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**CONFUCIAN ROLE ETHICS**  
**A VOCABULARY**

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### III

## The Confucian Project: Attaining Relational Virtuosity

### “Human Beings” or “Human Becomings”?

*What* is a human “being”? This was the perennial Greek question asked in Plato’s *Phaedo* and in Aristotle’s *De Anima*. And perhaps the most persistent answer from the time of Pythagoras was an ontological one: The “being” or essence of a human being is a permanent, ready-made, and self-sufficient soul. And “know thyself”—the signature exhortation of Socrates—is to know this soul. Each of us *is* a person, and from conception, has the integrity of *being* a person.

*In what way* does a person *become* consummately human? This was the perennial Confucian question asked explicitly in all of the *Four Books*: in the *Great Learning*, in the *Analects of Confucius*, in the *Mencius*, and again in the *Zhongyong*. And the answer from the time of Confucius was a moral, aesthetic, and ultimately religious one. One *becomes* human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one’s initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one’s life force within family, community, and cosmos.<sup>1</sup> “Cultivate your person” (*xiushen* 修身), the signature exhortation of the Confucian canons, is the ground of the Confucian project of becoming consummate as a person (*ren*): It is to cultivate one’s conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that one lives. In this Confucian tradition, we need each other. Becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all.<sup>2</sup>

It will be the argument of this chapter that insufficient attention has been paid to this fundamental difference between ontologically

constituted human "beings" and the Confucian project of "becoming" human. As a consequence, there is a real danger of inadvertently shoe-horning the Confucian foot into a Greek sandal. The exciting documents recovered in recent archaeological finds have persuaded our present generation of scholars to go back and take another look at our received texts. In doing so, we have found some issues that we have overlooked, and other things that we have been able to clarify by reference to these new materials.

As an example, we have found that an epistemology of concrete "feelings" (*qing* 情) is fundamental to an emerging Confucian tradition that, after the death of Confucius himself, we associate with the lineage traced from Confucius's grandson, Zisizi 子思子, down through Mencius (*simengpai* 思孟派). As a consequence, we have had to rethink our more cognitive, conceptual, and theoretical interpretations of the early Confucian canons to make sure that we have given the affective dimension of personal cultivation appropriate consideration.

Further, I believe that these same archaeological documents provide us with additional textual evidence for clarifying the Confucian notion of relationally constituted "human beings" and for distinguishing this notion of "person" fundamentally from an essentialist understanding of discrete human beings. The philosophical implications of this distinction between the Confucian *ren* and a foundational individualism that had its beginnings in classical Greece are pervasive and enduring, and unless and until we are clear on this difference, we will continue to theorize Confucian philosophy according to assumptions that are not its own.

How have contemporary scholars who are not inclined to distinguish *ren* from the notion of the discrete individual and who thus read it in an essentialistic way come by their interpretations? I will begin to address this question by examining one familiar passage from the *Analekts*:

Exemplary persons (*jünzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having set, one's proper path in life (*dao* 道) will emerge therefrom. As for family reverence (*xiao* 孝) and fraternal deference (*ti* 弟), these are, I suspect, the root of becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren* 仁).<sup>3</sup>

What does it mean to take the practical activities of revering family members (*xiao* 孝) and of deferring appropriately to elders (*ti* 弟) as the

root (*ben* 本) of becoming consummate in one's conduct as a person (*ren* 仁)?<sup>4</sup> Should we not rather regard such *xiao* and *ti* activities as a practical expression of *ren* as human nature? In making what is taken to be "human nature" the product rather than the ultimate source of human conduct, are we not putting the cart before the horse?

Zhu Xi 朱熹, the Southern Song philosopher who compiled the *Four Books*, seems to worry over this possible inversion, and cites the interpretation of his philosophical predecessors, the Cheng brothers 二程, on this same *Analekts* passage for clarification. The Cheng brothers argue that the problematic expression in this *Analekts* passage "becoming *ren*" 為仁 should in fact be read as "practicing *ren*" 行仁:

When reverence and deference are practiced within the family, a consummate love (*ren ai* 仁愛) is extended in all we do. This is what is called expressing affection in kin relations (*qinjin* 親親) and dealing with the people in a consummate manner (*renmin* 仁民). It is in this sense that becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren*) has its root in family reverence (*xiao*) and fraternal deference (*ti*). But in reference to human nature (*xing*), it is *ren* that is the root of *xiao* and *ti*. Some have wondered whether or not identifying *xiao* and *ti* as the root of *ren* is because *xiao* and *ti* can bring about *ren*. I think not. Saying that practicing *ren* commences from *xiao* and *ti* means that *xiao* and *ti* are expressions of *ren*; saying that they are the root of practicing *ren* is fine, but saying that they are the root of *ren* itself will not do. As for *ren*, it is human nature (*xing*); *xiao* and *ti* are its applications (*yong* 用). Within human nature, there are only the four components: *ren* 仁, *yì* 義, *lǐ* 禮, *zhì* 智. How would *xiao* and *ti* factor into it? Now the main import of *ren* is love, and there is no love greater than that for one's kin. Hence the text reads: "As for family reverence (*xiao* 孝) and fraternal deference (*ti*), these are, I suspect, the root of becoming consummate in one's conduct (*ren*)."<sup>5</sup>

One familiar way of reading this Cheng commentary is to assume that classical Confucianism has a notion of human beings, and that the Cheng brothers are, by properly separating nature from nurture, simply clarifying the internal, essential, and exclusive status of human nature (*renxing* 人性) we associate with Mencius. A second way of reading the commentary here is to argue that the Cheng brothers, as neo-Confucian philosophers, influenced as they were by an originally Indo-European Buddhism, departed from a Mencian notion of "human becoming"

by internalizing and essentializing human nature, taking it to be an original potential that is then actualized in what it means to become a human being. Yet another reading of this Cheng commentary would begin by allowing that by the Song dynasty, the Buddhism influencing these neo-Confucian thinkers had been so thoroughly sinicized that it would not have introduced such a major disjunction with the Mencian understanding of human nature. This interpretation would further argue that the notion of human nature at play here is consistent with Mencius' "four inkings or sprouts" (*sihuan* 四端) in being described as the "root" (*ben*) that nourishes our human behavior—a root that cannot in any way be conceived as independent of the other elements that together constitute the organic process of becoming human. This third interpretation would take nature and nurture as interdependent and correlative categories, rendering them symbiotic and mutually entailing. Indeed, in the Mencius, *xing* is often used verbally as something that is done.<sup>6</sup> In the ecological cosmology that gives this Cheng commentary context, one must understand the notion of root in its relation to the whole process of becoming a tree and must reflect on the nature of a person or any particular thing as the ongoing outcome of the total dynamic pattern of its relationships.

