

Talent (*cai*) as an object of philosophical and anthropological investigation in traditional China

Loreta Poškaitė

Vilnius University

Abstract. This article deals with the treatment of human talent (*cai* 才) in pre-imperial and early imperial China and concentrates on its relationship with other Chinese philosophical and anthropological concepts and the general cultural context. On the one hand, it analyses the moral meaning of talent, discussing its relationship with the concept of *xian* 贤 (the worthy) in Classical Confucianism, and on the other hand it analyses its relationship with the concept of *de* 德 (virtue) as it was treated from Classical Confucianism and Legalism to the Six Dynasties. The latter analysis is based mainly on books by Xu Gan *Zhong lun* 中论 (Balanced Discourses) and Liu Shao *Renwuzhi* 人物志 (The Study of Human Abilities), paying special attention to the infiltration of the Legalist understanding of *cai* into those books. The second problem discussed here is the relationship of *cai* and human nature (*xing*). The author argues that the discussions concerning human resources or talent in pre-imperial and early imperial China were inseparable from the anthropological and philosophical thinking on human nature and from the resolution of political problems. The understanding of human resources in China had from the very beginning a strong motivation for applicability in the political sphere, and this was a contribution not only of Confucian thinkers, but also by the schools of Legalists, Logicians (or School of Names), and Dialecticians (or School of Yin-yang). This could be the reason why the Chinese avoided the mystification, essentialisation and romanticisation of human talent, as happened in Western culture (especially with the titanism of the Renaissance and beyond).

The main reason for choosing talent as a topic for this paper is the seeming disproportion of the investigation of this concept in Chinese and Western sinology. In Western sinology until recent times, the concept of *cai* mainly attracted the attention of those sinologists who were interested either in the realization of Confucian elitist ideals in educational and bureaucratic practice or in the history and culture of the Six Dynasties (3rd–6th centuries), which was famous for the flourishing of artistic, philosophical and strategic talent, as well as for the beginning of the studies of human character and abilities. The concept of *cai* as such, however, does not seem to be considered too important in those sinological studies, since the main attention there was given to the ideals of *shengren* 圣人, *junzi* 君子 or *shi* 士 as the concrete examples or categories of moral persons.¹ The important contribution in the sphere of studies of

¹ At least I did not find any discussion on talent in such books as Balazs 1964; Lee 2000; Chaf-fee 1995.

talent as a sociological and anthropological concept was the early English translation of Liu Shao's book *Ren wu zhi* (The Study of Human Abilities), which was done by J.K. Shryock (1937) and still remains the only English translation of this book.² It however did not have a strong influence on more extensive or deeper studies of this concept in Western sinology, as if *cai* did not play any important role in Chinese culture or Confucian mentality in particular.

A somewhat different approach to this Chinese concept in the West is expressed by Russian sinologists. According to A. Martynov, for example, talent was one of the main features of an exemplary person (*junzi*) and, together with will (*zhi* 志), made up the formative qualities of the way (*dao* 道) of *junzi* (Martynov 1992, 71–2).³ A similar opinion was expressed by G. Zinovjev and Z. Lapina, who consider the problem of talent as one of the main problems in Chinese culture (Zinovjev 2001, 6). Another famous Russian sinologist, V. Maliavin, said that what the human had in imperial China was not a 'civil position' but only one's talent (*cai*), which should be used or employed (*yong* 用) in one or another way (Maliavin 1983, 19).

This approach conforms very well to the investigations of the problem and concept of human talent (*ren cai* 人才) in Chinese sinology, which started actively in the 1980s. One of the most important events in this field was the first symposium on the study of human talent in traditional China, held in 1980 in Hefei.⁴ Since that time, many books on the history of the treatment of *cai* or the use of talented men (*yong ren* 用人) have been published in China.⁵ As they reveal, the problem of talent was discussed by almost all ancient philosophical schools (namely Moism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism), in almost all canonical books (namely *Shijing*, *Shangshu*, *Zhouli*, and *Liji*), in eclectic works from the Qin and Han (*Guanzi*, *Lüshi chungiu*, and *Huainanzi*), and by the famous Han philosophers (such as Dong Zhongshu, Liu Xiang, Yang Xiong, Huan Tan, Wang Chong, and Wang Fu), whose insights formed the basis for the flowering of the investigations of talent and human abilities in the Six Dynasties and later until the 20th century. Finally, I would like to mention Zhang Dainian, one of the famous 20th century experts in Chinese philosophy who included the concept of talent (*cai*) into the cluster of his study of key concepts of Chinese philosophy. It was listed there among the anthropological and psychological concepts

² If I am correct, there are no other translations of this book into any European language. A few years ago a Russian translation, done by G.V. Zinovjev, was published. See Zinovjev 2001, 175–266.

³ I use here the English translation of *junzi* as exemplary person, which was introduced into Western sinology by Henry Rosemont and Roger T. Ames in their English translation of *Lunyu*. See Ames, Rosemont 1999.

