomatic pressure, and to consolidating his rule over the newly integrated areas. For these tasks he needed a strong military. However, he was keenly aware of the dangers that military governors and powerful palace armies beyond the emperor's direct control posed to centralized imperial rule. For example, T'ai-tsu made the following remarks to his chief advisor Chao P'u (922–992) in 961, shortly after he had acceded to the throne:

One day the emperor summoned Chao P'u and asked, 'Since T'ang times, a period of many decades, the empire has had eight changes of royal surname. Fighting and struggle have been without cease, and bodies are strewn over the earth. What is the reason for this? I wish to put an end to fighting in the empire and make long lasting plans for the country. What is the way to do this?'

[Chao] P'u said, 'Your majesty's mentioning this is the good fortune of heaven, earth, men and spirits. The reason is none other than that the military governors are too strong; merely that the ruler is weak and the ministers strong. Now there is no other special technique: the way to deal with this is gradually to strip their power, control their tax revenues, and recall their crack troops. Then the empire will of course be peaceful.'

Before he had finished, the emperor said, 'You need say no more, I already understand.'⁹

Thus, from very early in his reign T'ai-tsu began to take steps to limit the power of his leading generals, and to make institutional changes so that no general would again be in a position to gather enough power to challenge the throne as he himself had done.¹⁰ He also moved to ensure that no military commanders on the borders would have the kind of power that had enabled their T'ang predecessors to become virtually independent regional warlords.¹¹

This, in brief, was the legacy of Sung T'ai-tsu. According to the official history of the Sung, 'When the founding ancestor changed the mandate he first used civil officials and took power away from military officials. The Sung emphasis on culture took its start from this.'¹² This account is exaggerated, of course. T'ai-tsu set the direction that subsequent Sung rulers were to follow: reining in the military leaders and greater centralizing of power. But he had to rely on military men to a great degree himself; consequently, he could not advance this policy fully during his reign.¹³

No longer faced with the task of reunification,¹⁴ T'ai-tsu's successors T'ai-tsung (r. 976–998) and Chen-tsung (r. 998–1022) recognized that the

best means by which to achieve stable centralized rule was through civilian officials who owed their loyalty to the throne.¹⁵ During the forty-six years spanned by these two reigns over 9000 candidates passed the civil service examinations, whereas only 296 candidates were passed during T'ai-tsu's sixteen year reign.¹⁶ In addition, T'ai-tsung sponsored four major scholarly projects and Chen-tsung one,¹⁷ thereby bringing still more literati into the government.¹⁸ T'ai-tsung enjoyed writing poetry¹⁹ and practicing calligraphy,²⁰ and he was genuinely interested in such literary projects; but this rapid expansion of the number of literati brought into the government was, at least in part, the continuation of T'ai-tsu's efforts to reduce the power of the military.²¹

This policy of bringing the literati into the government had far reaching effects. By the early eleventh century scholar-officials were in power, men who gained their positions by mastering the classical tradition. One of the areas to which some of them turned their attention was philosophy, in an attempt to use classical Confucian texts to develop an ideology for this new socio-political order.

There are certain other factors which set the stage for the philosophic developments of the eleventh century. One such factor was the spread of printing. While there is no evidence directly linking the spread of printing to philosophic developments, there is reason to assume a relationship. For the first time, books became available to many for whom they had previously been too difficult to obtain.²² The first woodblock printing of the Confucian Classics was undertaken by prime minister Feng Tao (882–954) of the later T'ang (923–35), and was completed in 953.²³ In 988 scholars at the Directorate of Education (*kuo tzu chien*) printed the *Five Classics with Commentaries*, and in 1001, after collation had been completed, the emperor ordered the Directorate of Education to print the *Nine Classics with Commentaries*.²⁴ By the beginning of the eleventh century, a great variety of material had been printed: such works as Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Historical Records* as well as several other histories, an encyclopedia (the *T'ai p'ing kuang chi*), and the chief dictionary of classical Chinese (the *Erh ya*).²⁵ In addition to these works printed at the Directorate of Education in Kaifeng, other works were printed under the auspices of provincial administrations or schools.²⁶ In 1005, one scholar commented to the emperor on the importance of printing:

At the beginning of the dynasty, there were under 4000 [volumes in the Directorate of Education]; now there are over 100,000. The classics, histories and official commentaries are all complete. As a youth I worked as a scholar; whenever I saw a student who could not

