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Chapter Title: Confucius: Recapture the Lost Splendor

Book Title: China: Promise or Threat?

Book Subtitle: A Comparison of Cultures

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Published by: Brill

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/10.1163/j.ctt1w8h29s.14>

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Confucius: Recapture the Lost Splendor

Heavenly Mandate and Objective Order

The question of how the rule of one dynasty over a large territory was organized during the oldest period accessible in Chinese history, takes us back to the duality of family and polity. The early Chinese feudal system, however, was not really based on that duality, but on the principle of *entrusting family members*, who would be bound to their monarch by the sanctity of kinship ties, with the duty of acting as deputies of the king in remote areas (Gassmann 2006). Also, as extension of this system, trustworthy vassals *from outside* the ruling dynasty could be *adopted* and given the status of family members, including all the rights and duties involved.

The teaching of Confucius emphasizes that the conditions inside the family have direct impact on stability or fragility in how the country is governed: “For someone to be respectful to his parents and affectionate to his brothers, yet to be inclined to give offence against the ruler, that hardly ever happens. For someone without any inclination to give offence against the ruler to stir up a rebellion, that never happens” (From: The Analects 1, 2). All this illustrates how closely family and polity were intertwined – or rather, that such distinction did not exist – in the days of the Shang and the Zhou. In addition, they leave room for speculations that such feudal loyalty could be created on the basis of matrilineal family conditions as well as on the basis of a father-son-succession.

Given the closeness not only between family and polity (in the sense of organizing power over a large territory), but at the same time between family and the military, a country-wide military hierarchy was likely based on the same procedures. In addition, identical structures in family, polity, and the military were sanctioned by religion: Above in Heaven, Di had shifted his Mandate from the Shang to the Zhou. This showed that “*The Mandate of Heaven* is not forever” (Schwartz 1985: 46, footnote 13), but awarded to the most deserving clan, the Zhou, who during their tenure as kings established the long lasting order of peace and happiness which Confucius admired and was harking back to.

The sources of research supplying the data for this chapter on Confucius are not the *oracle bones* but the *oldest texts* available. One of those is the *Book of Poetry* which alludes to conditions in the early Zhou (or as Schwartz (1985)

writes: Chou) period (1046–771 BCE).¹ Confucius of course knew the ancient poems and concluded from their content what the conditions had been like in the days of the Zhou and how they had succeeded in following the Shang dynasty.

According to what is reported in the *Book of Poetry* about the Western Zhou, the notion that an unsophisticated clan by the name of Zhou could suddenly take over by force the rule in a large territory from the Shang is erroneous. The poetic sources indicate by contrast that the Zhou were not simply wild and more violent than the Shang, but instead had been their cultured neighbors and profited from their development long before taking over the kingship from them. “Archeological finds indicate that the Zhou people had internalized many aspects of the Shang achievements or participated in what might already have been a shared Chinese culture.” (Schwartz 1985: 42).

One of the reasons for the success of the Zhou rule may have been their definition of *Di* as their distinctly *personal* high god, not as aloof and remote as *Heaven* appeared to be seen in later periods. *Di* gave the Mandate to the Zhou king, thereby making him – in Western terms – a divine right sovereign. But from their take-over experience the ruling Zhou concluded that *Di* might just as well take the Mandate away from them again, should they no longer prove worthy of it. Schwartz quotes Zhou Kung, the Duke of Shao, who was an uncle of the heir to the throne and who ruled peacefully as regent alongside his infant relative, the future king.

The Duke of Shao is famous for his benevolent stance towards the people in the South of China whom he was entrusted to govern. The Duke used the word *Heaven* instead of *Di* when he explained the change of the dynasties from Shang (or Yin) to Zhou: “Implacable Heaven sent down ruin on Yin. Yin had lost the Mandate and Zhou has received it. Yet I do not dare to say whether it will end in misfortune... Heaven’s Mandate is not easily preserved. Heaven is hard to rely upon.” (ibid: 47).

