

The Western Inscription

by Zhang Zai

(translation by B.W. Van Norden; January 13, 2006)

[Translator's Introduction: The "Western Inscription" was a brief statement that the philosopher Zhang Zai wrote and posted on the Western wall of his study (hence its title). This brief, inspiring work became one of the fundamental expressions of the ethical views of the Confucian revival of the Tang and Song dynasties. After you have read it, ask yourself: Does the "Western Inscription" say anything different from what Buddhists would also say? This is a question that concerned later Confucian philosophers (because they were harsh critics of Buddhism). See, for example, Cheng Yi's "Letter in Response to Yang Shi's Letter on the 'Western Inscription' " (in Chan's Source Book, pp. 550-551).]

Yang is the father; yin is the mother. And I, this tiny thing, dwell enfolded in Them. Hence, what fills Heaven and Earth is my body, and what rules Heaven and Earth is my nature. The people are my siblings, and all living things are my companions. My Ruler is the eldest son of my parents, and his ministers are his retainers. To respect those great in years is the way to "treat the elderly as elderly should be treated." To be kind to the orphaned and the weak is the way to "treat the young as young should be treated." ⁱ The sage harmonizes with Their Virtue; the worthy receive what is most excellent from Them.

All under Heaven who are tired, crippled, exhausted, sick, brotherless, childless, widows or widowers -- all are my siblings who are helpless and have no one else to appeal to. To care for them at such times is the practice of a good son. To be delighted and without care, because trusting Them, is the purest filial piety. ...

Riches, honor, good fortune, and abundance shall enrich my life. Poverty, humble station, care, and sorrow shall discipline me to fulfillment. Living, I

compliantly serve Them; dead, I shall be at peace.

ⁱ The quoted phrases are from *Mengzi* 1A7.