In contesting the first two of the possible interpretations of the Cheng commentary and arguing for this third reading suggested above, I will be seeking an interpretation of how one becomes consummately human that does not violate the basic and persistent assumptions of classical Chinese natural cosmology that we surveyed in chapter two. I want to attempt to make sense of this particular *Analekts* passage and the Confucian canons broadly in such a way that it does not insinuate a Greek understanding of an essential human nature into the Confucian canons. By locating the notion of human nature within this relational *qi* cosmology, we will discover that what are sometimes taken to be unilateral and exclusive terms generally associated with human nature such as "root," "potential," "cause," and "source" have to be reconceived as collateral, transactional, and reflexive. The tree is an organic whole, and while the root may be thought to grow the tree, the tree in turn grows its roots. A poem by Tanya Storch comes to mind:

Roots are branches  
underground.  
Branches—roots  
into the sky.<sup>7</sup>

This understanding of the root and the tree as a symbiotic whole as an alternative to thinking of the root as an independent, single source reflects cosmological assumptions that require a situated answer to one of our most fundamental and perennial philosophical questions: "Where does meaning come from?" In the Abrahamic traditions, the answer is simple: meaning comes from a Divine source beyond and independent of the individual: Yahweh, or God, or Allah provides us with life's purpose. For the Confucian project, on the other hand, without appeal to some independent principle, meaning arises *pari passu* from a network of meaningful relationships. A personal commitment to achieving relational virtuousity within one's own family relationships is both the starting point and the ultimate source of personal, social, and indeed, cosmic meaning. That is, in cultivating one's own person through achieving and extending robust relations in one's family and beyond, one enlarges the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and in turn, this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of one's own personal cultivation.

Confucius is adamant that moral motivation is the motor of personal cultivation. While always self-effacing, Confucius not only allows but actually repeatedly endorses one description of himself—that he is a person who "cares deeply for learning" (*haoxue* 好學). And for Confucius, such learning means quite specifically having the unrelenting resolve to become consummate in one's conduct as a person (*ren*). Becoming consummate in one's conduct is a lifelong project that quite literally begins at home, and that is irreducibly collateral and transactional—the refined and elegant expression of a relational virtuousity. As Confucius is reported to have stated in the *Analekts*: "Correlating one's conduct with those close at hand can be said to be the method of becoming consummate in one's conduct."<sup>8</sup> Again, he insists that "becoming consummate in one's conduct is self-originating—how could it originate with others?"<sup>9</sup> And further, Confucius has the highest expectations for the transformative outcome of such resolve: "I study what is near at hand and aspire to what is lofty."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, in this Confucian tradition, there is a direct corridor from the achieved consummate life to a human-centered religiousness as the highest expression of personal cultivation. Confucian religiousness—the powerful sense of achieved worth and personal belonging that arises from the concerted growth of meaningful relations—is the *spirituality* achieved when members of family and community *aspire* to contribute themselves utterly in their relations with others, and thus live *inspired* lives. Such religiousness is itself the source and product of the flourishing family and community, and the quality of this religious life is a direct consequence of the quality of communal living. Said another way, religiousity is not only the root of the flourishing community and the seed from which it grows, but is most importantly its mature fruit, its radiant flower. The synergy between personal cultivation and the numinous is captured in the familiar mantra that is often appealed to by students of Chinese religiousness in distinguishing Confucian familial and communal reverence from Abrahamic God-inspired worship: That is, Confucian religiousness is characterized by “the symbiotic continuity between the natural and cultural context and the human experience” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一).

### Setting the Project: The *Great Learning* (Daxue 大學)

The *Great Learning* 大學, the seminal, foundational canon that sets and anchors this Confucian project early in the tradition, describes the process of becoming human. It insists that it is only through committing oneself to a resolute regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the comprehensive intellectual and moral understanding that will make the most of the human experience. The central message of this terse yet comprehensive document is that while personal, familial, social, political, and indeed cosmic cultivation is ultimately coterminous and mutually entailing, it must always begin from a commitment to personal cultivation. In the language of the text itself:

The way of achieving greatness through learning lies in demonstrating real personal excellence, in cherishing the common people, and in dedicating oneself to doing what is best. Such a course of learning can only be set once one has made this commitment. Only in having set such a course is one able to find equilibrium, only in having found equilibrium is one able

to become self-assured, only in having become self-assured is one able to be deliberate in what one does, and only in being deliberate in what one does is one able to get what one is after. There is the important and the incidental in things and a beginning and an end in what we do. It is in realizing what should have priority that one approaches the proper way (*dao*).<sup>11</sup>

Having endorsed the priority of making a commitment to personal cultivation, the text then continues by rehearsing the cosmic proportions the ancient sage-kings were able to achieve once they dedicated themselves to this project:

The ancients who sought to demonstrate real excellence to the whole world first brought proper order to their states; in seeking to bring proper order to their states, they first set their families right; in seeking to set their families right, they first cultivated their own persons; in seeking to cultivate their persons, they first knew what is proper in their own heartminds; in seeking to know what is proper in their heartminds, they first became sincere in their purposes; in seeking to become sincere in their purposes, they first became comprehensive in their wisdom. And the highest wisdom lies in seeing how things fit together most productively.

Once they saw how things fit together most productively, their wisdom reached its heights; once their wisdom reached its heights, their thoughts were sincere; once their thoughts were sincere, their heartminds knew what is proper; once their heartminds knew what is proper, their persons were cultivated; once their persons were cultivated, their families were set right; once their families were set right, their state was properly ordered; and once their states were properly ordered, there was peace in the world.<sup>12</sup>

Each person stands as a unique perspective on family, community, polity, and cosmos, and through a dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, everyone has the possibility of bringing the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within family and community into clearer and more meaningful focus. The “learning” (*xue* 學) of the *Great Learning* is the cultivation of productive, transpersonal habits of conduct.<sup>13</sup>

As the *Great Learning* enjoins us, in the singularly important project of becoming consummate persons, we must get our priorities right:

From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots

are not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly.<sup>14</sup>

The *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) version of the *Great Learning* concludes this text by declaring that giving priority to achieving personal excellence is wisdom at its best. In its own words:

This commitment to personal cultivation is called both the root and the height of wisdom.<sup>15</sup>

Here again, the “root” and its product, wisdom, are to be perceived as an organic whole that grow together or not at all.

In appealing to an understanding of Chinese natural cosmology as the relevant interpretive context for this Confucian project, I have tried to provide a language that will distinguish this worldview from the reductive, single-ordered, “One-behind-the-many” ontological model that grounds classical Greek metaphysical thinking wherein one comes to “understand” the many by knowing retrospectively the foundational and causal ideal that lies behind them. Instead, we have found that in Chinese correlative cosmology there is a symbiotic and holistic focus-field model of order that is illustrated rather concisely here in the organic, ecological sensibilities of the *Great Learning*. The meaning of the family is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each of its members, and by extension, the meaning of the entire cosmos is implicated in and dependent upon the productive cultivation of each person within family and community. Personal worth is the source of human culture, and human culture in turn is the aggregating resource that provides a context for each person’s cultivation.