This awareness that the kingship was awarded by *Di*, so to speak, *on probation*, must have been a strong motivation for self-criticism and for the willingness to reevaluate and improve over time the ways in which the rule over the country was implemented. Such self-critical attitude of the royal family toward its own performance as rulers was precisely what Confucius considered necessary, but found missing during his life.

1 The entire Zhou dynasty lasted for a very long time (1046–256 BCE), but is divided into the Western Zhou (1046–771) and the Eastern Zhou (771–256). Livia Kohn (2001) in her study of Daoism reports the year 1122 BCE (not 1046) as beginning of the rule of the Zhou.

Heaven, accordingly, was not – or no longer, as *Shang Di* appeared to be – the god of a clan, but had become the god of history. This made the high god of early China a personal deity who, although evolving out of the shared background of family relationships, had become independent of ancestors during the Zhou rule, independent even of the ancestors of the royal family. This clearly reduced the power of the Zhou ancestors as deceased family members over their offspring and establishes a mighty non-family god next to them as their judge and sacred god-king in the beyond. (ibid: 49).

It remains speculation if that implicit divine independence from dynastic interests was preserved in the continuity of Chinese culture, or rather lost in later eras: The concept that a divine judge above the clouds decided, which kinship group deserved to rule and which did not, may have become increasingly unwelcome to later dynasties. The warnings quoted above from the Duke of Shao “Heaven is hard to rely upon” may have given rise to a tendency for later rulers – particularly during the era that immediately followed the Western Zhou – to make themselves independent from any judge above them. When in later periods of the empire a particular dynasty got close to being deposed, the emperor and his relatives had probably already rejected the notion that a transcendental power was evaluating their performance. If this is indeed what happened, then that too could have been a reason for Confucius to consider the early Zhou worth going back to.

On the issue of whether or not in China absolute rulers were subjected to and judged by an *objective order* guaranteed by fate, Joseph Needham (Needham 1982) distinguished two opposite types of orders: He confronted the legislation by Yahweh as the source of Jewish and Christian religious orientation with what Needham calls the “organismic” order of the Chinese. By that he means a set of rules, which were, so to speak, already in existence on their own without a specific legislative act of a god.

As we mention here in a different context, in the Western tradition the Jews see their god as entering into a contract with his people and then abiding by it (even as the people breaks the agreement). In the warning statement given by the Duke of Shao “Heaven is hard to rely upon” it appears that there too are objective criteria by which the performance of a ruler is judged and possibly, if that appears necessary, the *mandate of heaven* is withdrawn.

Schwartz, in contrast to Needham, does not see any merit in making the distinction between the order resulting from a divine decree on the one hand, and a set of rules inherent in an inner-worldly system on the other. The decisive point to Schwartz is the fact that, regardless of the origin of the rules, the humans subjected to it *can obey it or not*, and a powerful person in the beyond can then hold them responsible for their actions. Accordingly, *Di* can award

or withdraw the *mandate to rule* and thereby make sure that power will be in the hands of good men rather than in the hands of their ruthless counterparts. This, according to Schwartz, is what counts, and the distinction between types of orders introduced by Needham seems irrelevant to Schwarz for drawing that conclusion.

The question of an *objectification of order* and of subjecting ruling individuals to sets of rules they cannot change or ignore is part of the observations relating to the *axial age*. At that threshold in cultural history Karl Jaspers (Jaspers and Arendt 1985) saw a developmental divide in the era of Confucius and Socrates. According to Jaspers it occurred in various regions, in ancient Greece, in India, in China at about the same time. One of the common achievements seems to have been the awareness that even the most powerful ruler was to be judged by comparing the political order he established and maintained, with the *notion of an ideal order* that could be used as a measuring stick for critique.

The changeover to a higher level of culture was thus made possible by the development of *abstraction and objectification*. Some ideas that transcended the physical existence of the individual became current, and some contents of human imagination were attributed the status of reality. In the West this applied to Plato's eternal ideas as explanations for what Socrates teaching was really about, and as sources for more and more ambitious ethical orientations. As an application of Plato's dualism there started to establish itself an alternative second reality in the beyond.

