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## LEARNING FROM THE CONFUCIANS: LEARNING FROM THE PAST

A distinguishing characteristic of Confucianism is its emphasis on learning as a key element in moral self-cultivation. The early Confucians, Confucius (551–479 BCE), Mencius (385?–12? BCE), and Xunzi (荀子) (310?–219? BCE), discussed learning in significant detail. The texts associated with these figures attend to different ways of learning for self-development. They emphasized *xue* (學), which relates to the gathering of information and knowledge, especially about human conduct and behavior. One comes by such information through listening (*wen*) (聞) and watching (*jian*) (見) (e.g., *Analects* 2:18<sup>1</sup>), and through reading classical texts such as the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing*) (《詩經》) and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*) (《禮記》). In addition to *xue*, the early Confucian texts also emphasize the place of reflection (*si*) (思) (e.g., *Analects* 2:15, at 79) in the cultivation of the self.

There is an important distinction between these two primary aspects of learning, *xue* and *si*. While *xue* relates to observing, gathering, and collating of details of past and current practices and beliefs, *si* is reflective, requiring a person to stand back, as it were, from received information.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I demonstrate that early Confucian philosophy understands *xue* and *si* as integrated parts of the cultivation process. Both are important right through a person's development: Learning informs reflection, and reflection guides further learning (*Analects* 2:15, at 79; 15:31, at 190). In this discussion, I focus primarily on the *Analects*, while drawing from or commenting on the *Mencius* and *Xunzi* where appropriate.

An important issue in discussions of Confucian self-cultivation is the role of the past, that is, of ancient wisdoms, traditions, and practices, in Confucian thinking. Appealing to the past seems to be a characteristic feature of the Confucian tradition, one that opponents of Confucian thought (including the Mohists, Legalists, and Daoists) were keen to reject. In briefly examining some of their arguments, I seek to demonstrate that these other thinkers made an incorrect assumption about the Confucians' use of the past. While the Confucians appealed to the

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past *selectively* and *creatively* (i.e., they drew on aspects of the past when it suited their arguments), the other thinkers believed that the Confucians appealed to the past as *authoritative*, in other words, that they appealed to the past as unquestionable authority. In philosophical terms, the other thinkers accused the Confucians of fallacious appeal to tradition. I suggest that the Confucian appeal to tradition is more nuanced than these other thinkers give it credit for.

Following these discussions, I explore how thinking about and reflecting on the past can enhance the moral development of a person. My discussions here have been influenced and inspired by Antonio S. Cua's work in moral philosophy, especially his work on moral development. There are three sections in this article: the first sets out a number of ways in which the past figures in the early Confucian texts, the second examines a number of criticisms advanced by thinkers of other persuasions, and the third suggests how the Confucian references to the past may shed light on how we think about moral development.

## I. THE ROLE OF THE PAST IN CONFUCIAN MORAL THINKING

One of the most significant indications of Confucius' respect for the past is his claim that he was a transmitter rather than an innovator (*Analects* 7:1, at 111). This statement is important because it provides clues to the scope and nature of the concepts of antiquity and innovation in Confucian thought. What was Confucius transmitting, in his view? Was it the actions and practices of former sages or their commitment to humanity? Was it the traditional ritual forms of the former Zhou (周) (1122–249 BCE) period? Or was it the ideas or ideals in the ancient texts such as the *Odes*? In this section, I explore a number of ways in which the past is evoked, in the ways of ancient sages, *li* (禮) (ritual forms that guide behavior), and reading and understanding classical texts.

### 1. *The Ways of the Ancient Sages*

In the *Analects*, Confucius upholds the way of life during the earlier part of the Zhou period when Zhou Gong (周公) (ca. eleventh century BCE) was in power; he makes rhetorical remarks about his dreams of Zhou Gong (7:5, at 111–12; 8:20, at 124–25). He also idealizes the commitment and achievements of the legendary sage rulers Yao (堯), Shun (舜), and Yu (禹). The *Analects* makes a number of references to these sage rulers specifically with regard to their adherence to Heaven (*tian*) (天) as their model (8:19, at 124; 20:1, at 226–

27), devotion to gods and spirits of ancestors (8:21, at 125), their frugality in personal affairs and lavishness in ceremonial ritual (8:21, at 125), effective and nonassertive government (15:5, at 185), and their moral leadership and commitment to the common people (8:19, at 124; 20:1, at 226–27). The text also enumerates a number of practical projects initiated by the sages, such as the construction of canals and irrigation channels (8:21, at 125). These references to the commitment and achievements of the sage-rulers are examples of the Confucian ideal of benevolent government (*renzheng*) (仁政) that seeks to bring benefits to the common people.

There are many similar references to sage kings in the *Mencius*, including especially those that articulate the ruler's commitment to the welfare of the people (*Mencius* 1A:7, 1B:4, 4B:5, 4B:28).<sup>3</sup> In his discussions, Mencius draws liberally on selected details from the past to illustrate his conception of ideal, benevolent government. The text provides some elaborate detail of government administration and benevolent treatment of the people (see especially *Mencius* 6B, at 263–85). Mencius also provides many negative examples of what those in power should not do.

Like Confucius and Mencius, Xunzi appeals to examples of paradigmatic as well as deplorable behavior. However, Xunzi explicitly contemplates how these appeals function in argumentation. For example, he notes that appeals to *li* should draw from the recent rather than more distant past because of the “difficulty of acquiring accurate information about the past.”<sup>4</sup> Among the three early Confucians, Xunzi appears most concerned about the issue of historical accuracy.<sup>5</sup> It would appear that perhaps Confucius and Mencius were more lax about precision, even though Confucius did consider how the past might be revised (e.g., *Analects* 2:11, at 78).

In Mencius' discussions, the examples from the past are injected with evaluative content; the passage on Jie (桀) and Zhou (紂), two ineffective kings, is just one of many such references:

Mencius said, “It was through losing the people that Chieh [Jie] and Tchou [Zhou] lost the Empire, and through losing the people's hearts that they lost the people. There is a way to win the Empire; win the people and you will win the Empire. There is a way to win the people; win their hearts and you will win the people. . . . The people turn to the benevolent as water flows downwards . . . thus Chieh and Tchou drove the people to T'ang [Tang] and King Wu.” (*Mencius* 4A:9, at 159)

Here, Mencius makes an evaluative judgment about the shortcomings of Jie and Zhou. We cannot tell from this passage whether the causal connections he makes, regarding the fundamental role of benevolence in good government, are accurate reports of what actually happened

during the time of Jie and Zhou. As studies such as David Nivison's "Mengzi as Philosopher of History" show many of Mencius' references to historical figures and events are grossly inaccurate.<sup>6</sup> Nivison does not speculate on Mencius' reasons for misreporting history, although he notes that, as a result of his investigation he does not trust Mencius' details about historical situations and events.