While certainly having important theoretical implications, the enduring power of this Confucian project is that it proceeds from a relatively straightforward account of the actual human experience. It is a pragmatic naturalism in the sense that, rather than relying upon metaphysical presuppositions or supernatural speculations, it focuses instead on the possibilities for enhancing personal worth available to us here and now through enchanting the ordinary affairs of the day. A grandmother’s love for her grandson is at once the most ordinary of things, and the most extraordinary of things.

Confucius develops his insights around the most basic and enduring aspects of the ordinary human experience—family reverence, deference to others, friendship, a cultivated sense of shame, growth and education, life in community, and so on—and in so doing, he has guaranteed their continuing relevance. One characteristic of Confucianism prominent in the words of Confucius himself that has made his teachings so resilient in the Chinese tradition is its porousness and adaptability. His contribution was simply to take ownership of the cultural legacy of his time, to adapt the wisdom of the past to his own present historical moment, and then to recommend to future generations that they do the same.<sup>16</sup>

The personal model of Confucius that is remembered in the *Analekts* does not purport to lay out some generic formula by which everyone should live their lives. Rather, the text recalls the narrative of one special person: how he in his relations with others cultivated his humanity, and how he lived a fulfilled and a fulfilling life, much to the admiration of those around him. We might take liberties and play with the title of the *Analekts*, reading “discoursing” (*lunyu* 論語) more specifically as “role-based discoursing” (*lunyu* 倫語). Indeed, in reading the *Analekts*, we encounter the relationally constituted Confucius making his way through life by living his many roles as best he can: as a caring family member (5.1, 5.2), as a strict teacher and mentor (16.13), as a scrupulous and incorruptible scholar-official (15.1), as a concerned neighbor and member of the community (9.10), as an always-critical political consultant (12.18), as the grateful progeny of his progenitors (7.5), as an enthusiastic heir to a specific cultural legacy (3.14, 9.5), indeed, as a member of a chorus of joyful boys and men singing their way home after a happy day on the river Yi (11.26). He offers us historical models rather than principles, and exhortations rather than imperatives. The power and lasting value of his insights lie in the fact that, as I will endeavor to show, these ideas are intuitively persuasive, and readily adaptable to the conditions of ensuing generations, including our own.

Indeed, in invoking the Chinese natural cosmology as context, what makes Confucianism more empirical than empiricism—that is, what makes Confucianism a *radical* empiricism—is the fact that it respects the uniqueness of the particular, and the need for a generative wisdom that

takes this uniqueness into account in anticipating a productive future. Rather than advancing universal principles and assuming a taxonomy of natural kinds grounded in some notion of strict identity, Confucianism proceeds from always-provisional generalizations made from those *particular* historical instances of successful living, the specific events recounted in the narrative of Confucius himself being a case in point.

### "Family" as the Governing Metaphor

The timelessness and broad appeal of the teachings of Confucius begins from the insight that the life of almost every human being, regardless of where or when, is played out within the context of his or her own particular family, for better or for worse. For Confucius and for generations of Chinese that have followed after him, the basic unit of humanity is *this* particular person in *this* particular family rather than either the solitary, discrete individual or the equally abstract and generic notion of family. In fact, in reading Confucius, there is no reference to some core human *being* as the site of who we *really* are and that remains once the particular layers of family and community relations are peeled away. That is, there is no "self," no "soul," no discrete "individual" behind our complex and dynamic habits of conduct. Each of us is irreducibly social as the sum of the roles we *live*—not *play*—in our relationships and transactions with others. The goal of living, then, is to achieve harmony and enjoyment for oneself and for others through behaving in an optimally appropriate way in those roles and relationships that make us uniquely who we are. The analogy with music here is irresistible. Harmony requires that each component maintain its own integrity and be itself while simultaneously joining in and integrating with the other participants to form an organic unity distinct from, and more than, the sum of its parts. The unity of each of us emerges as we pursue this inclusive harmony within the orchestra of our roles and relations.

Confucianism is grounded in the everyday lives of the people, and has as its source of animation the natural deference that pervades family living. For Confucianism, the meaning and value of family relations is not just the primary ground of social order; family relations have cosmological and religious implications as well. Family bonds properly

observed are the point of departure for understanding that we each have moral responsibility for an expanding web of relations that reach far beyond our own localized selves.<sup>17</sup>

The profound influence of family on personal development begins from the utter dependency of the infant upon the family relations into which it is born. If infancy teaches us anything, and it teaches us much, its first lesson should be the inescapably interdependent nature of the human experience. Indeed, when Confucius's rather unremarkable student, Zaiwo, resists the burden and inconvenience of the traditional three-year mourning period for his parents, Confucius chides him by observing that parents quite literally give to infants three years of themselves, nourishing them and ensuring the continuing viability of their offspring as persons.<sup>18</sup>

The family is conceived as the center of all order, social and cosmic, and as we have seen in the *Great Learning*, all meaning ripples out in concentric circles from personal cultivation within family, and then returns again to nourish this primary source. In fact, if we ask after the meaning of personal "roles" (*lun* 倫) or perhaps a more primarily gerundive expression of them—"the living of one's roles and relations"—as this process is understood in the classical Chinese language, this character *lun* is one of a cluster of immediately cognate terms that offer various ways of characterizing radial order. We might begin from the notion of "a wheel, or taking turns" (*lun* 輪). And the notion of "bonding" in our roles is reinforced by cognates such as "selecting out" (*lun* 揀) and "twisting a cord, the woof" (*lun* 綸). This family of terms shares in the association of developing and strengthening a functional pattern of relations and of achieving a desired order. But the dynamic, articulate, and discursive aspects of living our roles are perhaps best captured in cognates such as "conversing, conversation" (*lun* 論), "rippling, ripples" (*lun* 漣), and the root character, "turning over in one's mind, thoughts, ordering, achieving coherence" (*lun* 倫). Indeed, this root character *lun* 倫 dates back to the oracle bones, and is constructed from an "opened mouth" and "an orderly bundle of bamboo written strips," [iii] suggesting a coherent exposition that elicits from and brings coherence to a particular written document.<sup>19</sup>

When we bring these various associations of this family of characters together, the insight gleaned is that the perceived source of growing

proper "relations" is fundamentally discursive: an aggregating "relating to" and "giving an account of oneself" within the compass of one's roles that define family, and by extension, community. Simply put, a thriving, family-based community derives from continuing familial patterns of effective communicating. Said another way, "speaking" family roles in the broadest sense of living them is the ultimate source of coherence and order within the human experience. Family roles as a strategy for getting the most out of relations are thus an inspiration for order more broadly construed—social, political, and cosmic order. We might say that Confucianism is nothing more than a sustained attempt "to family" the lived human experience. For Confucianism, it is through discursive living in a communicating family and community that we are able to enchant the ordinary, to ritualize the routine, to invigorate the familiar, to inspire the customary habits of life, and ultimately, to commune spiritually in the common and the everyday.

