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# Mozi: Universal Love and Human Agency

Yuxi (Candice) Wang  
*Pomona College*

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Undergraduate Research Award

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Pomona College

Reflective Essay

## Reflective Essay

My research paper on Mozi started as a primary source analysis for my Religious Studies Directed Reading seminar, *Disputing the Way in Early China*. As part of the assignment, I revised my first draft, which I wrote solely based on Philip Ivanhoe's translation of Mozi's text, incorporating feedback from Professor Zhiru and my classmates as well as secondary sources by A.C. Graham and Benjamin Schwartz. Professor Zhiru also gave me Burton Watson's translation of the text for reference. In the process of revision, I realized that Watson's translation of Mozi's central idea as "universal love" conveys the concept better than Ivanhoe's translation "impartiality". Professor Zhiru also suggested that looking at Chinese sources might be helpful to my research since I am fluent in both Chinese and English languages. Hence, I went to the library to look for more sources to deepen my understanding of the text and learn more about the implication of reading a text in translation.

My library research started with inputting "Mozi" in the search box on library website's front page. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the library has a plethora of primary and secondary sources in both Chinese and English, some by famous Chinese scholars who studied Mozi over a hundred years ago and others published recently by scholars writing in English.

A digitized book that I accessed online, *Mozi as an Evolving Text*, provides useful context for my analysis. In class, we read A. C. Graham's *Disputers of the Tao*, a piece of fine secondary scholarship that proposes the "Three-Sects Theory" to explain internal inconsistencies in Mozi. Graham attributes different chapters to different interpretations by competing sects of Mohist thought. Prior to undertaking the library research, I had taken Graham's theory as absolute and my essay was previously centered on the extent to which I should ascribe all textual inconsistencies to the differences among Mohist sects. It was not until reading this online book that I began to entertain other theories to explain the seemingly diversification in the text of Mozi. *Mozi as an Evolving Text* discusses Taeko Brooks' "Sequence Theory", which attributes the text's internal inconsistencies to developments over time, and compares it to Watanabe Takashi's "Alternative Evolution Theory". As a first-year college student entering the world of academic discourse, I became aware of how scholars engage in dialogues with each other through Takashi's analysis of the similarities and tensions across the three predominant theories in Mozi studies. *Mozi as an Evolving Text* also warns me against assuming and therefore looking for

unity in the treatments of different chapters in Mozi, which I originally expected in my first reading of the primary source.

Another helpful secondary source I found through my library online search was a Ph.D. dissertation thesis on Mozi written by a doctoral candidate named Gunnar Sjöholm at Lund University, Sweden in 1981. I was able to request this item via interlibrary loan. This find is particularly exciting not only in terms of contents, but also because it provides me with inspiring glimpses of what graduate students accomplish at the end of their academic careers and their potential contributions to scholarship. Sjöholm pays close attention to the original Chinese ideographs in his analysis of Mozi's text, an aspect of the primary source that I initially neglected when reading it in translation. Bringing in other scholars' studies of graphic elements of Chinese characters, Sjöholm employs the method of "Metaphorical Associative Word Field" to explain the meaning of key words in Mozi's text. Sjöholm's thesis adds significant depth to my understanding of Mozi because much of the original Chinese ideographs' richness cannot be fully encapsulated by different English translations of the words.

Furthermore, Sjöholm discusses Mozi's artisan-class background in the light of the text's plain literary style that starkly contrasts with the writings of other elite philosophers who were Mozi's contemporaries. Sjöholm's contextualization of Mozi's socioeconomic background is especially beneficial and critical to restructuring my interpretations of his utilitarian principles and the examples he deploys to advance his arguments. Sjöholm's comparison of Mozi's text with "The Analects" (by Confucius) also helps me further ground my reading of Mozi within broader confluences of early Chinese thought.

Locating the print books from my search results, I made my first trip to the Asian Library at Honnold and was completely amazed by the resources I encountered there. Aside from books on Mozi, I saw traditionally bound volumes of bureaucratic reports with yellowing paper and meticulous ink writing from over a century ago as well as contemporary literature that I had been wanting to read since graduating from middle school in China. A Chinese secondary source on Mozi written by Liang Qichao, a Chinese scholar, proved to be most helpful in my research.