Xunzi's references to "historical examples" are not dissimilar from Mencius'. For example, in his discussion of physiognomy, Xunzi argues against the increasingly popular practice of fortune-telling based on a person's physiognomy. He draws on examples of the past to substantiate his argument that a person's physical features have no relation to his or her moral goodness or achievements:

When a person's principles are upright and his heart obeys them, although his physiognomy be repulsive, yet if his heart and principles are good, his physiognomy will not hinder him from being a superior man . . . the physiognomy of Confucius was such that his face was like a rumpled square; the physiognomy of Duke Chou [Zhou] was such that his body was like a broken tree. (*Xunzi*, "Chapter 5: Against Physiognomy" ["Fei Xiang" 〈非相〉])<sup>7</sup>

When we consider Xunzi's argumentation here, it is quite clear that his primary concern is to cite these "examples" as *illustrations* of his view. Citations of history, of this sort, abound in the early Confucian texts. This feature of Confucian argumentation is closely linked to the didactic preoccupations of the Confucians: their references to historical examples are for the purpose of demonstrating a particular point rather than to report or cite historical situations accurately. Hence, it begs the question to refer to these references to former sage kings as "historical" in nature, as if the Confucians were reporting on particular situations in the past.

The creative use of examples to strengthen one's argument was a dominant style of argumentation in this early period of Chinese thought. In fact, it persisted right through to the Warring States (475–221 BCE) and Han (206 BCE–220 CE) periods. For example, two major histories of the Han period, *Shiji* (Records of the Grand Historian) (《史記》) and the *Qian Hanshu* (History of the Former Han Dynasty) (《前漢書》), articulated a sense of respect for the past and its traditions, but more importantly, they were partly historical and partly didactic. Burton Watson comments on the nature of historical texts during the Han period:

The function of history . . . is twofold: to impart tradition and to provide edifying moral examples as embodied in the classics. These two traditions, one recording the words and deeds of history, the

other illustrating moral principles through historical incidents, run through all Chinese historiography.<sup>8</sup>

While mindful that Watson was referring to historical texts of a later period, it is not out of place to suggest that the early Confucians shared these objectives when they referred to examples of people in the past. Hence, with regard to appeals to history, the early Confucian texts are informative in that they allow readers to understand certain principles and how these may be manifest, rather than accurate records. Their discussions of examples indicate their value commitments; they also allow us some insights into their reasoning and argumentative methods. References to the ways of the sages are used primarily for didactic and illustrative purposes.

## 2. *Social Ritual and Elegant Expressions of Self*

The issue of *li* (禮), social ritual, is much more complex because it covers the question of conduct not only for sages but for people more generally, including those in ordinary contexts (e.g., responding to one's teacher or father). As we would expect, a topic of this magnitude has been extensively discussed in the commentary and secondary literature on Confucianism. Indeed, the topic of *li* and its place in Confucianism appears to have been a divisive issue among the first-generation disciples of Confucius.<sup>9</sup> The connection between *li* and *ren* (仁) (humaneness, benevolence) continues as a theme in contemporary debates by scholars including Antonio Cua, Herbert Fingarette, Tu Wei-ming, Phillip Ivanhoe, and Shun Kwong-loi.

*Li* has a range of meanings in the early Confucian texts. In its broadest sense, the term refers to the normative behavioral codes that are an integral part of the ethos of a society. These behavioral codes are articulated more specifically in particular relationships including those of parent-child, teacher-student, ruler-subject, and ruler-official (*Analects* 1:2, at 71; 2:5, at 77; 3:18, at 86; 3:19, at 86; 12:5, at 154). These specific prescriptions help to maintain consistency in interactions and are therefore a basic feature of social life. In this, the widest sense of *li*, the concept encapsulates aspects of a living cultural tradition: understanding existing social, cultural, and moral norms is a prerequisite for an individual's participation in society. In addition, insofar as *li* facilitate interactions between people, they are an important factor in smooth exchanges that can have an aesthetic component. There are many allusions to the aesthetic quality of ritual forms in the Confucian texts.<sup>10</sup> In broad terms, *li* provide a fundamental social infrastructure within which individuals express themselves and interact with others; in *Analects* 9:29 (at 132), the Confucian *ren* (benevolent) person is at ease (*buyou*) (不憂).

A second conception of *li* focuses on its function in restraining human excesses by regulating behavior. In this case, *li* are externally regulated norms of behavior that help to maintain hierarchy and rank in relational interactions, both at the personal as well as more public domains. With regard to this function, *li* are understood as outwardly observable expressions of deference and respect, and of human affect more generally. However, there is no guarantee that fulfillment of behavioral forms accurately reflects a person's emotions and the central concern here is the civilizing function of social ritual. Confucius seems to think of ritual in this way in his conversation with Zaiwo (宰我) regarding the requirements of the traditional three-year mourning period (*Analects* 17:21, at 208–10). When Zaiwo challenges the necessity of following through with the customary prescriptions, Confucius did not require external conformity but turned the question to one of inner commitment:

... The Master replied, "Would you then be comfortable eating fine rice and wearing colorful brocade?"

"I would indeed," responded Zaiwo.

"If you are comfortable, then do it," said the Master.

"When exemplary persons (*junzi*) are in the mourning shed, it is because they can find no relish in fine-tasting food, no pleasure in the sound of music, and no comfort in their usual lodgings, that they do not abbreviate the mourning period to one year. Now if you are comfortable with these things, then by all means, enjoy them." (*Analects* 17:21, at 209)

Confucius' response to Zaiwo reflects an awareness of the futility of mere behavioral conformity. However, the view in the *Analects* is not consistent as some other passages emphasize the maintenance of ritual form (e.g., 3:17, at 86). Among the early Confucians, Xunzi's discussions on *li* are most extensive as he was concerned about its civilizing and transforming effects (see, e.g., his chapters "Xiushen" (修身), at 24–32<sup>11</sup> and "Li Lun" (禮論), at 89–111). In the "Li Lun" chapter, Xunzi presents a hypothetical, state-of-nature justification for *li*:

What is the origin of rites [*li*]? I reply, human beings are born with desires, and when they do not achieve their desires, they cannot but seek the means to do so. If their seeking knows no limit or degree, they cannot but contend with one another. . . . The ancient kings hated chaos and therefore established rites and rightness [*yi* 義] in order to limit it, to nurture people's desires, and to give them a means of satisfaction. They saw to it that desires did not exhaust material things and that material things did not fall short of desires. Thus both desires and things were supported and satisfied, and this was the origin of rites. (*Xunzi*, trans. Bloom, in De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 174–75)