### The Discursive Nature of Family Relations

When all is said and done, what is a family "relationship"? To begin with, we are not separate "I" entities that then come into "we" relationships. As relationally constituted persons, "we" is the starting point, and we grow our lives significantly only through the extension and amplification of those relations that we already share as mother and wife and neighbor. For the relationally constituted conception of person, a relationship is comprised of various levels and modalities of discourse sustained over time. We shape each other linguistically through a sustained discourse, and also through other discursive media such as body, touch, and gesture. Certainly *li*—an achieved propriety in one's roles and relations—is linguistic, but it is not just speaking to each other. It is also the language of body and gesture, of music and food, of deference and attentive respect in the roles and relationships that we live. For Confucius, the human being is a social achievement, an adaptive success made possible through the applications of social imagination and intelligence. Society is not derivative of individual properties, nor is the individual the product of social forces. Rather, it is from the ecological and organic "doings and undergoings" of always-unique persons in their communities that both society and individual emerge together.<sup>20</sup> Given the reality of change, any success is

always provisional, leaving us as incomplete creatures with the always new challenge of contingent circumstances. And yet this success is at the same time progressive, programmatic, and consummatory.

The community is nothing more or less than a sustained "conversation" among a population of people, and exemplary persons within community are those who are virtuosic in effective speech and action, and who are both relationally and contextually catalytic in bringing to fruition the thriving community. The efficacy of what exemplary persons say and do not only influences the immediate community, but can have a profound and lasting effect on the world broadly.

In this early and persistent Chinese cosmology, human becoming and the discoursing that constitutes them are the inside and the outside of the same event, where meaning is made through productive associations. Human becoming is their meaningful relations. Hence the flourishing family is the outcome of an increasingly "familiar" discourse, and the thriving community is the outcome of an increasingly robust "communicating" and "communion" among its members. Importantly, in this Confucian tradition, all relationships—even the cosmological relationships between the heavens and the earth—are construed in discursive familial terms.

In reflecting on the power and substance of language, Hans-Georg Gadamer observes:

The "use" of words is not a "using" at all. Rather language is a medium, an element: language is the element in which we live, as fishes live in water.... In the exchange of words, the thing meant becomes more and more present. A language is truly a "natural language" when it binds us together in this way.<sup>21</sup>

The Chinese processual cosmology would perhaps take this Gadamerian insight into language one step further and claim that, in its broadest sense, "language," more than a medium, is constitutive of who we are as irreducibly relational people. The *Great Commentary* of the *Book of Changes* turns explicitly to the way in which communication functions to form persons discursively. The identity of a person, while certainly localized by "body" and "home," is in fact defined as a concentrated focus of patterns of deference established and fostered through effective discourses that entail body and gesture, but that also

include the written and spoken language, music, ritualized roles and relationships, food, and so on. Throughout classical Confucianism, the contention is that the proper and effective use of language (*zhengming* 正名) is the substance of relationships, and is basic to the flourishing community in all of its overlapping dimensions. Using language properly is how we achieve what is most *appropriate* in our associations, and hence what is most *meaningful*. Indeed, both of these qualities of conduct—appropriateness and meaningfulness—are captured in the term *yi* 義, a central terminology in this Confucian vision of the consummate life. This power of language as the primary source for effecting social order is not lost on Confucius:

"Were the Lord of Wey to turn the administration of his state over to you, what would be your first priority?" asked Zilu.

"Without question it would be to insure that names are used properly (*zhengming*)," replied the Master.

"Would you be as impractical as that?" responded Zilu. "What is it for names to be used properly anyway?"

"How can you be so dense?" replied Confucius. "Exemplary persons defer on matters they do not understand. When names are not used properly, language will not be used effectively; when language is not used effectively, matters will not be taken care of; when matters are not taken care of, the achievement of a ritual propriety in roles and relations and the playing of music will not flourish; when the achievement of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark; when the application of laws and punishments is not on the mark, the people will not know what to do with themselves. Thus, when exemplary persons put a name to something, it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be acted upon. There is nothing careless in the attitude of exemplary persons toward what is said."<sup>22</sup>

This notion of *zhengming* has conventionally been translated as "the rectification of names," suggesting that in our conduct we need to satisfy the stipulated definition of names and ranks. And this requisite is certainly part of the story. For Confucius, there is an immediate association between using political titles of office strictly, and the integrity of the state. In the *Zuo*zhuan commentary on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* there is an account of a person who in being rewarded

for saving a prominent man's life declines the offer of a city and asks instead to be allowed to use the dress and accoutrements of a prince. On hearing of this, Confucius denounces this charade bitterly in language reminiscent of the *Analekts* passage cited above:

What a pity! It would have been better to give him many cities. It is insignias of office and titles alone that cannot be conceded to pretenders—they must be managed by the ruler. Proper titles give rise to confidence, and confidence is what protects the insignias of office. It is insignias in which the meaning of ritual propriety is invested, and it is ritual propriety that carries appropriate conduct (*yi*) into practice; appropriate conduct is what gives rise to benefit, and it is benefit that brings equanimity to the people. Such things are what structure government, and if you concede them to pretenders, you concede the government along with them. If the government is lost, the country will follow, and there can be no stopping it.<sup>23</sup>

A major theme that runs through the *Analekts* is Confucius's insistence that unrelenting attention must be given to retaining a strict correspondence between formal ritual practices and the ranks of office, with the risk of political collapse being the consequence of doing otherwise.<sup>24</sup> More specifically, in his home state of Lu, Confucius was repeatedly chagrined at the powerful Ji family's usurpation of practices and privileges appropriate to the royal house.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, living language is informed by a history of usage that allows for its content to be stipulated, and in this sense, is retrospective in its meaning. But the need to *zhengming* does not end here. It is also prospective. That is, it is a living language and has to be used in a way that is sensitive to the specifics of the always changing context and in a way that respects the uniqueness of the persons involved in the conversation. It is often remarked upon that on six different occasions in the *Analekts*, Confucius is reported to have been asked by his protégés about the meaning of "consummate conduct" (*ren*), and on each of these occasions he gives each of these different students a different answer. This is because an impoverished, reticent, respectful, and conscientious Yan Hui would need a different understanding of what it means to become consummate in his conduct than a wealthy, self-possessed, assertive, and sometimes self-serving Zigong. We might

reflect on the fact that language has syntactical and morphological implications as well as semantic force, and as such, requires a sensitivity to "positioning and place" (*wei* 位) as being integral to its meaning. It is not just what one says that conveys meaning, but where, when, and to whom one is speaking.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, the efficacy of what the exemplary person has to say not only influences the immediate community, but also has a profound and lasting effect on the world broadly. The exemplary person as the source of effective speech and action has to be understood as catalytic within a configuration of circumstances in precipitating a certain course of events:

If what the exemplary persons say even while remaining at home is felicitous, those in distant quarters will respond to it; how much more so those near at hand. If what is said is not felicitous, those in distant quarters will oppose it; how much more so those near at hand. What is said comes from one's person but has an effect on the people; actions arise near at hand but are seen from a distance. Words and actions are the hinge and trigger of exemplary persons. And the operations of hinge and trigger control honor and disgrace. Since it is with words and actions that exemplary persons move the heavens and the earth, how could they be but circumspect with respect to them?<sup>27</sup>

The quality of discourse is measured by its degree of appropriateness (*yí*), and this feeling of appropriateness is whence a sense of genuine commitment and of belonging within meaningful relations emerges. Indeed, it is the quality of genuineness within the discourse that is the ground of effective communication, and that distinguishes virtuosic orchestration from manipulation, ethical exhortation from propaganda, liberating intimacy from an invasion of privacy, and inspiration from sensationalism.