⁴ This information is presented in Lei Zhenxiao 1986, 12.

⁵ See Cheng Youwei 1996; Lei Zhenxiao 1986; Li Shuxi 1992; and Miao Fenglin 1996, just to mention a few such books.

together with the concepts of human nature (*renxing* 人性) and emotion (*qing* 情) (Zhang Dainian 2002).

Thus, how can one explain the difference in the emphasis of this concept in Western and Chinese sinology? Should it be treated as the result of the difference in their scientific interests or methodology? Could it be, on the other hand, that the sinologists of both sides are investigating the same phenomena, but from different viewpoints and with different names? If so, then what could the basis be for the comparative investigation of human talent in Chinese and Western culture?

Of course, the solution to such questions demands far more detailed and extensive study than this article could include. My aim here is to discuss briefly the main aspects and perspectives of the investigation of the concept of *cai* in China during the pre-imperial and early imperial periods, concentrating mainly on its relationship with other Chinese philosophical and anthropological concepts and the conceptual-cultural context. This is in order to reveal its particularity and the possibility of its comparison with Western concept of talent.

Before proceeding to the discussion, I would like to point out the diversity of English translations of the Chinese word *cai*. In Western sinology, for example in the translations of *Lunyu* (*Analects*) 13.2, it is translated either as *talented* (*talent*) or as *able* (*ability*).⁶ Here I will use the word *talent* or *talented* for Chinese *cai*, in order to differentiate it from another Chinese word close to its meaning, that is, *neng* 能, translated into English mainly as *ability*, *able* or *skilled*. It seems that those two words were used rather interchangeably in early imperial China, although later, for example in Liu Shao's *Ren wu zhi*, their meaning became more differentiated.⁷ What seems to me more important, problematic and characteristic for the early usage of *cai* and *neng*, is their relationship with the word *xian* 贤 (translated mainly as the *worthy*), which accompanies it from the beginning of the discussions on talented men.

According to some Chinese scholars, the starting point of the estimation of talent for the sake of the state and government was set up by the legendary rulers Yao and Shun, the originators of so-called idealistic principle of 'selecting the worthy and promoting the able ones' (*xuan xian ju neng* 选贤举能) (Li Shuxi 1992, 5–11). There is almost no doubt that it was Kongzi and his followers who made those legendary rulers the originators of such a meritocratic principle, which was later transformed into the unique institution of imperial examinations as the main method for the formation

⁶ I have checked a few English translations of *Lunyu* 13.2 in which this word is used, namely, by Henry Rosemont and Roger T. Ames (they use *ability* for *cai*), Arthur Waley (*superior capacity* for *xian cai*), and Chihung Huang (he uses *talented*). The same difference is found in Russian translations: most early translators (V.P. Vasiljev, P.S. Popov, I.I. Semenenko), as well as one of the most authoritative recent sinologists, A. Martynov, use the word *able* (Rus. *sposobnij*), but others, namely, A.E. Lukjanov and L.S. Perelomov, translate *cai* as *talented* or *talent*.

⁷ As J.K. Shryock points out in his translation of this book (p. 39).

of the bureaucratic apparatus in imperial China. Kongzi, as a very sincere admirer of the past and of Yao and Shun, was certainly led by the same idealistic attitude and transformed it into the idea of ‘respecting the worthy and educating the talented’ (*zun xian yu cai* 尊贤育才). According to Cheng Youwei, a Chinese scholar, it was in the Chunqiu period that the new idea of ‘respecting the worthy and employing the able’ (*zun xian shi neng* 尊贤使能) came into usage, changing the early meaning of the word *xian* as *surpassing* or *superior* into a category of human talent. Consequently, the words *talent (cai)* and *able (neng, you neng zhe, neng zhe)* also turned into categories of the same order (Cheng Youwei 1996, 27).

Kongzi’s respect for the worthy and talented can be seen from his conversation with his disciple Zhonggong (Ran Yong). Once Zhonggong asked Kongzi about how to govern effectively, and his answer was as follows: ‘Set an example yourself for those in office, pardon minor offenses, and promote those with superior character (*xian*) and ability (*cai*)’. ‘How do you recognize those with superior character and ability in order to promote them?’ Zhonggong asked. The Master replied, ‘Promote those that you do recognize with the confidence that others will not spurn those that you do not’.⁸

The conversation is meaningful for at least two points. First, it reveals the social dimension of the concept of *cai* in the teaching of Kongzi and his closest followers. For them, one’s talent should be promoted and used not for personal but for social purposes, specifically, for the establishment of order in the state or ‘everything under heaven’ (*tianxia* 天下). Talented men, for Kongzi, are like ‘exquisite pieces of jade’, which should be sold for a good price rather than placed in any box for safekeeping.⁹ This means that the promotion of worthy and talented persons was considered a very serious and important affair, especially since one of the main problems in promoting talented people was, according to Kongzi, the difficulty in finding them (*cai nan* 才难) (*Lunyu* 8.20). This is why his discussions with his disciples were mainly concentrated on how to recognize various types of people, namely good from bad and prominent from known, in order to give them appropriate respect and employment.