In this passage, Xunzi emphasizes the restraining function of *li*. Being concerned about the impacts of selfishness and greed, Xunzi suggests that, without regulation, human society will be in ruins. Because of his view regarding the negative effects of unrestrained human behaviors, Xunzi has commonly been misinterpreted as holding the view that human beings are inherently (by nature) evil (*xing e* [性惡]: this phrase is also a title of one of his chapters).<sup>12</sup> In fact, we should focus on the *positive* outcomes of interactions tempered by *li*: without restraint, brothers will vie for property, but in cultivating *li* and *yi* (義), they will even yield to strangers (“Xing E” in *Xunzi*, at 157–72). Xunzi believed that human desires and expectations are malleable: he discusses this especially in his chapter on sagely government (“Wang Zhi” 王制, at 33–55). Interestingly, there is no equivalent emphasis in the *Mencius* on the regulation of human behaviors and desires, and this may be due in part to Mencius’ idealistic belief in the potency of benevolence in government, that it is sufficient to effect wider ethical reform.

In spite of the apparent pessimism in Xunzi’s philosophy, he does believe that human desires and expectations can be shaped by normative forces (see also *Analects* 19:22, at 223). In another of his passages, Xunzi eloquently expresses what may be attained by regulation according to *li*:

Rites trim what is too long and stretch out what is too short, eliminate surplus and repair deficiency, extend the forms of love and reverence, and step by step bring to fulfillment the beauties of proper conduct. Beauty and ugliness, music and weeping, joy and sorrow are opposites, and yet rites make use of them all, bringing forth and employing each in its turn. (“Li Lun” in *Xunzi*, at 100)

Here, Xunzi alludes to another function of *li*, and that is to nurture—to “bring forth”—human emotions. This third use of *li* is clearly more ambitious than the second one which aims only at restraint, although the two functions are not incompatible. As we have previously noted, Mencius, being more idealistic about Confucian benevolent government, focuses on *li* not so much in terms of its restraining function but its nurturing one. For Mencius, *li*, together with *ren*, *yi* (rightness or righteousness),<sup>13</sup> and *zhi* (智) (wisdom), are expressions of what is innate in the human mind-heart (*xin*) (心):

The heart [*xin*] of compassion is the germ of benevolence [*ren*]; the heart of shame, of dutifulness [*yi*]; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites [*li*]; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom [*zhi*]. Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. . . . If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. (*Mencius* 2A:6, at 73).

While Xunzi believes that regulation by *li* is primarily the initiative of enlightened government, Mencius holds that the origin of *li* is the human mind-heart, awaiting development in human relationships. For Mencius, *li* help in the expression of human emotion; in the passage above, courtesy (*ci*) (辭) and modesty (*rang*) (讓) are the roots of *li*. In the *Analects*, *li* are also conceived of in terms of expressions of human sentiment. However, there, *li* cover a broader range of emotions; the concept refers more generally to respect and appropriate sentiment (3:12, at 85; 3:26, at 88; 8:21, at 125; 17:11, at 206). According to our discussion so far, *li* are instrumental in that they encapsulate human feeling and facilitate its expression according to what is deemed appropriate within particular communities at particular points in time. To say that *li* are instrumental in this sense is not to say that it is secondary in importance (to *ren*) but that it is *necessary* to relational interaction, just as *ren* is. Indeed, the implicit suggestion in *Analects* 12:1 (at 152) is that one becomes a cultivated person of *ren* through constant practice of *li* ritual forms. In other words, both the *interactive transaction* and human feeling are necessary components of human life.

This is one of the distinguishing features of Confucian philosophy: both in terms of how we conceptualize the self, and of life in its concrete, lived realities, there is no dichotomy between “inner” moral commitment and “outer” expression. Elegant and polished expressions of the self are not mere “external” comportment; they are constitutive of a person’s character and moral commitment. Antonio Cua articulates how ritual form and moral character are integrated in Confucian thought:

[In Confucian ethics and traditional Chinese culture,] [t]he characteristic concern with the *form* of proper behavior is still present. However, the form stressed is not just a matter of fitting into an established social structure or set of distinctions, nor is it a matter of methodic procedure that facilitates the satisfaction of the agent’s desires and wishes, rather, it involves the elegant form (*wen*) for the expression of ethical character.<sup>14,15</sup>

According to this view, *li*, ritual forms, *are required for* self-expression and further development of an individual. In simple terms, we might say that *li* are part of the acculturation process whereby people become familiar with the accepted norms of the society they are part of. Yet, if we are to understand Confucian thought more thoroughly, ritual behavior is no mere artifact. There would have been some awareness of this theme around Confucius’ time, as the issue is expressly noted in *Analects* 12:18:

Ji Zicheng inquired “[*Junzi*] are determined by nothing other than the quality of their basic disposition (*zhi*) (質); what need do they have of further refinement (*wen*) (文)?



Zigong (子貢) replied, “It is a shame that the gentleman [*fuzi*: an official] has spoken thus about the [*junzi*] . . . Refinement is no different from one’s basic disposition; one’s basic disposition is no different from refinement. The skin of the tiger or leopard, shorn of its hair, is no different from the dog or sheep.” (155)

Ji Zicheng represents the critic’s voice that the Confucian focus on ritual forms was misdirected. This passage reveals the Confucian conception of self as a social being whose life is deeply integrated with the lives of others. Interactions and relationships are not secondary and superimposed on what is basic and more “natural”; sociality is central to human life and its meaning. Mencius developed this aspect of Confucian philosophy, making it very clear that relationships are an integral part of human nature and human life (*Mencius* 3B:9, at 139–45).

We have seen in our discussion of *li* three of its different, though not incompatible, functions. In fact, the three functions may be viewed progressively, each one being more subtle and complex than the previous. At the first, most basic level, *li* are the behavioral norms and ethos that enable a society to function well—some might say to function *at all*. In other words, *li* assist in the tasks of maintaining a society’s ethos and of socialization of individuals. At the second level, *li* are a critical part of civil society; here we may think of the functions of *li* in terms of the concept of civilization. They enhance social life and human relationships, making for smooth transactions. Third, *li* allow for the articulation of the self, as well as the application of an individual’s commitments, in ways that are understood and appropriately interpreted by others.