In China, however, what developed as contribution to *abstraction and objectification* – among other innovations of course – was the objective value attributed to *ritual*. The deceased ancestors are *really* present if they are worshiped in obedience to the proper *ritual prescriptions* just as in the Catholic and Orthodox Christian tradition the worship service's success is guaranteed *ex opere operato* (by the work itself that was performed) if the priest follows the rules of the ritual. Accordingly, as an alternative to the external objective reality of Plato's dualism ritual resulted here in a firm reality that could no longer be subjected to individual whims.

Thus, in the era of the Duke of Shao at the latest, a monarchical rule that had the moral ability to reflect its own quality came into being to replace an archaic absolute sovereignty during which the exercise of power had been self-explanatory and in no need of any justification. Confucius was an untiring advocate of subjecting monarchical reign to such ethical standards. He saw those standards largely disregarded by the power holders who were his contemporaries and none of whom was willing to use his services as advisor.

What the period of the early Zhou kings meant for Confucius is this: The achievements of the axial age must be preserved, and a long era of peace and

welfare can be established, proving thereby that an ethical foundation for a political and kinship order was possible, not merely imaginable. What the great sage Confucius, whom Marcel Granet (1884–1940) refers to as “this saint” (Granet 2013: 29), is faced with, is the painful question: Why and how did it get lost? And since in the days of Confucius the loss of that admirable condition was at hand with all its sadness and horrors, what could be done to restore it in the future? What were its characteristics that posterity should strive to restore?

In search for answers, Schwartz quotes again from ancient poetry, this time depicting the solemn ritual order at gatherings of cultured members of the ruling class. The verses of the poet describe how that gentlemen class flourished as long as each participant in ritual celebrations behaved in a sober and ritualistic way observing the *quasi liturgical* prescriptions for correct social conduct. But then the poem depicts how the use of more and more alcohol sets in with its ugly consequences, and as a result, the ritual gatherings tend to break up more and more frequently in the complete chaos of drunkenness. (ibid: 55).

Schwartz explains how such reckless behavior was performed by those, who ought to represent the culture of their time. They as the elite were then the social group who as a body stood for the normative knowledge available in that society. Their ethical failure led to the loss of the *tao* as the *normative order*. The familiar word, traditionally also referred to as *Dao* to which Daoism is dedicated, has several meanings. One of those is intended by Confucius when he refers to the *tao* (ibid: 64–67) as the order that was lost and that was therefore missing in his time.² But it was missing not only in the days of Confucius. He sadly experienced the absence of order as a task, and he devoted his teaching and his entire life to finding ways of restoring what had been lost.

Finding Options for the Future

According to Confucius, the familiarity of human beings with what is expected of them, their *normative knowledge* of the order they are designed by fate to realize in their lives, goes back much further than the early Zhou period. The deified sage sees sources of that normative knowledge present in some aspects of the Shang and even further back as far as the Xia kings who preceded the

2 Schwartz finds indications to this use of the word in the *Book of Documents*, in the *Book of Poetry* and in the *Analects*. Reference is made in all these texts to the *tao* as the *normative order* that embraces all activities humans undertake as the notion of how things ought to be. That may well be the Confucian use of the word. In Daoism itself, its meaning spectrum is more complex.

Shang. The specific orientation toward a splendid past, so typical of Confucianism, results in the principle of keeping the foundations intact even if a new house needs to be built to replace an old one.

Confucius insisted accordingly that he was not creating any new knowledge himself but merely related to his disciples the wisdom of the ancients. He confessed: "I trust the ancient past and I love it." (van Ess 2009: 21). Confucius concluded "that the highest possibility of human experience had already been achieved within the known human past and that the hope of the future was to recapture this lost splendor" (Schwartz 1985: 63). This *backward looking hope for the future* is a decisive trait of Confucianism and of Chinese philosophy in general. It may be at the same time a crucial distinction between Chinese thought and the wide spread progressivism dominating Western thought in spite of the influences of Oswald Spengler and others like him.