This orientation of knowledge in Kongzi’s teaching can be confirmed by his epistemological position, specifically, his understanding of the relationship of wisdom (*zhi* 智) and benevolence (*ren* 仁), as seen from another conversation of Kongzi with his disciple Fan Chi. Here, the Master, after being asked what realization or wisdom means (*zhi* 知), replied: ‘Realizing others’. Fan Chi failed to understand and so the Master explained: ‘If you promote the true into positions above the crooked, you can make the crooked true’.¹⁰ The same position was held by Mengzi, who

⁸ *Lunyu* 13.2. I am using the English translation of H. Rosemont and R.T. Ames (1999), p. 161.

⁹ I have in mind here the conversation of Kongzi and Zigong in *Lunyu* 9.13.

¹⁰ *Lunyu* 12.22 in Rosemont, Ames 1999, 160.

considered respect for those who are worthy (*xian*) and employment of those with abilities (*neng*) as one of the five main conditions for a ruler to become the father for his people.¹¹ In short, one of the main problems for early Confucianists was the problem of optimizing human capacity or resources,¹² which was shared by almost all philosophical schools and individual thinkers until the end of imperial China. Thus, it could be considered the main strategic problem in Chinese philosophy in general and the starting point for discussions about various types of people (*junzi*, *shengren*, *chengren*, *zhenren*, *shi*, *daren*, *zhiren*, etc.) and about the aspects of the human body and its psychosomatic processes (namely its vital energy—*qi* 气, nature—*xing* 性, heart-mind—*xin* 心, willingness—*zhi* 志, realization—*zhi* 知, self-cultivation—*xiu shen* 修身 and *yang shen* 养身), which were developed mainly by Confucianists, Daoists, and Neoconfucianists with the aid of artists and art theorists. This cluster of terms made a cultural and conceptual context for ‘personology’ or ‘talentology’ (*ren cai*) as a specific sphere of philosophical and anthropological investigations.

The second point that the conversation of Kongzi and Zhonggong (13.2) reveals is the ethical dimension of *cai* in the teachings of Kongzi and Classical Confucianism. This is implied from the context rather than from the text, however, because here and in some other places the word *cai* is used together with *xian* (*xiancai* 贤才), and the ethical meaning of *xian* (translated mainly in English as virtuous, worthy, good and wise, or superior or highest character) is certainly acknowledged by almost all sinologists (Lau 1970, 82; Ames, Rosemont 1999).¹³ As for Kongzi, he described *xian* as one who is able to discern duplicity and suspect untruthfulness even if he does not anticipate it (*Lunyu* 14.31). Such a person should certainly have moral consciousness or wisdom in order to discern such ‘immorality’ and thus be worthy of being called ‘worthy’. However, the question about the relationship of the terms *xian* and *cai* remains for many (including myself) unresolved, since it could be treated at least in two ways: those two words could be conceived of as either simply synonymous and interchangeable, or one of them may be the concretization of the other one.

The latter opinion is manifested by Chinese sinologist Cheng Youwei in his book on the history of the treatment of talent in ancient China (Cheng Youwei 1996). For him, *xian* is a kind of talented people, distinguishable by their moral character and behaviour. According to the author of this book however, the most important types of talent in the teachings of Kongzi were the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), the scholar (*shi* 士), and the efficacious person (*shanren* 善人), complemented by two

¹¹ *Mengzi* 3.5. See Lau 1970.

¹² I am grateful to Roger T. Ames, who suggested to me the translation of *rencai sixiang* as ‘studies on the optimizing of human resources’.

¹³ The Russian translation is similar: wise, talented.

others, specifically ‘the consummate person’ (*chengren* 成人) and sage (*shengren* 圣人), which seemed to Kongzi ideals rather than real persons (ibid., 35–6). What kind of talent are they? Actually, my aim here is neither to present a broader description of those people, especially of *junzi*, which has been described and investigated by many sinologists, nor to analyze their differences.¹⁴ What I would like to emphasize here is that their features are mainly moral ones, indicating their moral intention and behaviour. They are associated with political talent or the ability to rule the state, which seemed to Kongzi as one of the most important abilities, and with the virtue of benevolence (*ren*) in particular.

Does this mean that the content and meaning of talent in early imperial China could be described only in ethical terms? Or in other words, does being talented mean to be *junzi*, *shi*, *shengren*, *shanren*, etc., since that follows from the classifications of talent in the teachings of Kongzi and in *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, *Guanzi* and other philosophical books, as presented in the study by Cheng Youwei?