In summary, the concept of *li* (social ritual) pertains to aspects of cultural tradition—the ethos, so to speak—of a society at a given time. Because *li* embody and affirm the cultural traditions of a society, they encompass aspects of the past that may continue to shape the present. In understanding the concept of *li*, we also begin to appreciate how the Confucian tradition emphasizes the situatedness of the human individual and the historicity of society’s norms. An individual is in part a product of a particular socio-historical context; it is due to this that Confucian thought is sometimes deemed conservative.<sup>16</sup>

A commitment to ritual form and elegant expressions of the self requires practice in those forms and cultivation in skills of self-expression. Because Confucian philosophy takes the relational self as its starting point, it sees a very tight connection between moral commitment and practice, that is, one’s moral commitment is realized in and through one’s interactions with others. A key concept here is *xin* (信), often translated as “sincerity” or “trustworthiness,” although it is perhaps more accurately conceived in terms of “concordance

between commitment, word, and deed.” The Confucian tradition focuses not only on *what* benevolence is, but *how* it is manifest in the life of individuals in society. Understanding the commitment to humanity (*ren*) within the wider environment, appreciating the cultural (*wen* [文], *le* [樂])<sup>17</sup> and ritual forms (*li*) of a particular place and time, and knowing how appropriately to express oneself in interactions with others,<sup>18</sup> are integral and intertwined aspects of the Confucian vision.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. *Reading and Reflecting on the Odes*

The *Odes* is a classical text comprising approximately three hundred poems, parts of which had been written during the earlier part of the Zhou period. The *Analects*, *Mencius*, and *Xunzi* refer liberally to the *Odes* in their discussions, seeming to cite *Odes* as a voice of authority from the earlier Zhou tradition, and appealing to its poems to provide support for particular arguments. In the *Xunzi*, there are also some discussions about how the *Odes* are important in cultivation. In the chapter “Quan Xue” (《勸學》, at 15–23) in the *Xunzi*, the *Odes* and three other classic texts, the *Record of Rites* (*Liji*), the *Classic of History* (*Shujing*) (《書經》), and the *Record of Music* (*Yueji*) (《樂記》), are essential elements of a complete program in self-cultivation. According to this chapter in the *Xunzi*, one must read and reflect on these classics, and practise and cultivate *li* in one’s interactions, in order to appreciate the comprehensive nature of the Confucian vision.

The references to the *Odes* in the *Analects* are most interesting because there are emphatic discussions about how the *Odes* are important in moral life. From its passages, we may identify three functions of the *Odes*. First, they allow insights into the diversity of life and human experiences. These experiences are more varied than those that any one individual will experience over a lifetime. Hence, the classics, more generally, are repositories of information about the past,<sup>20</sup> about the experiences of different people. They are the *material* that a diligent person would sift through to understand more about his or her world. In this way, the *Odes* are an important resource in decision-making (*Analects* 13:5, at 163).

The *Odes* also help in situating the self: The poems provide for acquaintance and familiarity with aspects of tradition. In *Analects* 16:13 (at 200–1), we are told that reading the *Odes* helps one to “speak” (*yan*) (言). Here, we should reflect on the implicit reference to language and the factors that underlie discourse and interaction. In order to speak in a language, one must grasp the meanings and structures in language. These are, for the most part, embodied in language

use, and it is in understanding how language is used by different speakers in different contexts that one is able to use it appropriately to express oneself. In the same way that language provides a context for linguistic self-expression, aspects of tradition define the locus within which individuals express themselves and relate to others. In being acquainted with the *Odes* and similar classics, one is better able to appreciate how earlier norms and conceptual frameworks have shaped the present. In the same passage, the learner, Boyu (伯魚), has acquired fluidity and ease in self-expression after he has studied the *Odes*.

*Analects* 17:9 (at 206) expressly sets out the different ways in which the *Odes* contributes to the development of reflective capacities: They inspire (*xing*) (興), help to develop powers of observation (*guan*) (觀), encourage sociability (*qun*) (群), and improve one's critical skills (*yuan*) (怨). The *Odes* also help to develop one's ability for clarification and discrimination, that is, to understand words (names) and their applications. Ames and Rosemont translate this paragraph with an insightful practical slant: “[the *Odes*] instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you” (*Analects* 17:9, at 206). We know how these reflective skills may be manifest when, on two occasions, Confucius praises his disciples for their application of specific odes to illuminate their interpretation of issues they were deliberating on (*Analects* 1:15, at 75; 3:8, at 83–84)). We should examine the passage 1:15 with some care:

Zigong said: “What do you think of the saying: ‘Poor but not inferior; rich but not superior?’” The Master replied: “Not bad, but not as good as ‘Poor but enjoying the way (*dao*) (道); rich but loving ritual propriety (*li*) (禮).’”

Zigong said: “The *Book of Songs* [the *Odes*] states:

Like bone carved and polished,  
Like jade cut and ground.

Is this not what you have in mind?”

The Master said: “Zigong, it is only with the likes of you then that I can discuss the *Songs*! On the basis of what has been said, you know what is yet to come.” (75)

Zigong demonstrates the ability to extract the meaning of the poem, and creatively to apply it to an existing situation. While *li* are important to a person's cultivation in practical ways, the role of the *Odes*, and other texts like it, are important for developing critical skills. This passage focuses on how he uses wisdom from the past (*wang*) (往) to shed light on what is to come (*lai*) (來). This is an indication that there is some depth and complexity in the Confucian appeal to the past, which we will examine in greater detail in the final section. In the next section, we turn to criticisms of the Confucian reliance on past wisdoms, traditions, and practices.

## II. THE REJECTION OF THE PAST

In this section, I discuss a selection of criticisms advanced by other thinkers against the Confucian use of the past. The aim is to capture a range of reasons for their rejection of the authority of tradition and the past more generally, rather than to produce an exhaustive list of the discussions in this area.

### 1. Mohist Philosophy

Mozi (墨子) (480?–380? BCE) attacked a number of themes that were central to Confucianism, including its promotion of relationships, men of cultivation, ritual, and music. Mozi's rejection of antiquity was unsystematic. In his own arguments, he sometimes appeals to the past. For example, he upholds the frugality of the ancient sages in his rejection of extravagance (“Indulgence in Excess” in *Mozi*, sec. 6).<sup>21</sup> There, Mozi argues that the ways of these ancient sages are to be emulated. Yet, in its rejection of Confucianism, the *Mozi* dismisses appeals to tradition:

The Confucian says, “The cultivated person must follow the ancients in speech and dress so as to manifest humaneness.” We say, “That which is deemed ancient in speech and dress were once modern; the ancients who spoke that way and dressed that way were not considered cultivated men. Are you saying that one must wear the dress of a man who is not cultivated, and speak the speech of a man who is not cultivated, in order to manifest humaneness?” (My translation)<sup>22</sup>

This argument is interesting because it both raises an interesting point and commits a reasoning fallacy. The argument asserts that, because the Confucians are committed to the “ancients” for its own sake, they are therefore committed to a program of noncultivation because many of the ancients were not concerned about cultivation. This is a straw person fallacy as it attributes to the Confucians a claim that is not theirs. On the other hand, however, the argument makes an important comment on appeals to tradition: it points out that what is now traditional (*gu*) (古) was once current (*xin*) (新). An appeal to the past *cannot* be justified on its own grounds. In other words, if we were to ask the Confucians—or, for that matter, anyone else—their basis for appealing to the past, an answer such as “because the sages in the past said that should be so” would result in an infinite regress of appeals to the past. In thinking about the regress, we would immediately realize that, as the Mohists point out, the past was once the present. An appeal to the past must be justified on some other basis.