### Achieving Personal Identity through Embodiment (*zì* 體) Propriety (*lǐ* 禮) in One's Roles and Relations

In attempting to explore the Confucian focal notion of personal identity, we might begin from the challenge that William James directs at the familiar "substance" understanding of the unity of "essence" and "attribute" in the notion of our foundational individuality. James uses the analogy

of "climate" to illustrate the redundancy that a superordinate substance such as "soul" or "self" or "mind" introduces into an analysis of personal identity:

The low thermometer to-day, for instance, is supposed to come from something called the "climate." Climate is really only the name for a certain group of days, but it is treated as if it lay *behind* the day, and in general we place the name, as if it were a being, behind the facts it is the name of. But the phenomenal properties of things ... do not inhere in anything. They adhere, or cohere, rather, with each other, and the notion of a substance inaccessible to us, which we think accounts for such cohesion by supporting it, as cement might support pieces of a mosaic, must be abandoned. The fact of the bare cohesion itself is all the notion of the substance signifies. Behind that fact is nothing.<sup>28</sup>

The Confucian alternative to locating personal identity in some superordinate soul or self or mind is to find this same coherence in the achieved coordination and integration of one's conduct expressed through one's embodied roles and relations. In the *Zhongyong*—a canonical text included along with the *Great Learning*, the *Analects* and the *Mencius* as the fourth and most inspirational of the *Four Books*—we are told explicitly that family feeling is the ultimate source of the civility and propriety that is fostered within our ritualized roles and institutions:

Consummate conduct (*ren* 仁) means comporting oneself as a person (*ren* 人), wherein devotion to one's kin is most important. Appropriateness (*yí* 義) means doing what is fitting (*yí* 宜), wherein esteeming those of superior conduct is most important.<sup>29</sup> The degree of devotion due different kin and the degree of esteem accorded those who vary in excellence of conduct is what gives rise to the achievement of propriety in our roles and relations (*lǐ* 禮).<sup>30</sup>

Qian Mu 錢穆 insists that these family-based ritualized roles and relationships (*lǐ*) are a deep cultural identity that must be distinguished fundamentally from the highly variable local customs (*fengsu* 風俗) that separate region from region. For Qian Mu, it is shared *lǐ* rather than different customs that constitute the resilient and enduring fabric of Chinese culture:

You might say that the *jia* [家], or “family,” is the place in Chinese culture where *li* [禮] is transmitted. But it is important to distinguish between *jiating* [家庭], “the family living group,” and *jiazu* [家族], the “family descent group.” It is through the *jiazu* that the standards of social relationships extend beyond the family to relatives. The descent group, which includes the relatives on both sides of the family, can only exist if the standards of *li* are applied. So, when the *li* are extended, a family descent group is made, and when they are further extended, a “people’s descent group,” or *minzu* [民族] is made. The Chinese are a *minzu* because the *li* set the standards in social relations for all of the people.<sup>31</sup>

Coordinated family relations (*lun lun*) then are quite literally the fabric (*lun lun*) of the Chinese as a particular “people.”

Tang Junyi like Qian Mu affirms the centrality of family feeling as the distinguishing Confucianism value. The centrality of family is for Tang one of the most profound differences separating Western and Chinese values. He establishes a contrast with the Western philosophical narrative in which “family” as an institution has not been a significant inspiration for order within the broad sweep of the evolution of Western philosophy and culture.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, we are unable to find any family-centered philosophical notion that is comparable to and that has had the vital importance that “family reverence” (*xiao 孝*) holds for Confucian philosophy. The key characters cognate with the term “family reverence” (*xiao*) are revealing of its invested cultural value. This “intergenerational reverence” (*xiao 孝*) that binds families together through the “respect and emulation” (*xiao 效*) of family models and cultural exemplars is one of two elements that constitutes the Chinese graph for “teachings” (*jiao 教*) broadly.

Using Qian Mu’s language, just as the “family living group” (*jiating 家庭*), the “family descent group” (*jiazu 家族*), and the “people’s descent group” (*minzu 民族*) are radial extensions outward from the conduct of particular family members, it is the coherence in the conduct within these embodied roles and relations that constitutes the identity of the particular members themselves. We might use a traditional expression that continues in the modern Chinese language as a heuristic for explicating the fundamental importance of family as ground for the achieved identity of Confucian persons. In the English language we might say “everybody (or everyone), please stand up,” using the “body”

and a presumed discreteness (“one”) as indices for “person,” thereby reinforcing linguistically an assumption that the “invisible” individual is the lowest unit in our social organization. By extension we refer to “anybody,” “nobody,” and “somebody” (or “anyone,” “no one,” and “someone”).

In vernacular Chinese, however, we would say “*dajia qing zhanglun*” 大家請站起來—literally, “big family, please stand up,” suggesting that family relations are perceived as constitutive of our persons, and that indeed it is life together within our specific familial roles rather than any single individual that is the lowest social unit. Implicit in this usually unconscious but rather stark contrast between the expressions “everyone” and “big family” (*dajia 大家*) is a fundamental, default distinction between individuated, self-sufficient, and thus discrete human beings, and situated, relational human beings who grow and realize themselves as distinctive persons through a sustained commitment to their always-collaborative, transactional roles within the nexus of family and community.

Applying this Confucian perspective to an understanding of my own person, I might reason that I am certainly incarnate and live my life as an embodied individual, and that my somaticity is integral to my “big family” identity. At the same time I must allow that I am D. C. Lau’s student, and Bonnie’s husband, and Jason and Austin’s father, and Sor-hoon’s old teacher, and Tze-wan and Chan-fai’s friend and colleague, and David and Henry’s long-time collaborator, and so on—and that these roles and relationships as we have grown them together over a lifetime weigh heavily in any adequate understanding of personal identity. After all, these wonderfully satisfying roles and intimate relations are complex and enduring, and are truly the inspiration that animates my always-embodied conduct. In considering personal identity from a Confucian perspective, we must appreciate fully the way in which both our somaticity and our complex manifold of relations with others enable us to achieve and sustain our coherence as a person, a coherence that is best understood as a dynamic focus of identity rather than as something separate and discrete. We might recall the focal and functioning understanding of the psychophysical and spiritual heartmind (*xin 心*) as an apposite analogy for the Confucian notion of person. At the same time, just as “what is the

heartmind in itself?" is a meaningless question, so we must resist the familiar, uncritical assumption that being embodied and being "enrolled" necessarily commits us to the notion of superordinate, individual "selves."