My answer would be not necessarily, even if *cai*, as was mentioned above, has a strong ethical dimension and, according to Kongzi’s idealistic vision, is related to virtue (*de* 德) or moral behavior (*de xing* 德行). Actually, discussions of talent (*cai*) in imperial China were inseparable from the problem of its relation to morality or *de*, which was discussed by many philosophers (even if *de* in some contexts could be understood in a broader sense as power or excellence). And the impetus for such discussions could be found in the provocative words of Kongzi himself: ‘A fine steed is praised for its excellence (*de*), not for its strength’ (*Lunyu* 14.33). This remark seems to be a subject of dispute not only because of the question of what difference there is between *de* and strength in regard to the steed, but also in dealing with the methods and criteria of selecting and appointing candidates to official posts in particular. Consequently, it gave birth to various models of the relationship of *cai* and *de*.

Those models were summarized and described by Zhang Xianghao as follows: 1) *de* as primary, *cai* as secondary (*de zhong cai qing* 德重才轻); 2) *cai* as primary, *de* as secondary (*cai zhong de qing* 才重德轻); 3) the differentiated approach to the use of *cai* and *de* (*cai de shu yong* 才德殊用), that is, the decision of giving priority to one or the other depends on the concrete situation, harmonization or lack of harmonization of *de* and *cai*; 4) mutual support of *cai* and *de* (*cai de xiang zi* 才德相资), according to which *de* cannot exist without *cai* and vice versa, although both of them could be positive as well as negative in their meaning; 5) *cai* and *de* relate to one another as substance relates to function (*de cai ti yong* 德才体用) (Zhang Xianghao 1988,

¹⁴ I found a very interesting analysis on the differences between *junzi* and *shi* as well as *junzi* and *shengren* in Rosemont and Ames’ introductory article to their translation, see Ames, Rosemont 1999, 60–5.

34–41). The most illustrious proponents of the first model, according to the author, are Kongzi and Mengzi, Dong Zhongshu and Sima Guang, the latter's thinking taken as the development of this model to the extreme, namely, the idea of 'rejecting talent and choosing virtue' (*she cai qu de* 舍才取得). The exponents of the second model are mainly the most distinguished persons of the Wei-Jin period, such as Xu Gan, Ge Hong and Cao Cao, again with the latter as an example of the extreme idea of 'employing only the talented' (*wei cai shi ju* 唯才是举). The third model, with Xuan Yue and Ouyang Xiu as its exponents, is conceived of by Zhang Xianghao as a more rationalized version of the first one; the fourth is manifested by the Cheng brothers (Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi) and Zhu Xi; and the fifth—by Wang Fuzhi.

There are several dialogues in *Lunyu* displaying the preference of *de* over *cai* by Kongzi. For example, he once remarked: 'If the person with talents more admirable than those of the Duke of Zhou is arrogant and niggardly, the rest is not worthy of notice'.¹⁵ By this, Kongzi wanted to say that those who have *de* can have talent as well, but not vice versa,¹⁶ or that talent without virtuous conduct is meaningless and useless. Any talent loses its value if the person does not wish to show the appropriate respect to other people, is limited by his egoistic desires, and is not kind-hearted. Here, he does not identify talent with morality, and we can only guess what sense he put into the word *cai*. Most probably, he had in mind the talent for ruling and some kind of knowledge, which has much in common with abilities and skills (*neng*) as acquired through the practice of the Six Arts and reading the canons.

His follower Mengzi has however identified talent with human nature and virtues (such as benevolence, wisdom, ritual behaviour, and appropriateness), thus implying its inborn or fundamental goodness and morality. The only problem, according to him, is the possibility of fully employing those talents. Such employment depends on the historical circumstances and their influence on human hearts and a person's activeness: 'The trouble with man is surely not his lack of sufficient strength, but his refusal to make the effort', Mengzi remarked (Lau 1970, 172). The next step to and clear manifestation of this tendency could be seen in the earliest criteria for the recommendations to governmental posts that were held in the Han Dynasty and based on Dong Zhongshu's principle of 'stressing *de* and underestimating *cai*' (*zhong de qing cai*), with the understanding of *de* here as benevolence (*ren*) and knowledge (*zhi*). It was the founding Han emperor who ordered that worthy or morally qualified persons should be recommended as candidates for the offices. Later, Emperor Wudi, persuaded by Dong Zhongshu, in 134 B.C.E. started the annual recruitment of the

¹⁵ *Lunyu* 8.11. See also 14.33; 14.4; 2.1; 2.3.

¹⁶ Such is the interpretation of Cheng Youwei, and I partly agree with it. See Cheng Youwei 1996, 38.

‘filially pious and incorrupt’ (*xiao lian* 孝廉), and this, according to Lee, ‘became the most important Han recruitment exercise’ (Lee 2000, 112). Finally, in 36 C.E. the government spelled out for the first time the definition of talent: it meant to be ‘truthful, unspoiled, humble and frugal (*dunhou* 敦厚, *zhipu* 质朴, *xunrang* 逊让, *jiejian* 节俭)’ (ibid., 114).