The Mohist criticism of appeals to the past is an important one relating to the dynamics of argumentation. In the passage above, it

objects to Confucianism on the basis that the latter looks to the past mindlessly, slavishly adhering to its dictates and norms. However, we have seen that, for the most part, when the Confucians refer to the past, these function as illustrative examples within their own arguments. When Mencius and Xunzi appeal to the past—whether in reference to the ways of the sages or texts such as the *Odes*, they use them creatively and selectively, rather than as authoritative guides that determine how life in the present should be lived.

## 2. *Legalist Philosophy*

The Legalists claimed that because Confucianism appealed to the past, it failed to adapt to the needs of the present. Han Fei (ca. 280–33 BCE), the most prominent thinker in the Legalist tradition, argued that the growth in population, from ancient times to the present, was a primary factor that necessitated a change in standards. In his essay the “Five Vermin,” Han Fei concedes that Confucian *ren-and-li* government might have been effective in ancient times; however, that was no longer applicable:

In the age of remote antiquity, human beings were few while birds and beasts were many . . . [now] people have become numerous and supplies scanty . . . people quarrel so much that . . . disorder is inevitable . . . the sage, considering quantity and deliberating upon scarcity and abundance, governs accordingly. So it is no charity to inflict light punishments nor is it any cruelty to enforce severe penalties: the practice is simply in accordance with the custom of the age. Thus, circumstances change with the age and measures change according to circumstances. (*Han Fei Zi*, “Chapter 49: Five Vermin,” at vol. II: 273, 277–78)<sup>23</sup>

The break in tradition was a critical step in the establishment of the Legalist program. In order to install rule by penal law (*fa*) (法), the Legalists had to denounce the viability of benevolent government. Being keenly aware of the incompatibility between a benevolent government and one that sought primarily to maintain its power, Han Fei claimed that Confucian benevolent government undermined rule by *fa* (*Han Fei Zi*, “Chapter 7: The Two Handles,” at vol. I: 46–50; “Chapter 19: On Pretensions and Heresies,” at vol. I: 156–68). He described their incompatibility in his anecdote of *maodun* (矛盾) (which is still popular today), of a man who promoted his spears (*mao* [矛]) and shields (*dun* [盾]) by claiming that his spears could penetrate anything, and that nothing could penetrate his shields (*Han Fei Zi*, “Chapter 40: Nan Shi,” at vol. II: 199–206).

The Legalist rejection of appeals to the past was intertwined with their preoccupation with the maintenance of the power of the sover-

eign. From the point of view of this central concern, there was only one source of authority; the common people were not to have an independent vantage point, whether from tradition or elsewhere, from which to reflect on the affairs of the state. The most thorough method of eliminating criticism of the sovereign was to restrict learning:

. . . in the state of the enlightened sovereign there is no literature written on bamboo slips, but the law is the only teaching; there are no quoted sayings of the early kings, but the magistrates are the only instructors. . . . (*Han Fei Zi*, “Chapter 49: Five Vermin,” at vol. II: 291)

The argument of the Legalists, that the optimal style of government depends in part on social and historical contingencies, is at first glance a credible one. It makes sense that different organizational styles are better suited to different population sizes. They disagreed with the Confucians more extensively, regarding the *aims* of government, and not merely in relation to its methods or styles. More importantly, their rejection of antiquity was grounded in their concern to quell dissent. The problem, from their point of view, was not antiquity as such, but rather anything that challenged the ruler’s authority. The Legalists have not successfully established an argument against appeals to the past. The heart of their argument is that, given that Confucian benevolent government and Legalist *fa* are incompatible, and given that they (the Legalists) uphold *fa*, the Confucian paradigm cannot stand.

### 3. *The Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*

The Daoist text *Zhuangzi* is disdainful of conventional pursuits. It advocates great wisdom (*dazhi*) (大知) in contrast to the small, conventional wisdoms (*xiaozhi*) (小知) held by most people and, as proposed by thinkers of other persuasions (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 2).<sup>24</sup> *Zhuangzi* sets up contrasts between the two: “Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome” (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 3).<sup>25</sup> Small knowledge is preoccupied with trivialities but, more importantly, it also restricts the perspective of the person who is guided by it. There is an illuminating description of a person who is caught up in the flow of convention:

Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending before them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic? Sweating and laboring to the end of his days and never seeing his accomplishment, utterly exhausting himself and never knowing where to look for rest—can you help pitying him? . . . Man’s life has always been a muddle like this. (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 2; trans. Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 33)

The fraught life of this man who is driven by convention—unreflective, restless, ill at ease—is drastically different from the life guided by great wisdom. In the *Zhuangzi* text, great wisdom is associated with having a certain “knack,” rather than a conventionally defined notion of benefit, worth or correctness. On the whole, the text focuses on more subjective and intuitive learning, at times mystical and perhaps spiritual.<sup>26</sup> These features are important aspects of wisdom in the *Zhuangzi*, both in content and method: because wisdom consists in transcendence of conventional values, one approaches or attains it in ways that are nonconventional.

In the *Zhuangzi*, there are a number of examples of how knack is grasped and how it is manifest. These examples are drawn from ordinary vocations and actions, a far cry from the Confucian men of wisdom or the Legalist ruler in his supremacy. There is the expert butcher, Cook Ding (丁) (chap. 3, at 63–64), the wheelwright, Bian (扁), whose craft is inexpressible in words (chap. 13, at 139–40), the experienced ferryman (chap. 19, at 136–37), the hunchback cicada catcher (chap. 19, at 138), and the wood carver and his marvelous bell stands (chap. 19, at 135). According to Schwartz, these craftsmen are not settled in transcendent awareness, merely going through the motions of men who live in the world; they are *experts* in their selected activities and they engage with the world in all its imperfections.<sup>27</sup> They are expert because of their “know-how”: “. . . the Taoist art of living is a supremely intelligent responsiveness which would be undermined by analyzing and choosing . . . grasping the Way is an unverbalisable ‘knowing how’ rather than ‘knowing that.’”<sup>28</sup>

Know-how in the *Zhuangzi* is defined in terms of its contrast with book-learning. There is striking imagery in the example where the wheelwright, Bian (the text playfully names the wheelwright “Bian,” meaning “flat”) challenges Duke Huan (桓公), who is reading an old text. Here, Zhuangzi overturns the roles of the ordinary workman and the cultivated and learned man. The wheelwright says:

If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me. This is how through my seventy years I have grown old chipping at wheels. The men of old and their untransmittable message are dead. Then what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn't it? (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 2, at 140)

This simile suggests that, if it is knack we are concerned about, we will not be able to acquire that expertise from reading a book. In fact, Bian points out that he has been unsuccessful teaching his skills to his son.