The character for "body" (*ti* 體) that has "bones" (*gu* 骨) as its classifier emerges relatively late in antiquity.<sup>33</sup> Although by the time of the silk manuscripts dating from 168 BCE that were recovered at Mawangdui *ti* does occur in this present form, it appears earlier on the Zhou dynasty bronzes with a "lived body" (*shen* 身) signifier as [*tu*], and then on the bamboo strip manuscripts with a "flesh" (*rou* 肉) signifier as [*u*].<sup>34</sup> We can use these three alternative classifiers that constitute the variant forms of this character *ti*—*gu* 骨, *shen* 身, and *rou* 肉—as a heuristic for parsing *ti*'s range of meaning. We must allow that *ti* with the "bones" (*gu* 骨) classifier references the "discursive body" as a process of "structuring," "configuring," "embodying," and thus "knowing" the world not only cognitively and affectively, but also viscerally. Each of us collaborates with the world to discriminate, conceptualize, and theorize the human experience, embodying and giving form to our culture, our language, our habitat. Above I cited Hilary Putnam who in *Realism with a Human Face* insists that our "language" and our "minds," together with the values that attend them, penetrate so deeply into human experience that it would be a nonsense to try to separate out some reality that stands independent of them.<sup>35</sup> The more holistic Confucian philosophy would take Putnam's claim further in arguing that it is not just language, mind, or indeed, a human face, that penetrates our reality, but our persons in their entirety.

*Ti* with the "lived body" (*shen*) classifier highlights another dimension of embodying experience by referencing the vital, existentially aware lived-body in its dynamic social relations with others. Experience always has a subjective dimension, an inside as well as an outside. And *ti* with the "flesh" (*rou*) classifier references the carnal body—the body as flesh and bone. At the most primordial level, the body via these three mutually entailing modalities serves as the bond that conjoins our subjectivity with our environments and that mediates the processes of thinking and feeling with our patterns of conduct.

Zhang Yanhua describes the active and intentional nature of the term *shen* 身 in precisely these terms:

*Shen* is both physical and extraphysical, capable of feeling, perceiving, creating, and reasoning or embodying changes and transformation on the social world as well as in the natural world. It is the world: at the same time, emotive, moral, aesthetic, and visceral.... In other words, the domains of body, mind, and emotion are mutually penetrating and activating.... Its practical logic involves a language of "bodies" in dynamic process and constant transformation and a language of relations.<sup>36</sup>

The idea that the entire world is brought into focus by and implicated in each of our embodied persons is captured in the expression "valuing one's person" (*guishen* 貴身) that appears as a strong theme in the *Daodejing*. That is, attending to one's own relationally constituted person is by extension treasuring the world:

Thus those who value the care of their own persons more than the care of the world can be entrusted with the world. And those who begrudge their persons as though they were the world can be put in charge of the world.<sup>37</sup>

In the Confucian tradition, the body is an inheritance we receive from our families, and as a current in a genealogical stream that reaches back to our most remote ancestors, brings with it a sense of continuity and belonging, and the religious significance that such feelings bring with them. To respect one's own body is to show reverence for one's ancestors and one's relationship to them, while disregard for one's body is to bring shame upon one's lineage. As it states in the opening chapter of the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經):

Your physical person with its hair and skin is received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins ...<sup>38</sup>

This responsibility to preserve one's body intact is a major theme throughout the Confucian canons. In the *Book of Rites*, it says:

Among those things born of the heavens and nurtured by the earth, nothing is grander than the human being. For the parents to give birth to your whole person, and for one to return oneself to them whole is what can be called family reverence. To avoid desecrating your body or bringing disgrace to your person is what can be called keeping your person whole.<sup>39</sup>

Confucius's protégé, Master Zeng, is a name often associated with family reverence (*xiao* 孝) in the canonical literature, and in the *Analects* it is recorded that on his deathbed he said the following:

Master Zeng was ill, and summoned his students to him, saying, "Look at my feet! Look at my hands! The *Book of Odes* says:

Fearful! Trembling!

As if peering over a deep abyss,

As if walking across thin ice.<sup>40</sup>

It is only from this moment hence that I can be sure I have avoided desecration of my body, my young friends."<sup>41</sup>

This relationship between the responsibility one has for keeping one's body intact and the appropriate attention to family reverence (*xiao*) works in the opposite direction as well. Traditionally, in the application of penal law (*xing* 刑) as is captured with the knife element (*dao* 刀) in the character itself, amputatory and branding punishments were often meted out for serious crimes. Such punishments are a deliberate strategy for not only alerting the community to the presence of a ne'er-do-well in its midst, but also as a way of assuring that such felons wear their shame before their ancestors in the world beyond.

Nathan Sivin has explored the correlations between body, cosmos, and state in the pre-Qin and early Han dynasties, arguing that "the ideas of Nature, state, and the body were so interdependent that they are best considered a single complex."<sup>42</sup> Perhaps the writings traditionally ascribed to the Han dynasty Confucian, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, are the *locus classicus* for describing the many correspondences between the human person and the cosmos—between microcosm and macrocosm.<sup>43</sup> Therein Dong describes not only associations between the changing seasons of the year and the rise and fall of the human passions, but also explores the many ostensive correlations between the anatomy and physiology of the human body and the structure of the material cosmos.<sup>44</sup> Further, early in the tradition, an elaborate vocabulary evolved that associates specific family relations with different parts of the body: the "living person" (*shengshen* 生身) is a metaphor used to refer to one's parents, "bones and flesh" (*guru* 骨肉) for one's children, "hands and feet" (*shouzu* 手足) for one's brothers, "stomach and heartmind" (*faxin* 腹心) for one's friends, and "of the same womb" (*tongbao* 同胞) for one's countrymen.<sup>45</sup>

In the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*) and several other canonical texts, there is a further correlation pursued in associating the proper structure of the cosmos (*li* 理) as a whole with propriety in human roles and relations (*li* 禮), suggesting that human morality has its counterpart in the harmonious workings of the cosmos. What is significant in this reflection on our embodied persons is that physically, socially, and religiously, our bodies are a specific matrix of nested relations and functions, and are invariably a collaboration between our persons and our many environments. "Nobody" and no "body"—not the vital, the social, or the carnal bodies—do anything by themselves.