Thus, the hope to recapture the lost splendor was the theme that connected the various topics of the great sage's teaching. What today we know as the words of Confucius are obviously not *his very words*, any more than the words Socrates supposedly used in his dialogues. Their teaching was written down by their students. As a result it is nearly impossible to determine what has been the teacher's original intent and what has been added to, or interpreted into it later (van Ess 2009: 19).

While this applies to Chinese as it does to Western ancient philosophy, there are some distinctions to be made. As was mentioned above, Confucius is quoted as saying that he only wants to hand down to his disciples what has come to him, and that he does not claim to create any new ideas of his own. (ibid: 21). This statement may have been motivated by modesty. Referring to ancient authors is also a universal *topos* to legitimize a particular thesis by attributing it to *the ancients*. By contrast, many Western authors such as Plato and Aristotle have presented their own innovative insights with self-confidence.

The conviction of finding options for the future in connection with the lost splendour of the past also influenced the educational program: Learning and studying classical texts was and is to this day more central in the Chinese tradition than in the West. It is compatible with looking for *wisdom in the past*. In the West the student's own thinking, reflecting, and speculating was consistently encouraged. That is a method which more likely helps finding *new solutions in the future* rather than wanting to reproduce a splendid past (ibid: 19–20).

The students of Confucius were taught to improve their morals and behavior. Looking into the past in the hope that it will lead to a good future was part of learning how to be a gentleman. A central concept in making the vision of a cultured person become a reality is the virtue of being human, referred to by the word *jen* (仁 in pin yin: ren). *Jen* includes the Western ideas of *love*,

humanity, benevolence, and kind-heartedness. According to *van Ess* it is often confused with *chih* (知), the knowledge of how to care for the needs of the people. Having *chih* means to *know how humans are*, acting with *jen* can be translated as to *deal with humans* in a considerate way (ibid: 21).

These ethical virtues become uniquely Chinese by culminating in the kinship context: The special love for one's own parents is called *xiao* (孝) with an emphasis on behaviour rather than attitude. Because the living and healthy body is regarded as a gift from the parents, loving one's parents implies taking good care of one's body. A tattoo is interpreted as a severe infringement against that rule and in the past could be inflicted on a person as a punishment. Originally the *act of xiao* was the performance of the sacrificial rite which the son as "family priest" offered for his deceased father (and his other ancestors) in the beyond (ibid: 22f.). The original form of *xiao* has thus been distinctly religious, performed out of dedication to the father in the beyond.

From the beginning of the first millennium (1000–900 BCE), long before the sage's own days, the eldest son as the family priest was required to perform the ritual for the deceased ancestors. Van Ess quotes an ancient text according to which in antiquity the Son of Heaven (the emperor) worshipped seven ancestors, a feudal lord in the emperor's service worshipped five, a high ranking official three, and a simple official merely his own father (originally after the father's death!) Later Confucian teachers came up with a more egalitarian system allowing even a simple man to sacrifice for up to four ancestors (ibid.). These numbers must also have reflected the amount of support the respective person could expect from the beyond related to the number of immortals with whom he was in regular contact.

We find the meaning of *xiao* (孝) change during about the first half of the Han period, i.e. one or two centuries before Christ: From performing the sacrifice for the beloved *dead relatives* in the beyond it is gradually transformed to describing submission to and reverence for one's *living parents*. This social evolution helps understand the transcendental roots of *xiao* that exist in Confucian cultures to this day. It includes the conviction shared by the vast majority of all Chinese persons that they owe it to their parents to have offspring. To die *childless on purpose* constitutes for them a serious breach of the *xiao*.