Knack cannot be taught through language; it can only be grasped in practice. Based on this and other metaphors, wisdom in the *Zhuangzi* has been described as spontaneous and intuitive. Scholars use such terms as “illumination,” “awakening,”<sup>29</sup> and “gnosis”<sup>30</sup> to describe the nature and mood of its philosophy.

These assessments of the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* are gleaned from careful study and analysis of its themes, interactions with other philosophies, and its language. However, we need to examine Zhuangzi’s use of examples—butchery, carpentry, and more generally of craftsmanship—to see whether they adequately demonstrate spontaneity and intuition. The examples in the *Zhuangzi* express various features of craftsmanship: expertly executed, nonreflective, practical, and habitual. The craft persons in the *Zhuangzi* are good at what they do because they have had much practice over the years (Cook Ding has been butchering for nineteen years (chap. 3, at 63–64); the cicada catcher has disciplined his body over time (chap. 19, at 138). The various skills may *seem* spontaneous because the skilled person does not stop to *reflect on* how she might execute her skill. Furthermore, these skills are not normally acquired through the accumulation of knowledge and are often inexpressible in words. However, because they are the result only of extensive practice and learning, they are not typically the kind of activity we would label “intuitive” or “spontaneous.” In fact, if we were to compare these examples of cultivated skills with the cultivation of the self in Confucian philosophy, there are many similar features. These include the primacy of practice, the arduous nature of cultivation, the rigor and intensity with which the learner or apprentice approaches his or her tasks, and the impressive fluency and beauty of their execution.<sup>31</sup> There is, however, one significant difference between the examples in the *Zhuangzi* and the cultivation of the Confucian paradigmatic person and that is that, in the case of the former, we are discussing skills associated with single tasks whereas Confucian self-cultivation attends to a number of integrated aspects of life (such as the relational, ethical, social, and political).

Yet, there remains in the metaphor of the wheelwright another point of interest in the context of our discussion. Not only does it challenge convention, which Confucianism upholds, it also rejects the Confucian reliance on classical texts. In general, Daoist philosophy makes a persuasive point that over-reliance on convention and tradition can stifle spontaneity and initiative in individuals. It is clear from our analysis that Confucianism emphasizes convention and tradition as part of its program. The question we need to ask is, does Confucian philosophy consistently or mostly emphasize tradition at a cost to individual initiative? In order to consider this issue more fully, we will



need to examine the conception, nature, and aims of learning in the Confucian.

### III. LEARNING THE CONFUCIAN WAY

In *Analects* 5:22, Confucius is concerned about some of his followers who are unable to take a critical stance on issues: “. . . with the lofty elegance of the literatus, they put on a full display of culture, but they don’t know how to cut and tailor (*cai*) (裁) it” (101; see also *Analects* 4:11, at 91; 12:4, at 153; 12:6, at 154; 13:23, at 168–9). The term *cai* involves the exercise of judgment to trim and prune.<sup>32</sup> Mencius picks up discussion of this issue (*Mencius* 7B: 37, at 327–31) and makes a connection between this passage and a number of others (*Analects* 13:21, at 168; 17:13, at 207). *Analects* 13:21 (at 168) emphasizes the importance of views that are carefully considered, avoiding both the rash (those who are quick to dismiss the authority of the ancients and of tradition) and the timid (those who are overly cautious about attempting different or new ways).

Mencius refers to the case of a person who does not hold to his value commitments, or perhaps does not have any. Being capricious, he openly and blindly accepts norms, irrespective of their source, and is also quick to abandon them when he so chooses (*Mencius* 7B: 37, at 327–31). Mencius describes this person—who Ames and Rosemont nickname the “village worthy”—in the following way:

The village worthy would say: “What is the point of the rash scholar’s grand ambitions? With no relation between word and deed, nor any between deed and word, I simply say ‘The Ancients this! And the Ancients that!’ And why the timid scholar’s unsociable airs? Born into this world, act on behalf of this world. As long as you are good at it, it’s fine.” At home anywhere, toadying to all around—such is the village worthy.<sup>33</sup>

This is one of the clearest statements from the early Confucian texts of the importance of being thoughtful and cautious about convention. This takes us back to the utterance by Confucius that he is a transmitter only, and not an innovator, and that he is a follower of antiquity (*haogu*) (好古) (*Analects* 7:1, at 111). How can Confucius be a transmitter *only*, if he practices and promotes revision and review of the old: “. . . I learn much, select out of it what works well, and then follow it. I observe much, and remember it” (*Analects* 7:28, at 117)? Note that, in this passage, selection *precedes* implementation.

The Confucian approach to learning is aptly captured by Levenson and Schurmann, who describe Confucius as an “innovating traditionalist,” as one who used terms from the past but injected them with

new, moral meaning.<sup>34</sup> This description captures the methodology in the *Analects*, that is, drawing from the past so that its useful aspects may be integrated into current situations. The text emphasizes a passion for learning from a range of sources (*xue*: 1:1, at 71; 6:3, at 103–4; 6:27, at 109; 7:2, at 111). One listens (*wen*) and looks (*jian*) in order to learn (2:18, at 79–80; 7:28, at 117). Those who came to inquire with Confucius were often asking about what they had heard or seen, and whether they should follow that (e.g., 11:22, at 146–47). Clearly, the followers of Confucius were not simply abiding by prevailing norms, past or present. For the Confucians, learning (*xue*), that is, information-gathering and knowledge-acquisition, is only a part of self-cultivation: when Confucius describes his stages of development (from fifteen to seventy years), *xue* is the project at the very first stage, when he was fifteen (2:4, at 76–77).

Learning must be put into practice (*xing*: 5:14, at 98; 7:3, at 111; 11:22, at 146–47), as well as reflected on (*si*: 2:15, at 79; 15:31, at 190). This is the multifaceted process of Confucian self-cultivation: a person is *informed* by learning, *tested* in practice, and *guided* by reflection. *Analects* 2:15 emphasizes the place of both learning and reflection: The Master said: “Learning without due reflection leads to perplexity; reflection without learning leads to perilous circumstances” (at 79). Both learning and reflection are necessary for the cultivation of the individual.