Writing during a time of political turmoil and social unrest in early twentieth century China, Liang provides alternative interpretations to contextualize Mozi compared to western

scholars. Liang determines that Mozi's philosophy arose out of challenges to Confucian doctrines and suggests different groupings of Mozi's chapters. In addition, Liang argues that the chapters on Heaven and spirits in the text are in fact motivated by Mozi's desperation to use superstition as a persuasion tactic rather than by Mozi's genuine belief in supernatural forces. This analysis aligns with the acceptance of scientific proofs and the rejection of religious elements that modern Chinese intellectuals during Liang's time tended toward. Recognizing this broader pattern in interpretations, I realized that I have to keep in mind the ways in which a scholar's background might mold one's reading of classical sources.

Liang's usage of the original text's language avoids the problem of translating Mozi's central idea into "impartiality" or "universal love". In writing my paper on Mozi in English, it was helpful to compare the treatments of important Chinese terms by different scholars and the implication of various translations. In the case of this particular term, Sjöholm's graphical approach suggests understanding the concept as "joint action", which complements the meanings of different translations.

The process of researching Mozi taught me important lessons of comparing secondary sources and analyzing the text from multiple approaches. Especially for scholarship in translation, it is crucial to take language into account in considering key terms' meanings. The digitized book, the interlibrary loan service, as well as the Religious Studies Librarian Holly Gardinier were extremely helpful to my research process. Furthermore, the Asian Library collection was the most valuable resource to my research on Chinese philosophy. A comprehensive comparative investigation of different versions of Chinese primary sources and of different translations by English-speaking scholars over the years would be a good future project to undertake given the library resources.

2016  
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Pomona College

Research Project

“Mozi: Universal Love and Human Agency”

# Mozi: Universal Love and Human Agency

Candice Wang

Pomona College

## Abstract:

Mozi (c. 480-390 B.C.E.) was a Chinese philosopher from the Warring States period in early Chinese history whose utilitarianism contrasted with Confucian and Daoist thought. Through reading the Mohist text in translation, I examined the relationship between two central principles in Mozi's philosophy: Heaven's standard universal love and human action. Mozi builds his arguments in the framework of a sociopolitical hierarchy that incorporates utilitarian analyses of customs, morality, and beliefs in ghosts and spirits. By comparing secondary sources in English and Chinese, reading different translations, and learning from graphical analysis of the text's key terms' original Chinese ideographs, I concluded that in Mozi's philosophy, human action is the necessary agent to carry out Heaven's will of universal love for the ultimate goal of benefitting all people.

## Key Words:

Mozi, early Chinese philosophy

Candice Wang  
RSLT 199DR  
Professor Zhiru  
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### Mozi: Universal Love and Human Agency

“Heaven made it come to pass that [the sage-kings] each became the Son of Heaven and were given the wealth of all the world.”<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 26 (“Heaven’s Will”), Mozi (c. 480-390 B.C.E.) ascribes Heaven the power of appointing the head of the sociopolitical hierarchy in the human world. However, Mozi gives another account in Chapter Eleven (“Obeying One’s Superior”): “[the people] chose the best person among the most worthy and capable in the world and established him as the Son of Heaven.”<sup>2</sup> This alternative theory of the origin of government suggests a bottom-up, rather than top-down selection of the Son of Heaven. In this account, the people have their sense of moral judgment to choose a ruler.<sup>3</sup> This juxtaposition poses the question of the relationship between Heaven and people: is Heaven an external entity imposing morality on human endeavors, or an extension of human tendency to prefer righteousness and universal love? This question must be investigated in the context of Mozi’s sociopolitical hierarchy in which Heaven lords over the Son of Heaven, who governs the people. In this system, Heaven’s will, universal love, is carried out through human agency for the purpose of benefitting all people.

According to Mozi, Heaven’s standard does not originate from the people. Even “the most honored person in the world and the richest person in the world”, the Son of Heaven, “does

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<sup>1</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Twenty-Six: Heaven’s Will,” in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2001), 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, “Chapter Eleven: Obeying One’s Superior,” 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



not make up his own standard.”<sup>4</sup> Because occupants of higher position in Mozi’s framework of hierarchy are deemed more “righteous” and “wise”, they serve as models to their inferiors.<sup>5</sup> This line of reasoning applies to the people following the Son of Heaven, and also to the Son of Heaven obeying his superior. “Heaven is pure eminence and pure wisdom. Therefore righteousness in fact originates with Heaven.”<sup>6</sup> Although universal love is not synonymous with righteousness, both are moral standards and natural tendencies that according to Mozi, are decrees of Heaven.

Heaven enforces its will through rewards and punishments in a way comparable to how the Son of Heaven governs people with incentives and deterrents.<sup>7</sup> Mozi clearly states this relationship: “the way in which Heaven holds possession of the world is no different from the way in which a ruler or a feudal lord holds possession of all within the four borders of his domain.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, Heaven is simultaneously an external force from which the standard of universal love originates and a personified participant in the sociopolitical hierarchy that guides his subordinates.