In the tradition of Chinese culture the more general command: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you* is valid as one of the Confucian rules; but in addition – in comparison to the West – in China it is radicalised and concentrated on dealing with each other inside the kinship context. This is true in spite of the historical fact that Confucius was hoping not only to influence family life, but to gain political impact by his teaching. His motivation to teach, came out of the misfortune that beset him: Confucius had not been able to

find a monarch who would hire him and rule according to his teachings, so he taught his students in the hope that they would find such a ruler in the future, even after the master's death.

To make that more likely, they needed to qualify as gentlemen in a more formal sense of the word. In about the year 500 BCE in the days of Confucius (551–479), in the advanced parts of China there existed a gentlemen culture of the nobility. It required of its male members six areas of competence: 1. rules of etiquette as cultured behaviour, 2. music, 3. archery, 4. being a charioteer in military confrontations, 5. reading and writing, and 6. calculating. To master these six skills constituted membership in the group of not only the Confucians but of the educated Chinese gentlemen in general. (ibid: 25).

The impact of this gentlemen class in the history of Chinese culture was (until 1949) highly significant, because for centuries they were the ones who taught the right ways in thought and deed and practiced the arts in the villages of the vast nation. As village teachers they kept the continuity of Chinese culture to the days described by Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1953), until communism forced many of their successors into martyrdom if they had been on the side of Chiang Kaishek (1887–1975 also known as: 蔣中正, Jiang Zhongzheng). As a group they had been for centuries the carriers of the normative knowledge on which the culture of China rested.

Such groups as preserver of the Chinese culture were of course particularly important in times of crisis. During the Mongol occupation that led to the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE) the ruling Mongols “dispossessed the Song³ imperial and aristocratic families. Those anxious about preserving the heritage of the past – which the Mongol occupation threatened to annihilate – turned to the social practice of connoisseurship to remember the Song” (Brook 2010: 193). Familiarity with the literature and art of the past was a badge of membership in the group of cultured Chinese families. It served as an invisible bulwark against unwelcome innovators as it does to this day.

At the beginning of this book when we looked at Bert Brecht's admiration for the universalistic teaching of Mozi and at the rejection of Mozi's opinion by Mencius, the Confucian, we encountered a fundamental distinction between Chinese and Western views: Universalism as at least an option in the West versus its rejection as animal-like on account of neglecting relatives. Mozi's implicit anticipation to early Christian as well as utopian socialist ideals did not find acceptance into Confucian thinking.

3 The Chinese dynasty that preceded the foreign rule of the non-Chinese Yuan from Mongolia. The Yuan clan included Genghis Khan (1162 or 1155–1227).

Even the basic views in philosophical anthropology on what supposedly constitutes the essence of the human condition are largely incompatible: Mencius teaches that humans are good-natured by birth. He often mentions the great sages of antiquity, mythical emperors and founders of dynasties, who are represented as embodying all imaginable human virtues in an ideal way. But they are to him and his disciples not merely the greats over there, in the beyond and out of reach. They are instead to be experienced as present in this world like you and me, and we must work hard to become like them. This is so, because every human person is endowed with the potentials we admire in the great sages, and thus it is the duty of each of us to realize those potentials.

Neither in the philosophical anthropology of Mencius in China nor in that of J.J. Rousseau in the West is there anything like *original sin*. Instead, following Mencius, there are four innate qualities in everybody's heart aiding his or her goodness: 1. compassion, 2. shame and disgust, 3. modesty and being reserved, and 4. knowledge of right and wrong.

Those four abilities flowing directly from the heart, enable humans to realize in their conduct four cardinal virtues: 1. The kind-heartedness mentioned here before as *jen* (or *ren*) is based on compassion. 2. The inclination to be just and to let justice be the principle of treating others, is not so much linked to obeying laws (as it is in the West), as it is to following one's inner feeling of shame and of disgust when confronting evil deeds or conditions. 3. Morality grows out of modesty and out of conducting oneself in a reserved way. 4. Finally, it is knowledge or wisdom that is obviously linked to being able to tell right from wrong (van Ess 2009: 32).

