

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

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**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 (3<sup>rd</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> The important contribution in the sphere of studies of

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