*Si*, reflection, is an integral concept in early Confucian philosophy.<sup>35</sup> The concept expresses the importance of reflective contemplation and critical thinking in ordinary life. In reflecting on one’s experiences and those of others in the past, one engages in the ethical life of society at the meta-ethical level, and not merely at the normative level.<sup>36</sup> For an individual to engage in reflection of this sort is to establish some critical distance from prevailing norms. For the Confucians, reasoning at this level also includes awareness of commitments and how they are manifest in practice (*Analects* 14:12, at 174; 16:10, at 199; 19:1, at 218). For example, “. . . in countenance [exemplary persons] think about [*si*] cordiality . . . in bearing and attitude they think about deference . . . in conducting affairs they think about due respect . . .” (16:10, at 199).

The Confucian exemplary person reflects on, selects, reviews, and assesses what he or she learns, including from the past. The expertise—should we say knack—attained through learning, practice, and reflection allows one to be a keen observer and assessor of others (*guan*: 1:11, at 73–74; 2:10, at 78; 4:7, at 90–91). Observations of the character and behaviors of others not only tell us about those others, they also have a role in enriching the self: the Master said, “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound

to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly” (*Analects* 7:22, at 115–16).

In this light, we can return to the aspects of history and tradition and their role in Confucian cultivation of self. Based on the preceding discussion, the past figures in the following ways:

- as examples, to illustrate a point;
- provides knowledge about customs, norms, and traditions;
- alerts individuals to the diversity of situations and the possibilities for action and responses;
- as material to reflect on in one’s development of critical and reflective skills; and
- as paradigmatic models that exemplify particular virtues.

In brief, the critics of early Confucianism have focused predominantly on the assumption that the Confucians draw from the past as authoritative. However, I have shown here that, for the most part, not only do the Confucians draw on the past selectively, they also advocate reflection on the material gathered from the past. An appropriate testimony to this claim is from the “Encouraging Learning” (“*Quanxue*”) section of the *Xunzi* text, which eloquently brings together elements of learning, practice, and reflection in the Confucian vision:

The noble person knows that what is not complete or what is not pure is unworthy to be called beautiful. Therefore he recites and reiterates so as to integrate it, reflects [*si*] and ponders so as to comprehend it, determines his associations so that he may dwell in it, and eliminates what is harmful in order to preserve and nourish it. . . . Therefore he cannot be subverted by power and profit, nor swayed by the masses and multitudes, nor unsettled by the whole world. . . . He who holds firm to inner power [*de* (德): power, virtue] is able to order himself; being able to order himself, he can then respond to others. He who is able to order himself and respond to others is called the complete man [*chengren* (成人)]. Heaven manifests itself in its brightness; earth manifests itself in its breadth; the noble person values his completeness. (*Xunzi*, trans. Bloom, in De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 164)

*Xunzi* presents a picture of the Confucian cultivated person as one who is careful, observant, learned, disciplined, and thoughtful. This exemplary person has benefited from the past by using it reflectively and not blindly. It may now be our turn to learn, thoughtfully, from these Confucian thinkers of the past.

## ENDNOTES

I am grateful to Michael Funston, whose comments have helped to shape my arguments in this article.

1. All references of Confucius' *Analects* are taken from Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to the *Analects* include page references to this book unless otherwise noted; *Analects* 2:18 is found at pp. 79–80.
2. See D. C. Lau's analysis in *Confucius: The Analects (Lun Yu)*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), 43–49.
3. All references of *Mencius* are taken from *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press; first published in Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979), unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to *Mencius* include page references to this book unless otherwise noted; *Mencius* 1A:7, 1B:4, 4B:5, and 4B: 28 are found in pp. 15–25, 33–37, 175, and 185, respectively.
4. Antonio S. Cua, "Ethical Uses of the Past," reprinted in *Human Nature, Ritual, and History: Studies in Xunzi and Chinese Philosophy*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 94.
5. *Ibid.*, 96.
6. David Nivison, "Mengzi as Philosopher of History," in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations*, ed. Alan Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 282–304, at 300.
7. *The Works of Hsuntze*, trans. Homer Dubs (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1928), 67–69.
8. Burton Watson, *Sources of Chinese Tradition: Volume 1: From Earliest Times to 1600*, ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 368.
9. Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 130–34.
10. The discussions which deal more extensively with aesthetic form in Confucianism include: Antonio S. Cua "Discussions of *Li* (Propriety): Reflections on an Aspect of Hsun Tzu's Ethics," in *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 4 (1979): 373–94; Lauren Pfister, "Considerations for the Contemporary Revitalization of Confucianism: Meditations on *Te* in the *Analects*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1986): 239–64; Herbert Fingarette, "Human Community as Holy Rite," in *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 1–17; Herbert Fingarette, "The Music of Humanity in the *Conversations* of Confucius," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10 (1983): 331–56; David Hall and Roger Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), esp. 85–88; and Karyn L. Lai, *Learning from Chinese Philosophies* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), esp. 139–56.
11. All references from *Xunzi* are taken from *Hsun Tzu: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to the *Xunzi* include page references to this book, unless otherwise noted.
12. An analogy used by Xunzi demonstrates that he did not hold a notion of inherent evil that might correspond to the Judaeo-Christian conception of original sin. In this analogy, Xunzi explains: "ritual and rightness are always created by the conscious activity of the sages; essentially they are not created by human nature. Thus a potter molds clay and makes a vessel, but the vessel is created by the conscious activity of the potter and is not created by his human nature . . ." ("Xing E," in *Xunzi*, trans. Bloom, in De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 181).
13. In the passage below, D. C. Lau translates *yi* as "dutifulness." This is an unusual rendition of *yi*, which is usually translated as "rightness" or "righteousness," or even as "morality." Lau explains in his introduction to his translation of Confucius' *Analects* that "dutifulness" captures the obligatory nature of morality, especially as "benevo-