Those historical facts allow us to conclude that the first model of ‘*de* as primary, *cai* as secondary’ was actually transformed in Western Han examination practice into the identification of *de* and *cai*, mixing into one the requirements of literal abilities, knowledge of canonical books, and moral qualification. The latter was understood mainly as ritual behaviour, which was the way to demonstrate the virtues of filial responsibility and loyalty in particular, although such behaviour was too often artificial and insincere.

Thus, the rise of the second model of ‘*cai* as primary, *de* as secondary’ can be explained as a reaction to the confusion of talent with ritual behaviour, and to the high estimation of virtuous conduct over talent. For example, Xu Gan (A.D. 170–217), one of the most prominent scholars of the Later Han, in his book *Balanced Discourses*, argued that talent rather than virtuous conduct is more beneficial for the world since the latter is often only ‘popular reputation’ (Makeham 2002). What did he mean by talent? For him, it is wisdom, intelligence and ability: ‘If those who hold positions of authority in government are intelligent and wise, then all of the country’s affairs will be carried out’ (Makeham 2002, 221). In order to prove the importance of wisdom over morality, Xu Gan recalled several examples of the unfortunate ends of past kings who had cultivated benevolence and rightness but were unable to discern between good and bad people or right and false words, were ignorant about the use of weapons, and thus were unable to protect themselves and finally lost their life.

This means that Xu Gan, referring to the talented as wise, had in mind a special kind of wisdom: it is the ability to conform to the changing situation, which is reminiscent of the strategy of war: ‘The man of social standing (*shi* 士) who is intelligent and wise is one who, when threatened, does not panic, and who, when blocked, is able to find a way through. He settles suspicions and fixes uncertainty, and ‘distinguishes between things, situating them in their proper categories’. When he notices events in transformation, he penetrates their incipient trends; when he obtains events in their regular state, he acts in accord with their norms. ...Is it not absurd to compare him with a man of social standing committed to his aspirations (*zhi* 志) and deeds (*xing* 行)?’ (Makeham 2002, 119). For him, the talented person is like a good military strategist who uses his intelligence not for moral self-improvement or enlightenment of the people, but for self-protection and, accordingly, the protection of the state.

A very similar view was held by Cao Cao, a famous military leader for whom Xu Gan worked as an adviser and who, as has been mentioned above, took the model of ‘*cai* as primary, *de* as secondary’ to the extreme. He ordered the exclusive nomination of those who possess talent or ability (*cai*) instead of those who are incorrupt (*lian*), because *de* is helpless to stop the wars and chaos in the world. According to him, ‘[t]here may be those who had neither humanity (*ren*) nor filial piety, but who may know the methods of conducting good government or successful military operations’ (quoted from Lee 2000, 126). Here, the meaning of *cai* is even clearer than it is in Xu Gan’s book: it is understood as special knowledge, specifically administrative abilities or military skills.

It seems to me that one of the reasons for the change of the first model of ‘*de* as primary, *cai* as secondary’ into the second model of ‘*cai* as primary, *de* as secondary’ from Kongzi’s teachings to the Wei-Jin period (at least in the views of Xu Gan and Cao Cao) was the changing meanings of *de* and *cai* and in particular the attribution of knowledge or wisdom (*zhi* 知) to one part or the other of this pair. In the case of Dong Zhongshu and in the context of his discussion of the relationship of *de* and *cai*, for example, *de* was conceived of as benevolence (*ren*) and knowledge (*zhi*), whereas for Xu Gan, Cao Cao, and even Ge Hong, *de* was conceived of as benevolence (*ren*) and virtuous behaviour, but the same knowledge (*zhi*) or understanding (*ming* 明) was attributed to *cai* (Zhang Xianghao 1988, 35–7). Thus, the evaluation or devaluation of *cai* has depended accordingly on the variations in the meaning of knowledge (*zhi*) and in the teachings of the persons mentioned above.

The understanding of *zhi* by Xu Gan and Cao Cao comes closer to Legalist teaching than Confucian teaching. This is quite understandable, since Cao Cao based his politics of the strong state and the idea of creating a new system of recruitment to the offices extensively on Legalist ideas, which became very popular in the Wei-Jin period in general.¹⁷ Their evaluation of talented seems quite paradoxical, however, if we recall the basic prejudice of Legalists, and Shang Yang in particular, to oppose the estimation of the worthy and propose the appointment according to law (*fandui shang xian, zhuzhang ren fa* 反对尚贤, 主张任法), which was the opposite of the Confucian idea of ‘respecting those who are worthy and employing those with abilities’ (*zun xian shi neng*). Such disfavour of those who are worthy had its roots in Shang Yang’s general idea that strengthening the state should be based on weakening the people, and in his hostility towards virtuous conduct, which he listed as one of the six parasitic functions or louses leading to the dismemberment of the state (Duyvendak 1928, 196–7). Even