[recite] the entire classics and commentaries, [I felt] this was because the hand-written transmission was not sufficient. Now the printed editions are full and complete, and scholars and commoners all have them in their home. This is the good fortune of scholars who are living at the right time.²⁷

In 977 the prefect of Chiang-chou requested that the Pai lu tung, one of the most famous private academies in the Sung, be given a copy of the Classics. The emperor ordered the Directorate of Education to present a copy to the academy.²⁸ In 990, the emperor ordered that each circuit (*lu*) be given a set of the Classics, and that all officials study them.²⁹ The development of printing thus made the Classics, the basic texts of the eleventh-century Confucian revival, far more widely available than ever before.³⁰

Another factor, albeit an elusive one, should be mentioned here. Buddhism had by now become a basic part of the Chinese philosophic landscape. Many Confucian scholars felt a desire to refute Buddhist ideas, which they believed were harmful to the Chinese empire.³¹ Equally important, Buddhist terminology and concepts had become a part of the intellectual world of all educated Chinese. Scholars were now to some degree familiar with a philosophic system that dealt with cosmological and ontological questions that had never been part of the Confucian tradition. In order to refute Buddhism, therefore, they had to engage in speculative thought about cosmology, ontology and the nature of reality, topics formerly at the periphery of ethics-centered Confucianism.

In addition, many of these scholars had been influenced by Buddhism to a far greater degree than they would acknowledge. They maintained that their ideas were drawn instead from the Confucian tradition, but the connections are evident. For example, Ch'eng Yi was asked if his ideas about enlightenment were not similar to those found in Buddhism. He responded that there was no need to mention Buddhism, since Mencius had already spoken of enlightenment. Enlightenment, he said, referred to understanding Confucian principles.³² Similarly, Su Shih described a conversation he had with a Buddhist monk: 'I said to him, What you speak about, we already have in Confucian texts.' Su went on to demonstrate the similarity of ideas in the *Doctrine of the Mean* to Buddhist ideas.³³ Many eleventh-century scholars attacked Buddhism and attempted to refute its ideas; but in doing so they revealed the great power of its influence on them. And thus, ironically, from the eleventh century on, it became common for scholars who considered themselves to be solidly within the Confucian tradition to be attacked as Buddhists.

In sum, the imperial sponsorship of learning and of scholarly projects, the rise of the scholar-officials, the spread of printing, and the overall stability afforded by the new regime provided the stage on which the philosophic developments of the eleventh century were enacted. And the direction these philosophic developments were to take was shaped by the fact that many scholars, themselves greatly influenced by its ideas, perceived Buddhism as an evil which should be attacked.

The present work is concerned with one of the most important philosophers of this period. Chang Tsai was heavily influenced by Buddhism,³⁴ and one of his purposes in writing philosophy was to refute Buddhist ideas. He developed a philosophic system which, although derived from the Confucian Classics, reinterpreted those texts in a way that would probably have been unrecognizable to Confucius.

Chang Tsai died some thirty years before Ch'eng Yi, and Chang's followers dispersed after his death, many of them going to Loyang to study under the Ch'engs. The philosophy of the Ch'eng brothers and their disciples, particularly that of their fourth generation disciple Chu Hsi (1130–1200), emerged as the dominant school of philosophy and later became the state-sanctioned orthodoxy. In his desire to unify the diverse strands of eleventh-century thought, Chu Hsi created a single lineage for the school of the 'Study of the Way.' He maintained that the movement had begun with Chou Tun-yi (1017–73), had been transmitted to the Ch'eng brothers, and thence to the branches of Chang Tsai and Shao Yung (1011–73), as well as to the Ch'engs' own disciples. This scheme, which came to be accepted as fact, has obscured the point that Chang Tsai was an important thinker who developed a systematic philosophy largely prior to, and independent of, that of the Ch'eng brothers. For this reason Chang's philosophy, except insofar as it accorded with the ideas of the Ch'engs and Chu, received scant attention in the following centuries, and some of his writings were not preserved.³⁵

In the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties various thinkers, reacting against the dominant Ch'eng-Chu tradition, showed renewed interest in the thought of Chang Tsai.³⁶ And recently scholars in the People's Republic have been interested in him as a materialist thinker.³⁷ Nevertheless, Chang's thought has not been fully understood, and he remains largely unknown in the West. It is my hope that this study will contribute to our understanding of Chang's thought, and of the origins of Neo-Confucianism.