- lence does not carry its own moral guarantee” (*Confucius: The Analects*, 27). We should, however, note that *yi* also has a sense of moral evaluation of self. See the discussions by Kwong-loi Shun, in *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 58–65; and Lai, *Learning from Chinese Philosophies*, 74–79.
14. Antonio S. Cua, “The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (1996): 153–74, at 166. Elsewhere, Cua discusses the importance of tradition in moral life in his examination of concepts such as “form of life,” “way of life,” and “style of life.” He writes, “The notion of the form of life focuses on the consensual background of the moral tradition, which renders intelligible the uses of moral concepts. The notion of a way of life focuses on the coherence and convergent ways of behavior as congruent with a set of formulable rules of conduct; while the notion of the style of life draws attention to the diverse qualitative significance of the way of life for individual agents.” (See Antonio S. Cua, “Reflections on Moral Theory and Understanding Moral Traditions,” in *Interpreting across Boundaries*, ed. Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 283–84.
  15. Herbert Fingarette emphasizes the integration of behavior—performance—and moral commitment. He notes that “Acts that are *li* . . . are subtle and intelligent acts exhibiting more or less sensitivity to context, more or less integrity in performance. . . . We distinguish sensitive and intelligent musical performances from dull and unperceptive ones; and we detect in the performance confidence and integrity, or perhaps hesitation, conflict, ‘faking,’ ‘sentimentalizing.’ We detect all this *in* the performance; we do not have to look into the psyche or personality of the performer. It is all ‘there,’ public.” (See Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 53.) In breaking down this dichotomy, Fingarette suggests that the ethical discussions in Western philosophy tend to focus on the “inner” psychological self, leading to a neglect of the “outer” performance of a moral act.
  16. See, for example, Kwong-loi Shun’s discussion of “*Jen* and *Li* in the *Analects*” in *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993): 457–80, esp. 465–66; 472–73. In his analysis of the connection between *ren* and *li*, Shun preserves the element of conservative backward pull in revisions of *li*. Shun’s analysis stands in contrast to the interpretation of David Hall and Roger Ames in *Thinking through Confucius*. In their discussion of *li*, Hall and Ames state that “. . . just as the ritual actions [*li*] inherited from the traditions require appropriation and creative elaboration, so the inherited physical disposition [*ti* 體] is not definitive, but an achievement informed by the insights of those who have gone before. It is malleable—wax into which one’s novelty can be impressed” (Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 101).
  17. I use the term “culture” broadly to include *wen* (script, literature) and *le* (music). Music, *le*, was an important part of Confucian ritual life. In the Confucian texts, there is a connection between music and moral cultivation (*Analects* 3:3, at 82; 13:3, at 161–62). There was acceptable music (*Analects* 7:14, 8:15, and 9:15 at 113–14, 123–24, and 130, respectively) and degenerate music (*Analects* 15:11, at 187; 17:18, at 208). Some of the references to music in the *Analects* mirror the references to the early sages. The music associated with decadent and corrupt rulers is also debased. These are most probably evaluative rather than descriptive. My discussion of the past will not include an evaluation of music because, while there are references to music of the past, history or age is not an integral element of music. It is, nevertheless, important to note that, in the Confucian tradition, music is an important element of cultural tradition.
  18. Karyn L. Lai, “Confucian Moral Cultivation: Some Parallels with Musical Training,” in *The Moral Circle and the Self: Chinese and Western Perspectives*, ed. Kim-Chong Chong, Sor-Hoon Tan, and Chin Liew Ten (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), 107–39, esp. 111–12.
  19. *Ibid.*, 123–30.
  20. Hall and Ames discuss two functions of the *Odes*, one as a “repository of historical information to be learned [*xue*]” and the other “a primary source of creative reflection [*si*].” See Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 64.

21. In *The Ethical and Political Works of Motse*, trans. Yi-pao Mei (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1929), 22–27.
22. The Mohists were keen to reject these aspects of tradition because keeping up with rituals and music was a cost that society could not afford. Mozi perceived the Confucian project as an elitist preoccupation, attempting merely to preserve exclusive ritual forms. He argued that the resources required for the maintenance of *li* were simply unjustified as they did little more than to detract from economic productivity. Refer to “Against Confucianism,” sec. 39; *Mozi*, in *Mo Tzu: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), 124–36.
23. All references of *Han Fei Zi* are taken from *Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu: A Classic of Chinese Political Science*, trans. Liao Wen-kuei (London: Arthur Probsthain, 1939, 1959), vols. I and II, unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to the *Han Fei Zi* include page references to this book, unless otherwise noted.
24. All references from *Zhuangzi* are taken from *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, trans. Angus C. Graham (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), unless otherwise noted. Subsequent references to the *Zhuangzi* include page references to this book, unless otherwise noted. *Zhuangzi* 2 is found at 48–61.
25. Translated by Burton Watson in *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 32.
26. Philip J. Ivanhoe (“*Zhuangzi* on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Tao,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 [1993]: 639–54), Robert Allinson (*Chuang-Tzu for Spiritual Transformation: An Analysis of the Inner Chapters* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989]), and Lee Yearley (“The Perfected Person in the Radical *Chuang Tzu*,” in *Experimental Essays on the Chuang Tzu*, ed. Victor Mair [Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986]) suggest that the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* engenders spiritual transformation; Edward Slingerland understands the philosophy in religious terms (in “Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Idea of Wu-Wei,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2 [1986]: 293–328), while Benjamin Schwartz (*The World of Thought in Ancient China*) and Harold Roth (*Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1989]) understand it in mystical, perhaps gnostic terms (Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*). Note that the *Zhuangzi* is a composite text, with some identifiable strains: Yangist, Primitivist, Syncretist, and school of Zhuangzi (Angus C. Graham, “How Much of *Chuang Tzu* Did Chuang Tzu Write?” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 3 [1980], thematic issue: 459–501).
27. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 235.
28. Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989), 186.
29. Lisa Raphals, “Skeptical Strategies in *Zhuangzi* and Theaetetus,” in *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, ed. Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 30.
30. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, 215–37.
31. Refer to Antonio S. Cua, “Reasonable Action and Confucian Argumentation,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (1973): 57–75; and Fingarette, “The Music of Humanity.”
32. Lau, *Analects*, 79
33. Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, at n. 86, 238–39.
34. Joseph Levenson and Franz Schurmann, *China: An Interpretive History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 54.
35. It is curious that Ivanhoe makes a firm distinction between the philosophies of Confucius and Xunzi as emphasizing learning (*xue*), and that of Mencius as emphasizing thinking (*si*) (in Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Thinking and Learning in Early Confucianism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17, no. 4 [1990]: 473–93, esp. 473–74). Strictly speaking, Ivanhoe’s distinction that is drawn along the lines of emphasis (i.e., Xunzi emphasizes *xue* while Mencius emphasizes *si*), is not incorrect. However, we should be careful not to overextend the dichotomy between the two philosophies (refer to the quotation from *Xunzi* in the text, at the end of the article, that emphasizes the place

of *si* in the life of the complete person). Furthermore, the passages in the *Analects* refer to *si* as much as they do *xue*.

36. Refer to Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*; Antonio S. Cua, "Tasks of Confucian Ethics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1979): 55–67; Antonio S. Cua, "Confucian Vision and Human Community," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (1984): 227–38; and Fingarette, "The Music of Humanity."