Strangely, in order to explain this concept of Confucian ethic, Mencius refers to something like an opposite to original sin: An original compassion. If a child should fall into a well, everyone will react with concern and compassion, independent of whether the child is a relative or not. This may in part contradict Mencius' rejection of the universalism of Mozi.

Van Ess mentioned that in addition to the four cardinal virtues *kindness, justice, morality, and wisdom*, Confucius taught about *bravery* during his lifetime as virtue number five. However, during the evolution of Confucianism, being courageous moved further and further into the background. Wisdom and cleverness (like the wisdom of Zhuge) rank higher than being daring. In the Occident, on the other hand, the evolving concept of masculine honour implied the necessity for any male to prove the complete absence of fear, if that seemed the requirement at hand. Being called a coward had become the worst imaginable offence to a male. Van Ess suggests that this may be "one of the most remarkable differences... between the entire Chinese tradition and European thinking" (ibid: 33).

Accordingly, in the Chinese tradition it is more desirable to be “as wise as Zhuge” than to be a daredevil. Downgrading bravery and admiring such wisdom entails a preference for non-violent behaviour. Even the good ruler does not govern by force and by threatening his subject with punishment. In addition, he does not impose large numbers of inflexible laws on them. Instead he leads by his own virtue and charisma. (ibid: 35).

Apart from political power, following the history of ethics, it was hardly possible to link Confucianism to capitalism for this reason: The disciples of Confucius were taught to put their own private interests behind. (ibid: 27). The master’s advice was: “Do not worry about not finding employment but be concerned about the means by which you try to find it. Do not worry about nobody knowing about you; instead be concerned that there should be no reason why anyone should know you” (ibid: 28).

Advancement in society as climbing to a higher level of social status was, according to the teaching of Confucius, to be achieved by learning hard and by raising the level of morals as a gentleman, not by making money! Accordingly, merchants ranked low in prestige. In the Han period (200 BCE–200 CE), a period during which Confucian doctrine was dominant, businessmen were counted among the class lowest in recognition and prestige regardless of their wealth (ibid.).

The Party or the Family as “Church” in China?

In the West, the “sinfulness” of everyone, including the rulers from Charlemagne to Henry VIII, was part of Christian teaching and found its painful confirmation in history. This experience constantly reinforced the need for institutionalized ethical knowledge in the church as well as – since ancient Greece – in the academy. In China there were intermittently truly admired monarchs whose presence in history could be interpreted as supporting the claim, that the ruling family was able to find within its ranks the one son who after his father’s death had the ability to realize in his reign the combination of “the highest possibility of human experience” in ethics, with the concentration of absolute power in one person (Schwartz 1985: 63). Looking at it this way, China may have had so many admired emperors since the beginning of the Common Era that the hope to subject the individual sovereign’s power to any law above him did not develop into a lasting institutionalized order because there seemed to be no need for that.

As a consequence, and in the absence of any structural option like a *church*, which in China could become the guarantor of ethical behavior – or at least of

ethical knowledge outside the family –, the *scholar and intellectual* as expert in normative knowledge was the only source of critical influence upon the unchecked authority of the emperor. China has been and is to this day ruled by *persons*, not by *principles*: The notion that everybody including the holder of the highest position in government is subject to a law binding to all, is absent. Even today in contemporary China any verdict handed down by a court of law can be annulled by the Communist Party.⁴

This indeed raises the question if the party will gradually become the functional equivalent of a *church* as structural home of abstract rules that apply to everyone, or whether the party is merely the heir of the absolute power of the emperors of the past and will continue personalizing it in the person of the party chief. Referring to the situation prior to Communism, Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1953) described the risky status of the intellectual under imperial rule, who may be accepted as advisor to the monarch, but gets himself into life-threatening situations if he dares to criticize the supreme power.

If the Communist Party has indeed arrogated to itself the traditional powers of the absolute ruler, appearing – at least occasionally – as standing above the law (or a law?), then the consequences may well be that the situation of the intellectual has not changed: He (or increasingly also, she) oscillates between taking high level risks on one side and yielding to opportunism on the other, as intellectuals in China were obliged to do for centuries or even millennia.