Heaven sets a standard for the Son of Heaven, who then “unifies norms” for the people.<sup>9</sup> It is upon the people to choose to accord with Heaven’s will, universal love, rather than going against it. In Chapter Sixteen (“Impartial Caring”), Mozi engages in extensive reasoning to argue that universal love (or impartiality) should be people’s standard for “choosing one’s ruler”.<sup>10</sup> This attempt to convince people of the righteous choice indicates that execution of Heaven’s will

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. “Chapter Twenty-Six: Heaven’s Will,” 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> Mozi, “The Will of Heaven, Part II (Section 27),” in *Mo Tzu: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York/London: Columbia University Press, 1963), 84.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Eleven, Obeying One’s Superior,” 67.

<sup>10</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 71.

depends on human agents. Though originated from Heaven, universal love is a human act practiced by former sage-kings rather than a supernatural one like “picking up Mount Tai and carrying it across the Chang Jiang.”<sup>11</sup> In Mozi’s hierarchy, the superior sets and enforces a standard, and the inferior emulates the example of his superior. This relationship is Mozi’s ideal of government and also the role Heaven plays in governing the Son of Heaven. As Schwartz points out, “human actors basing themselves on Heaven as a ‘model’ will play the decisive role in shaping the future” in Mozi’s philosophy.<sup>12</sup> This is the interactive relationship between Heaven and the people.

Despite the implication of election based on merit in Chapter Eleven, people are expected to obey their superiors once the ruler is chosen. Here, human agency within the structure appears to be limited. In other words, the ultimate authority lies in the system of hierarchy. Mozi invokes the acts of sage-kings who “wanted to make clear to the people of the world that Heaven governs the Son of Heaven” to prove Heaven’s supreme position and urge people to obey Heaven’s will.<sup>13</sup> The principle of upward conformity holds the hierarchy firm. Communal interest depends on the orderly structure of society and right leadership.

Mozi’s utopian ideal of social order is not simply top-down or bottom-up, but grounded in the underlying assumption of reciprocity. In Chapter Sixteen (“Impartial Caring”), Mozi formulates his argument for preferring universal love over partiality around reciprocal human interactions. “One must first care for and benefit the parents of others in order to expect that they in turn will respond by caring for and benefitting one’s own parents” is the reason Mozi offers to

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring,” 72.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Mo-tzu’s Challenge,” *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 162.

<sup>13</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Twenty-Six: Heaven’s Will,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 91.

explain that universal love is more beneficial to oneself and the people collectively than filial piety.<sup>14</sup>

The idea of reciprocity also applies to the relationship between people and Heaven. “If I do what Heaven desires, then Heaven will do what I desire.”<sup>15</sup> This claim could be read in conjunction with Heaven’s mechanism of reward and punishment: “those who accord with Heaven’s will, caring for one another impartially, and benefitting one another in their interactions, will surely be rewarded.”<sup>16</sup> Although people have the autonomy to act, their agency is limited to actions in accordance with Heaven’s will, otherwise they would face consequences.

The interest of people aligns with the will of Heaven because the ultimate goal of universal love is to benefit all people. Because Heaven “lays claim to all people”, it desires prosperity for them just as the Son of Heaven wants wealth and peace for his subjects.<sup>17</sup> In both cases, the leader’s concern is meant for the people collectively, not directed at individuals. Heaven would punish one person to preserve justice and order for the benefit of all people.<sup>18</sup> Heaven judges merits of people and deeds by their contribution to the collective interest, so the Son of Heaven and the people, taking Heaven’s will as their model, should adopt this utilitarian standard as a guideline of conduct.

Mozi identifies three specific objectives of government: to “enrich the poor, increase the population, bring stability to precarious situations and order to chaos.”<sup>19</sup> These are goals of the Son of Heaven for a state and what Heaven desires of all people. In Mozi’s reasoning, the utility of different alternatives is measured by their abilities to contribute to the three purposes that

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring,” 75.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Twenty-Six: Heaven’s Will,” 91.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Twenty-Five: For Moderation in Funerals,” 87.

embody the benefit of all people. This view places usefulness as the ultimate end in Mozi's philosophy, relegating other institutions to the status of means. "If the people of the world all obey their superiors on up to the Son of Heaven but do not obey Heaven, then Heavenly disasters still will not cease."<sup>20</sup> Upward conformity within the hierarchy has to accord with Heaven's will and serve the benefit of all people. Hence, rather than an end in itself, the hierarchical system is the instrument through which the Son of Heaven and the people can carry out Heaven's will.