In this Confucian tradition, we might correlate "body" (*ti* 體) and its cognate character "achieved propriety in one's roles and relations" (*li* 禮) by arguing that they express two ways of looking at the same phenomenon: That is, they reference "a living body" and "embodied living" respectively. If we use the vocabulary of contemporary medical anthropology to capture the nonanalytical relationship between living and embodying, we might cite Zhang Yanhua who concludes that "*jingshen* 精神 is not perceived in opposition to *shenti* 身體 but constitutive of it"—that is, our animated life activities are not distinct from our embodiment, but are integral to and an expression of it.<sup>46</sup>

*Ti* and *li* are further correlated in the *Book of Rites* as a "corpus" or a "body" of ritual proprieties:

Now the great corpus of ritual proprieties (*li zhi datu* 禮之大體) is embodied (*ti*) in the heavens and the earth, emulates the four seasons, takes *yin* and *yang* as its standard, comports with human feeling, and is thus called "ritual proprieties" (*li*). As for those who would denigrate these proprieties, they have no idea where such things come from.<sup>47</sup>

Peter Boodberg in searching for the common ground shared by these two cognate terms, *ti* 體 and *li* 禮, allows that "form, that is, organic form ... appears to be the link between the two words, as evidenced by the ancient Chinese scholiasts who repeatedly used *ti* [ti] to define *li* in their glosses."<sup>48</sup> Deborah Sommer goes back to the usages of *ti* in the *Book of Odes* to quite literally dig out its earliest connotations. *Ti* is associated in the early literature with vegetable propagation that is "accomplished not with seeds but by dividing the roots, stems, tubers or other fleshy parts of plants into segments that are then replanted to develop into 'new

plants."<sup>49</sup> Sommer observes that "for people of an agriculturally based society, the notion that plants can be multiplied through vegetative division would have been a commonplace."<sup>50</sup> There is both continuity and origination in the process of sprouting tubers being dissected and grown again and of the unusable roots of defoliated herbs generating a new harvest of leaves and stems. From these early references, Sommer offers an abstracted understanding of the *ti* body as

... a polysemous corpus of indeterminate extent that can be partitioned into subtler units, each of which is often analogous to the whole and shares a fundamental consubstantiality and common identity with that whole.... When a *ti* body is fragmented into parts (literally or conceptually), each part retains, in certain aspects, a kind of wholeness or becomes a simulacra of the larger entity of which it is a constituent.<sup>51</sup>

Although in Sommer's survey of this early literature she concludes that "*ti* bodies often act more like plants than like humans,"<sup>52</sup> I would hesitate in making such a sharp distinction between these two categories. Indeed I would want to press her analysis a step further as providing real insight into the early Chinese way of thinking specifically about human genealogical continuity, and in so doing, provide an opportunity to extrapolate from horticulture to human culture. In chapter two above we rehearsed Tang Junyi's proposition, "the inseparability of the one and the many, of uniqueness and multivalence, of continuity and multiplicity, of integrity and integration" (*yiduo bufen guan* —多不分觀). If we take human procreancy as an illustration of this proposition, such a characterization is another way of affirming *paisheng* 派生, the birthing of a distinctive and unique person from those who are genealogically prior. At the same time, within the ongoing, ceaseless process of shaping and being shaped called *huasheng* 化生, the "many" prior progenitors persist and live on in this process of transforming into someone else. That is, while persons emerge to become specifically who they are as individuals, the parents and grandparents of such individuals continue to live on in them, just as they too will live on in their future progeny. The focus-field language that we have proposed as a way of thinking about the relationship between particulars and the totality seems immediately relevant to the kind of holography Sommer alludes to when she says that "each new plant in some sense is still the parent plant, and there exists a

material continuity of identity from one life form to the next.... Mother and daughter plants are at once autonomous and yet consubstantial."<sup>53</sup>

We might take an elaboration of this *ti* genealogy a step further. This process of division, diffusion, and derivation can provide additional illumination if we reflect upon the complex transmission of always-embodied knowledge from generation to succeeding generation. The body is the site of a conveyance of the cultural corpus of knowledge—linguistic facility and proficiency, religious rituals and mythologies, the aesthetics of cooking, song, and dance, the modeling of mores and values, instruction and apprenticeship in cognitive technologies, and so on—as a continuing, intergenerational process through which a living civilization itself is perpetuated.<sup>54</sup>

The communal *shen* body is diffused in the dynamic family and communal roles and relations that constitutes it, and just as the *ti* body does not carry with it a superordinate notion of "self" or "soul"—some ghost in the machine—likewise, achieved propriety in living one's roles and relations (*li*) that complements this body in constituting one's person is also primordial. That is, the quality of one's conduct is not mediated by or reduplicated in some notion of a discrete "agent" or "character" that would isolate and locate persons outside of the concrete pattern of their social and natural relations. Instead, the identity of persons lies in the achieved amalgamation, the integration, and the sustained coherence of their continuing habits of conduct within the embodied roles that constitute them.

These roles have their beginnings in "family reverence" (*xiao*), and are then extended in a process that quite literally brings the community home through surrogate family relations. As we perform our various roles, so we are in turn formed as persons. Tang Junyi describes the function of *li* in the following terms:

When the "Ritualizing Experience" (*liyun* 禮運) chapter of the *Book of Rites* discusses the ideal of the era of Great Harmony (*daxiong* 大同), what is intended is simply that everyone should get what they deserve. Herein the concepts of propriety (*li*) and appropriateness (*yì*) are subsumed under the concept of person. As such, persons in the course of realizing this purpose must participate fully and appropriately in their symbiotic ritualized roles and relations before each person can get what they should get out of these relationships.<sup>55</sup>

Tang is here rehearsing a proposition that is also found in the *Analects* where it insists that any genuine harmony must be mediated through a robust sense of propriety in the roles and relations that situate us within family and community (*Analects* 1.12). Confucian "harmony" is much more than merely an absence of discord that could be maintained by indiscriminately enforcing social order. The ultimate achievement of an orchestrated harmony grounded in family feeling is to bring into focus and resolution the persons who make up a community in which everyone has developed a sense of shame and responsibility (*Analects* 2.3).