Fei reports that in the Chinese tradition the emperor has been compared to a tiger who unexpectedly may take a person's life: "If the highest authority were bound by law, then administrative authority would be able to cage the tiger. But in Chinese history this has never happened. As a result, the ruled, including the officials themselves, have never sought for efficiency in administration. Rather the opposite has been true. Inefficiency and parasitism, on the one hand, remoteness of imperial control and a do-nothing policy by the emperor, on the other – this has always been the ideal" (Fei 1953: 26). These remarks, published in English translation as long ago as 1953, ring frighteningly up to date.

The image of a perfect state, or of ideal political conditions, included the expectation, that a "good emperor" was one "who presided but did not rule" (*ibid.*). This Daoist ideal, however, was not something an intellectual serving as official could rely on. They went to serve the emperor in spite of the danger

4 Questioned about this practice, a Chinese professor and party spokesperson compared it to the power of the jury in court proceeding in the U.S.A., which he saw as limiting the powers of the judiciary as well.

of being attacked by the tiger, in the hope that their service there would result in an informal type of immunity, that would, hopefully, grant them and their families protection by using “their position as a shield against the emperor’s whims” (ibid: 27.).

As a result “groups of officials with their relatives, formed” in Chinese society “a special class not affected by the laws, exempt from taxation and conscription. Nevertheless, they had no real political power” (ibid.). It appears then that the tradition of being above the law applied not merely to the emperor himself but also to his courtiers and their relatives! It is reminiscent of the condescending Western saying: *quot licet Jovi non licet bovi*. (What is allowed to Jupiter is not allowed to cattle), as an odd argument against legal equality.

The absence of the general Western notion of equality from China is related to the central position of family values there. The inner order of family life everywhere is not egalitarian; it is instead hierarchical. In the context of family interaction, a parent surely claims rights from which smaller children are barred. Western demands for equality find their origin in sources other than the kinship system, or, if one wants to insist on the family context, in the idea of a universal brotherhood of all humans as siblings rather than the image of a three-generation kinship group in which social status is attributed according to age.

The Western norm of *equality* before the law is based on *equal rights* awarded (by God?) to individual citizens over against their government. The Chinese tradition of *inequality* by contrast emphasizes the *different duties* individuals as family members have in protecting and caring for weaker ones under their domination.

The centrality of kinship relationships in China makes the individuals less dependent there upon government action. It is true, that compared to the West, a Chinese person must acknowledge more duties toward family members, must provide financial support, and must take care of ailing and aging kin. But as a consequence Chinese relatives depend on each other rather than on the government. In Western nations by contrast, as the cohesion within family contexts gets weaker, people become increasingly dependent upon government support.

The wealth of ethical provisions, which developed in the course of the cultural history of China was identified, collected, and interpreted by a highly educated stratum in that society, i.e. by scholars to whom Max Weber in his text on China refers as the *literati*. They not merely represent the small section of the population who in the old days could read and write, and where thus *literate*, they are in addition, the intellectuals, the bearers of Chinese cultural

tradition, with high levels of erudition, but with very low levels of political power.⁵

Fei describes the service provided to Chinese society by the *literati* thus: “The function of the scholar was to formulate, to clarify, and to crystallize this point of view” that society accepted, “into a doctrine. In the period of transition between feudalism and imperialism the school of thought which reflected the philosophic trend of the times best was that of Confucius and his followers. But the Confucian school was only one of many in this period of the ‘hundred schools.’” (ibid: 35). The reason why Confucianism became the dominant system of ethical teaching is attributed by Fei to the fact that its popularity in kinship contexts coincided with its adaptability to “the Chinese imperial system” (ibid.).

But there is another distinction between China and the West to be taken into consideration. In the teaching of Jesus there is the obvious demand and expectation that action will follow the knowledge about what God expects. Fei points out, however, that “the Confucian *tao-t'ang* stands not for action but for upholding a standard or norm which defines the Way of a good emperor (and a good citizen). It is one thing whether the monarch acts according to the Way or not. It is another whether we” (ibid. 41) as scholars have clearly worked out what it takes to be a good ruler (and a good family person in general).