¹⁷ For more on Cao Cao’s Nine Grades system of recruitment of able people, see Lee 2000, 124–6; for more on the worldview of Cao Cao and the rebirth of Legalism in the Wei-Jin period, see Balazs 1964, 173–6, 187–98.

sages and talented men are useless, because they 'are bound to their personality and nature, which cannot be transferred to others' (ibid., 309). Moreover, men of superior talent and wisdom were even considered dangerous to the authority of the ruler. The only thing that could be valued in promoting people was their military merit that was the result of their readiness or enthusiasm (*qili* 气力) to fight with complete courage and plan the fighting with complete wisdom.

Han Fei's position regarding the appointment the worthy men to office seems to me more reasoned and at the same time more complicated, if not contradictory. On the one hand, he regarded the estimation of worth as dangerous for a ruler, because in that case 'ministers will on the pretence of worthiness attempt to deceive their ruler', and 'will gloss over their defects in order to meet the ruler's need' for the worthy (Liao 1959, 49–50). On the other hand, he considered the appointment of the worthy to office by estimating their abilities and bestowing bounties according to their merits as normal activity of an intelligent ruler, who actually establishes posts and offices in order to promote the worthy and encourage men of merit (ibid., 68). Again, on the one hand, all ministers should have sufficient abilities and manifest their talents in office for obtaining promotions; on the other hand, 'the intelligent ruler never employs worthy and clever ministers or wise and able men for any selfish purpose' (ibid., 41). The only way the merits of able people could be estimated is the law. The only desirable ability of the ruler is the ability to know how to manipulate the law and thus maintain his power. Consequently, the best men who can be placed over the body of officials and used in charge of distant affairs are those who follow the discipline of the law and are able to weigh different situations.

In this point, I agree with Roger T. Ames, who states that the Legalist rejection of the efficacy of individual talent and the underestimation of superior men is incompatible with Confucian elitism and its principle of promoting men of superior talent, thus coming closer to the Daoist vision of the actualization of totality (the functioning of the state) as the co-participation of each thing (person) as a unique and at the same time equal part of this whole (Ames 1994, 149–50). However, I would not like to state that Han Fei was completely against the promotion and employment of talented men, if we conceive talent here not in an aesthetic or elitist sense, but in a more general sense, specifically as human resources, and at the same time in a technical sense. It seems to me that Han Fei narrowed the meaning of talent down to bureaucratic or administrative skills and military abilities, treating it as the kind of specialized knowledge with the addition of loyalty to the ruler. Actually, two types of human resources in Han Fei's political philosophy can be discerned, namely that of 'bureaucrat-automatist' and 'ruler-strategist'. It is unclear whether they are the result of learning or a kind of natural propensity, although the general prejudice of the

Legalists against learning as the way to improve human nature and knowledge tends to accept the notion of their innateness.

The ramifications and synthesis of early Confucian, Daoist and Legalist notions of human talent can be found in *Renwuzhi* (The Study of Human Abilities), written by Liu Shao in the middle of the 3rd century.¹⁸ The importance of this book, first of all, could be discerned in its advice about how to recognize and employ the particular talents and abilities of persons for the office as the highest form of the manifestation of human resources. Moreover, it is valuable for its psychological insights into human nature and behaviour, and for its more rationalized and classified analysis of human abilities.

Liu Shao divided persons into three hierarchical levels, namely, the one-sided talent or ‘the abilities of partial accomplishment’ (*pian zhi zhi cai* 偏至之才), the person of mixed (or all) talent, and the person of all virtues. The latter, who in his actions and abilities embodies the virtue of the mean (*zhong*) and belongs to the category of sages, is characterized here as impossible for any description and described rather as the mixed image of the Daoist and Confucian sage (*shengren*).¹⁹ In fact, Liu Shao indicates the mean (*zhong* 中) and harmony (*he* 和) as the main characteristics of human substance or being (*wu* 物), thus reminiscent of the initial words of the Confucian classic *Zhong yong* about the mean and harmony as the basis for the establishment of the cosmic order and the way to self-realization. At the same time, he characterizes the essence of those virtues as tasteless (*wuwei*) and insipid (*ping dan*), which is reminiscent of Laozi’s characterization of the Dao as ‘bland to the mouth and without taste’ (*dan hu qi wu wei* 淡乎其无味). Thus, in analyzing any person and his abilities, Liu Shao advises first to look for one’s ‘insipidity and tastelessness’, and then to the outer manifestations of his body.