Rising from the craftsman class, Mozi advocates for "rank awarded on the basis of virtue" in Chapter Eight ("Honoring the Worthy") because it strengthens the effectiveness of the hierarchy and contributes to governance in accordance with Heaven's will; his motivation is not pure moral affinity for meritocracy or social mobility. Mozi presents the examples of sage-kings elevating able people of humble origin to high positions in the bureaucracy because of the usefulness of such acts. Meritocracy can "promote public righteousness and prevent private resentment."<sup>21</sup> It is for constructing a stable society to serve the benefit of all people rather than personal fairness. Mozi's discourse on meritocracy suggests his egalitarianism, but more importantly, it reveals his commitment to utilitarianism. Equality, or even moral standards, are only desired in their usefulness. As Schwartz suggests, Mozi is concerned with "doing good" rather than "being good".<sup>22</sup>

Mozi's pragmatism is most pronounced in his attitude toward so-called tradition. Although he often cites the sage-kings as examples for contemporary rulers to emulate like "The Analects" does, Mozi does not value antiquity for its own sake. He takes a critical approach to customs and follows only those that lead to "the way to realize what is benevolent and what is

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., "Chapter Eleven: Obeying One's Superior," 67.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., "Chapter Eight: Honoring the Worthy," 64,

<sup>22</sup> Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 146.

right.”<sup>23</sup> Music, an important part of Confucian rites, is condemned by Mozi because it “does not promote the benefit of people in the world today.”<sup>24</sup> Activities that in the Confucian worldview relate to moral cultivation such as rituals and music are judged by their usefulness to increase wealth and population for the benefit of all people in Mozi’s philosophy. As Liang Qichao explains in *A Critical Survey of Mo Tzu*, everything Mozi advocates stems from the principle of universal love, and the practical aspect of this theory lies in mutual benefit and utility for all.<sup>25</sup>

Mozi’s view on mourning rituals provides an example of his utilitarian analysis of traditions and rites. He rejects practices of “lavish funerals and prolonged mourning” because “the state would be poor, the people few, and the government in chaos” as a consequence.<sup>26</sup> Mozi’s method of investigation in reaching this conclusion further illustrates his standard. Because his ultimate concern is tangible economic achievements, Mozi reasons in these terms. Graham points out “the three tests of argument” that Mozi employs to argue his claims: “finding the assertion’s root, the evidence for it, and the use of it.”<sup>27</sup> Mozi believed that once acquainted with the right evidence, people would correct their thinking and act accordingly. In prescribing social norms, Mozi does not merely appeal to the authority of “tradition” but judges their consequences with regard to bringing wealth, population, and order, which is what Heaven desires for its people. The sage-king Yu “launched a campaign to rectify the ruler of the Miao was not because he wanted to increase his wealth and honor, earn for himself additional favors and blessings... but because he wanted to contribute to the benefit of the world and eliminate

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<sup>23</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Twenty-Five: For Moderation in Funerals,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., “Chapter Thirty-Two: A Condemnation of Musical Performances,” 105.

<sup>25</sup> Liang Qichao, *A Critical Survey of Mo Tzu* (Shanghai: Commercial Press Limited, 1921), 16.

<sup>26</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Twenty-Five: For Moderation in Funerals,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> A.C. Graham, “A Radical Reaction: Mo-Tzu,” *Disputers of the Tao* (Peru: Open Court Publishing Company, 1989), 37.

what is harmful to it.”<sup>28</sup> To Mozi, the sage-kings are exemplary rulers because their actions were motivated by the intention to benefit all people, which was in accordance with Heaven’s will.

In a similar vein, Mozi denounces fatalism on the basis of its counter-productiveness. “Fatalism brings no benefit to Heaven above, no benefit to the spirits in the middle realm, and no benefit to mankind below” because it prevents people from “pursuing their tasks”.<sup>29</sup> If the belief in fatalism leads to “not enough wealth and goods”, it fails to meet the standard of Heaven and is “the way of evil man”.<sup>30</sup> Mozi examines the claim of fatalists by applying it to the three tests of argument and emphasizes that human conduct is responsible for consequent rewards and punishments. Such importance placed in human agency brings up the question of the role of supernatural forces: Heaven above, and the ghosts and spirits in the middle realm.