The sad fact that order had completely broken down in the days of Confucius – poetic language describes tigers roaming the streets – became the topic of a dialogue between him and one of his students. Looking for an explanation for the disastrous condition of public order, the master asked his disciple, if his teaching may be wrong and may be to blame for the disaster. But his student Yen Hui answered: “The Way of my master is very great – the world cannot accept it. But, my master, try to carry out your Way. If others don’t accept you, it shows that you are a gentleman. If we don’t work out the Way for doing things, that is our shame. If those who have the power don’t follow the right Way, that is their shame” (ibid: 41).

Fei compares Christianity with Confucianism and emphasizes that Christ did not accept the division between knowing and action. By contrast, “Confucianism is divided into two parts: (1) the knowing what is good and (2) the doing what is good. Thus the man who knows what is good does not necessarily have an obligation to carry it out. In fact, he may not be able to do so, since

5 Compare the popular Chinese novel: *The Scholars* (Chinese: 儒林外史: “The Unofficial History of the Forest (ie. World) of the Literati”) is a Chinese novel authored by Wu Jingzi (吳敬梓) and completed in 1750 during the Qing Dynasty. [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scholars_\(novel\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scholars_(novel)).

what he is able to do depends upon his social position. As a result, we have the differentiation into separate categories of (a) the scholar who knows and (b) the monarch who does" (ibid.). Thus there is a scholarly task at hand, to construct – or rather re-construct out of familiarity with cultural history – the normative knowledge that is needed to lead a cultured and ethically spotless life.

But the scholar who knows is merely a member of a loosely knit group of intellectuals who can be dispersed easily. They can be caused to retire to their respective families if as a group they become undesirable to those in power. The university has occasionally shown signs of political strength, but then again has proven to be utterly vulnerable. In summary then in China – in the absence of the equivalent of a "church" – there appears to be no structural basis for objectified normative knowledge outside the family.

Since the kinship system is the central social structure of Chinese society, *the family* has become the primary field of application of that normative knowledge. Whereas in the Western tradition a person wanting to lead an exemplary life had the choice of making the family his arena of excellence or devoting his or her life to public service, such an alternative never existed in China. Why that is so becomes clear from the following quotation. Confucius' student Zengzi, is believed to have written the ancient text *Da Xue*.⁶ The name means "Great Knowledge" and is also the Chinese word for university (大学). Zengzi's text explains what knowledge of "the ancients" we should look for, and why.

Da Xue 2: "The ancients, who wished to illustrate enlightened virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things. Things being investigated, knowledge became complete.

Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified; their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated; their states were rightly

6 Da Xue, this text, which, along with the Doctrine of the Mean, is traditionally dated to the fifth century, soon after the death of Confucius, was most likely composed late during the third century BCE, shortly after Xunzi's heyday and, perhaps, during the brief Qin Dynasty (221–208 BCE). <http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Daxue.pdf>.

governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides.”

It is remarkable how in the above text the various areas of human existence, person, family, and state, appear as one integrated whole. Zengzi’s text *Da Xue* has led to numerous commentaries. Here follows one example to illustrate how family life and the public sphere are interconnected.⁷

7 *Commentary on “Ordering one’s state and setting the world at peace”*: Concerning the phrase, “Getting the world at peace lies in ordering the state.” When the ruler treats the elderly as the elderly should be treated, the people rise up with filiality. When the ruler treats his elders as elders should be treated the people rise up with behavior fitting the younger. When the ruler treats the orphaned with compassion the people do not turn their backs. Hence the ruler fulfills the *dao* of the carpenter’s square. What you detest in your subordinates do not employ to serve your superior. What you detest in those who are before you do not employ to lead those behind you. What you detest in those who are behind you do not employ to follow those before you.