The most attention in this book is given to one-sided and mixed talents, as inborn qualities or inherent abilities of human nature. They are presented here as twelve types of personality (*ti bie* 体别) of those who lack the virtues of the mean and have some advantages and disadvantages. For example, the severe, strict, sharp and resolute person is described as able to regulate others, but unable to stimulate their faults; the soft, pleasant, peaceful and considerate person has the ability to tolerate but is not able to make any decision; and the simple and upright person is sincere but lacks subtlety. It is therefore very useful to know where to employ and where not to employ such one-sided persons: the severe one is good for establishing law and order, but not good for entering

¹⁸ For more on Shang Yang’s opposition to the ‘estimation of *xian*’, see Cheng Youwei 1996, p. 53.

¹⁹ The translator of this book, J.K. Shryock, dates this book to the time between A.D. 240–250. See Shryock 1937, 2.

into any subtleties; the soft one is good for doing ordinary things, but not suitable for deliberation about complicated matters; the simple one is good at practising loyalty, but not suitable for weighing changing values (Shryock 1937, 101–2).

Such one-sided talent could be employed in particular professions as well. Consequently, they are further grouped by Liu Shao into twelve vocations or categories of abilities (*liu ye* 流业): the person of sublime behaviour (*qing jie jia* 清节家), the statesman (*fa jia* 法家), the strategist (*shu jia* 术家), the leader of a state (*guo ti* 国体), the person of instrumental ability (*qi neng* 器能), the critic (*zang fou* 臧否), the practical person (*ji liang* 技两), the astute person (*zhi yi* 知意), the literary person (*wen zhang* 文章), the learned person (*ru xue* 儒学), the dialectician (*kou bian* 口辩), and the military hero (*xiong jie* 雄杰). People with such talent can receive their proper offices according to their abilities (Shryock 1937, 105–11).²⁰

Moreover, the insightful psychological analysis of various types of talent and ways of recognizing them in this book is further complicated by the distinction of talent or ability (*cai*) and capacity (*neng*), which Liu Shao introduces in Chapter 5 ‘Caineng’ (literally translated as ‘The capacities of abilities’). According to him, ‘Abilities (*cai*) are different, and so each differs in its capacity (*neng*), which means, that ‘the capacities naturally come from the innate abilities’. For example, the capacity for responsibility is the ability of sublime behaviour; the capacity for planning is the ability of the strategist, the capacity for fierceness and ferocity is the ability of the military hero, etc. (Shryock 1937, 119–22). Again, those capacities belong only to persons of partial abilities and can be employed in gaining one particular office, whereas the capacity of a ruler consists of all abilities and manifests itself in harmonizing and ruling over all abilities or his subjects.

Such detailed classification is presented here to show that only those who have a broad nature are suitable for both great and small affairs, whereas those who have a narrow nature are suitable only for small affairs. Liu Shao views the difference between bigness and smallness as a difference of degree. It could be considered a difference in human nature as well, because ability or talent (*cai*) is conceived by Liu Shao as an inherent quality of human nature which cannot be transformed or improved through teaching, thus only making a person capable of performing a certain kind of work and even making him a certain kind of person. Then, there is no wonder that Liu Shao concentrates his attention on the main laws of manifestations of human essence, that is, nature and feelings, putting aside the relationship of human nature and talent as perhaps unproblematic.

²⁰ ‘Therefore it is salty and yet not salty, tasteless and yet k’uei, plain yet not undecorated, refined yet not over-decorated. It can be awe-inspiring, and it can cherish. ...It is capable of infinite change, reaching the proper state as limit’ (Shryock 1937, 101–2).

The relationship of human talent and nature (*xing* 性) was, however, the object of philosophical debates, which intensified during the Wei-Jin period. They were summarized by Zhong Hui in his book *Si ben lun* (*The Discussion on Four Roots*), which divides the debates into four theories or positions: 1) the theory about the sameness of talent and nature (*cai xing tong* 才性同), as represented by Fu Jia; 2) the theory about the difference of talent and nature (*cai xing yi* 才性异), as represented by Li Feng; 3) the theory about the harmonization of talent and nature (*cai xing he* 才性和), as represented by Zhong Hui; 4) the theory about the separateness of talent and nature (*cai xing li* 才性离), as represented by Wang Guang. The question may arise here: what is the difference between the sameness and harmonization of talent and nature on the one hand, and the difference and separateness on the other hand. It was explained in more detail by Cheng Youwei, who stated that the relationship of talent and nature was in every theory understood as the relationship of some particular aspects of the human body and person. For example, it was understood as the relationship of moral behaviour (*de, de xing*) and talent in the first theory, as the relationship of natural essence (*ziran shuxing* 自然属性, *tianxing*) and talent in the second, as the relationship of the 'substantial' body (*benti* 本体) and functioning (*gong yong* 功用) in the third, and the relationship of moral nature (*dexing*) and tactics (*celue* 策略) in the fourth (Cheng Youwei 1996, 197–202). Unfortunately, no copies of the book by Zhong Hui are extant, and a more detailed analysis of those theories is therefore impossible.