In Mozi’s three-tiered system, Heaven is above ghosts and spirits, and all of them govern the people. Heaven plays the role of the ultimate moral leader that monitors the Son of Heaven: “If the Son of Heaven does something good, Heaven has the power to reward him, and if he does something bad, Heaven has the power to punish him.”<sup>31</sup> The sage-kings whose conduct conformed to the expectations of this hierarchy “worked to promote what is beneficial to the world and eliminate what is harmful.”<sup>32</sup> Heaven has a will independent of human actions, but this will is ultimately concerned with the welfare of people. As Schwartz suggests, the Son of Heaven is “the active collaborator of Heaven” whose actions contribute to organizing Mozi’s ideal productive society.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Mozi, “Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring”, trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> Mozi, trans. Watson in *Mo Tzu: Basic Writings*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>33</sup> Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 145.

Ghosts and spirits also enforce Heaven's ideal by watching over human conduct and responding with rewards and punishments. Mozi reasons in Chapter Thirty-One ("On Ghosts") that ghosts and spirits exist and "could reward the worthy and punish the wicked."<sup>34</sup> However, ghosts and spirits do not have an agenda of their own outside of monitoring people's actions to ensure that "the world will be well-ordered."<sup>35</sup> In contrast with their ritual significance in "The Analects", ghosts and spirits are rather "perfunctory" in Mohist thought with little implication on "the moral cultivation of individuals or communities".<sup>36</sup> Mozi discusses ghosts and spirits as useful deterrents against harmful human actions. Hence Graham argues, "the function of Heaven and the spirits in the Mohist scheme is to enforce the true morality by reward and punishment," and its spiritual dimension does not go deeper than utilitarianism.<sup>37</sup>

How does Heaven's will, universal love, manifest in Mozi's hierarchy, through the relationships among Heaven, the Son of Heaven, and people? The sage-king Tang's speech demonstrates Mozi's stance:

I, the little one, Lü, presume to use a dark-colored sacrifice to make my announcement to the Lord of Heaven above. I declare that Heaven's great drought is my responsibility. I do not know if I have committed some offense against those above or below... The judgment lies in your mind along, Lord! If those within my domain have committed any offense, let the responsibility rest with me. If I have committed any offense, let the responsibility not fall upon those within my domain.<sup>38</sup>

Mozi does not highlight Tang's deference to Heaven in performing the sacrificial ritual, but emphasizes the fact that Tang "did not hesitate to present himself as an offering" despite his

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<sup>34</sup> Mozi, "Chapter Thirty-One: On Ghosts," trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>36</sup> Roel Sterckx, "Mozi 31: Explaining Ghosts, Again," in *Mozi as an Evolving Text: Different Voices in Early Chinese Thought*, ed. Carine Defoort and Nicolas Standaert (Leiden, NLD: Brill, 2013), 95-96.

<sup>37</sup> Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 48.

<sup>38</sup> Mozi, "Chapter Sixteen: Impartial Caring," trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 73.

position as the Son of Heaven and his wealth.<sup>39</sup> Tang's declaration to take responsibility for his subjects' wrongdoings reveals his commitment to benefit all his people, which is Mozi's message in this anecdote: "Such was the impartiality (or universal love) of Tang."<sup>40</sup> As the Son of Heaven, Tang defers to Heaven as the ultimate judge and authority. Thus, human agency in Mozi's philosophy does not preclude the authority of Heaven because Heaven desires to benefit all people, and universal love is the shared norm that Heaven, the Son of Heaven, and people have in common.

Mozi's call to action under the guiding principle of universal love operates in the framework of a sociopolitical hierarchy with the ultimate moral leadership of Heaven. As Sjöholm suggests, the Chinese ideograph for Heaven, composed of a horizontal stroke placed above the ideograph for "the 'great' performer of rites," demonstrates the hierarchical relationship between Heaven and people.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, a graphical analysis of what Graham translates as "universal love" and Ivanhoe as "impartiality", *jian*, reveals that the word could be a pictorial representation of "two bundles in the hand," which is related to the central Mohist idea of "keeping all men together to further the greatest advantage for the sake of the whole."<sup>42</sup> For Mozi, morality does not exist outside of utility. In his utopian vision, the Son of Heaven leads the people to better the collective interest in an orderly, productive society. The hierarchical system, like social practices and supernatural existence, does not exist for its own sake but serves the purpose of carrying out Heaven's will and benefitting all people. Although all people including the Son of Heaven defer to Heaven as the originator and enforcer of its standard, the superior and

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Gunnar Sjöholm, "Readings in Mo Ti, Chapters XXVI - XXVIII, On the Will of Heaven," (Lund, Sweden: Lund University, 1981), 212.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 154.



the inferior participants of the sociopolitical order have an interdependent relationship because while the former presents a model, the latter's actions materialize the ideal of universal love.

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