According to Zhang Dainian, this discussion did not have any influence on later (Tang, Song) dynasties (Zhang Dainian 2002, 391). I would not like to agree completely with his opinion. First, it seems to me that the ramification of this problem of the relationship of human nature and talent could be found in the literal and aesthetical theories (e.g. of Cao Pi and Liu Xie), as well as the teachings of Neo-Confucianists, in which talent was conceived as the manifestation of vital energy (*qi* 气), as opposed to or correlative to principle (*li* 理). This should be the topic of another article, however.

The discussions about human resources or talent in pre-imperial and early imperial China were inseparable from anthropological and philosophical thinking about human nature and from the resolution of political problems. In summary, in the semantics of *cai* at least three aspects that were co-related and did not have analogous treatment in Western culture can be discerned: 1) ethical-social (as revealed through the relationship of *cai* and *de* as well as *cai* and *xing* [human nature]), 2) classifiable (as revealed through the hierarchization of human abilities and the imagining of ideal persons), 3) anthropocosmological-aesthetical (discussing talent from the perspective of *yin-yang* 阴阳 cosmology, processual flow of vital energy [*qi*], and the co-relative existence of the micro- and macrocosmic realms).

This approach to human talent reveals the concept of person not so much as a unique and absolute value by itself, but rather as the typical totality of particular potencies, which could and should be integrated into the hierarchical structure of human resources. This means that the Chinese did avoid some mystification, essentialisation and romanticisation of human talent, which took place in Western culture (especially with the titanism of the Renaissance and beyond). The understanding of human resources in China had from the very beginning a strong utilitarian motivation with the purpose of its applicability in the political sphere, and this was the contribution not only of Confucians, but of Legalists, Logicians and Dialecticians as well. Moreover, the ethical grounding of human resources in China seems to be very topical and motivating for all cultures around the world.

References

- Ames, Roger T. *The Art of Rulership. A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought*, foreword by Harold D. Roth, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994.
- Ames, Roger T., Henry Rosemont, Jr. (trans.). *The Analects of Confucius. A Philosophical Translation*, A new translation based on the Dingzhou fragments and other recent archaeological finds, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.
- Balazs, Etienne. *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy. Variations on a Theme*, trans. H.M. Wright, ed. Arthur F Wright, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1964.
- Chaffee, John W. *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995.
- Cheng Youwei 程有为. *Zhongguo gudai rencai xixiang shi* 中国古代人才思想史 (The History of Thinking on Human Talent in Ancient China), Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou guji chubanshe, 1996.
- Duyvendak, J.J.L. (trans.). *The Book of Lord Shang: A classic of the Chinese school of law*, trans. from Chinese with introduction and notes, London: Arthur Probstain, 1928.
- Lau, D.C. (trans.). *Mencius*, with an introduction, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.
- Lee, Thomas H.C. *Education in Traditional China*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2000.
- Lei Zhenxiao 雷贞孝. *Zhongguo rencai sixiang shi* 中国人才思想史 (The History of Thinking on Human Talent in China), Beijing: Zhongguo zhannian chubanshe, 1986.
- Li Shuxi 李树喜 (ed.). *Zhongguo rencai shi* 中国人才史 (The History of Human Talent in China), Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guanbo chubanshe, 1992.
- Liao, W.K. (trans.). *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu*, London: Arthur Probstain, 1959.
- Makeham, John (trans.). *Balanced Discourses, translation of Xu Gan 'Zhong lun'*, with introductions by Dang Shengyuan and John Makeham, A bilingual ed., New Haven and London: Yale University Press, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2002.
- Maliavin — Малявин, В.В. *Гибель древней империи* (The Fall of the Ancient Empire), Москва: Наука, 1983.
- Мартупов — Мартынов, А.С. 'Проблема личности в имперском Китае' (The problem of the person in Imperial China), in *Личность в традиционном Китае* (The person in Traditional China), ed. В.Б. Меньшиков, Москва: Наука, Восточная литература, 1992.

- Shryock, J.K. (trans.). *The Study of Human Abilities. The Jen wu chih of Liu Shao*, New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1937.
- Zhang Dainian. *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Edmund Ryden, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2002.
- Zhang Xianghao 张祥浩. 'Zhongguo gudai de cai de lun' 中国古代的才德论 (Theories about talent and virtue in Ancient China), *Nanjing daxue xuebao* 4 (1988): 34–41.
- Zinovjev — Зиновьев, Г.В. 'Лю Шао. О человеческом существе' (Liu Shao. On Human Essence), in *Искусство властвовать* (The Art of Rulership), Москва: Белые альвы, 2001, 175–266.

Loreta POŠKAITĖ, Ph.D. (lposkaite@yahoo.com), Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at the Centre of Oriental Studies, Vilnius University

✉: Vilnius University, Centre of Oriental Studies, Universiteto g. 5, LT-01513 Vilnius, Lithuania