We find the Latin *proprius*—literally, "making something one's own"—as the root in words such as "proper," "appropriate," "propriety," and "property." This root provides us with a series of cognate expressions that are felicitous in translating those key Confucian philosophical terms that are felicitous in translating those key Confucian philosophical terms that define of personal identity because such translations locate one as an active participant committed to personalizing one's various life forms—physical and social—and thus making them one's own. This always-reflexive personalization of one's roles—I am this son to this mother—has immediate consequence in the search for effective renderings of this philosophical vocabulary. For example, if we acknowledge the persistence of a relational rather than essential understanding of the Confucian person, *yi* 義 cannot be "righteousness"—putatively an individual's compliance with some external divine directive. Rather, *yi* must be an inclusive "conducting oneself appropriately" in those relations within one's particular family and community. That is, *yi* is doing what is most fitting within the specific circumstances, as opposed to simply following some external principle or rule in doing what is deemed correct. Similarly, *zheng* 正 cannot be simply "correct" or "rectified" conduct or language—again, an appeal to some external standard. Rather *zheng* must be an inclusive "conducting oneself properly" or "using language properly" as negotiated by a particular person within a particular social context. Relatedly, *zheng* 政 is not simply "government" but a reflexive "governing properly" that necessarily begins at home in the life of the family and then extends radially outward in the community and polity.<sup>56</sup> And *li* ("ritual propriety") is not just "performing formal observances flawlessly," but is the quality of propriety achieved by *personally and consistently* doing what is most appropriate in the roles and relations that define one. As is recounted in the *Analects*:

The expression "sacrifice as though present" is taken to mean "sacrifice to the spirits as though the spirits are present." But the Master said, "If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as though I have not sacrificed at all."<sup>57</sup>

On the informal and uniquely personal side, full participation in a ritually constituted community requires the appropriation and reauthorization of the prevailing institutions and values that are defining of a culture. What makes the mechanism of achieving ritual propriety in one's roles and relations profoundly different from merely comporting with law or rule is the sense of shame one develops in the ongoing process of making the tradition one's own. As we will see in the next chapter, shame looms large as a key element in ethical motivation because shame is an earned awareness that we live together interdependently in family and community, and that each of us is responsible in our conduct for the well-being of the world that we share.

A careful reading of the classical Confucian literature uncovers a way of life carefully choreographed down to appropriate facial expressions and physical gestures, a world in which a life is an embodied performance requiring concentrated and unrelenting attention to detail. Importantly, this *li*-constituted performance begins from the insight that personal refinement is only possible through the discipline provided by formalized roles and behaviors. But form alone without sustained personalization is coercive and dehumanizing law. On the other extreme, creative personal expression in the absence of form is randomness at best, and license at worst. It is only with the appropriate combination of and balance between formality and functional personalization that family and community can become elegant, refined, and self-regulating.

Zhang Yanhua appeals to "an aesthetics of relationships" in her attempt to take full cognizance of the powerful emotional dimension of family flourishing that is instrumental in fostering an immediate sense of both intra- and inter-generational continuity and belonging:

The cultural aesthetics of *renhe* 人和 (harmonious interpersonal relationships) finds its full expression in Chinese family ethics that guide the way the family members care for and interact with each other according to their places within the family. The harmonious family also includes a vertical dimension. This concern for harmonious family relationships extends to the deceased

members of the family, that is, the spiritual world.... This is also related to the Chinese sensibility of *tong* 通 (connection and flowing).... For the Chinese, harmony presupposes a healthy process of connecting and extending.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the vertical concern for ancestors that reinforces the continuity of family identity, there is an important horizontal dimension of interdependent family relations that expands outward through the vital role of friendship in the Confucian project. As Zhang Yanhua reports:

It is also important that the cultural aesthetics of *renhe* (harmonious interpersonal relations) extend beyond one's immediate circle of family members and relatives through extensive networks of "human emotions" (*renqing* 人情) created and maintained diligently by all forms of social exchanges, of gifts, labor, services, respect, and so on.<sup>59</sup>

### The Liberating Role of Friendship

Zhang Yanhua's observation about cultural aesthetics leads us to a reflection on the vital importance of the notion of friendship in Confucian role ethics. Within the web of Confucian relations, intimate friendships take on a transformative force that can only be adequately explained by understanding them as an extension and amplification of the family itself. As a dimension of a Confucian family-centered ethic, friendship serves as a definite, sometimes compensatory source of meaning and value. While immediate family relations are usually a matter of birth and blood, developed friendships are contingent, and entail diversity and deliberate choice. We might describe the role of friendship as a doorway through which erstwhile outsiders enter to join and add a remarkable depth to the ranks of family relations.

The vital importance of friendship for Confucianism lies in its function as an open conduit that leads from the security and stability of one's own family out into the more uncertain and sometimes taxing of social, political, and cultural realm. When Ziliu asks after the makings of a scholar-official, Confucius says plainly:

Persons who are critical and demanding, yet amicable can be called scholar-officials. Persons need to be critical and demanding with their friends, and amicable and acquiescent with their older and younger brothers.<sup>60</sup>

Confucius thus anticipates that friendships can in some ways be more challenging than intimate family relations. One can fairly take for granted the love and protection of one's immediate family, while successful life in the public sphere requires a higher degree of discrimination and a more critical sense of engagement. But then again the dividends to be reaped from enduring friendships over a lifetime are truly substantial, introducing into the project of personal growth resources that provide a deeper degree of difference. In this Confucian tradition, to "make" friends is quite literally to participate in the "making" of each other to the extent that it is the friendship itself that becomes what is most concrete, while the "individuals" who participate in the growth of the relationship become increasingly an abstraction from it.

In choosing one's friends, Confucius is emphatic: "Exemplary persons ... do not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as they are."<sup>61</sup> This declaration is a clear acknowledgment of his understanding that personal growth and diminution are a function of associated living. It prompts us to ask again: For Confucius, where does the meaning in a "meaningful" friendship come from? In a Platonic-come-Christian world wherein meaning has a transcendent reference, friendship is instrumentalized as a commitment to a common end. The conclusion of the reflection on friendship in the *Phaedrus* is that friends hold all things in common. And when what they hold in common is an *eros* directed toward the transcendent Good, they are *true* friends. Similarly, for the Christian, *philia* as the love among friends and family members is subordinated to *agape*, the love of a transcendent God channeled through His creatures as their love for one another.

Aristotle, like Plato, takes commonality as the basis for friendship. In both cases, there is a high value invested in self-sufficiency. For Aristotle, there is a lower level of incidental friendship that seeks utility and pleasure. But *true* friends by contrast are "another self" or "a second self" because they mirror one's own virtuous character and the intellectual activity of *nous* that is identical in all people. Indeed, Aristotle appeals to the mirror metaphor to illustrate how the real friend in being similarly virtuous is a source of self-knowledge.<sup>62</sup> He allows that "contemplative friendships" are higher than the practical kind, and that such virtue friendships are rare; they are only available to an elite circle of equally virtuous people.<sup>63</sup> There is a superiority of the theoretical life over the

practical, and of the speculative vision over daily moral activities. Thus, for Aristotle, the eternal truth that can be grasped by *nous* must be given priority over friendship, even when it means turning one's back on one's own teacher—in his case, Plato:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and discuss thoroughly what is meant by it, although such an inquiry is made an uphill one by the fact that the Forms have been introduced by friends of our own.... [W]hile both are dear, piety requires us to honor truth above our friends.<sup>64</sup>

For Confucius, like his Greek cousins, friendships are in some ways a matter of common cause:

Master Zeng said, "Exemplary persons attract friends through their refinement, and through these friends promote consummate conduct (*ren*)."<sup>65</sup>

May Sim has identified many resonances between the Confucian and Aristotelian models of friendship, taking careful account of their important similarities.<sup>66</sup> But beyond these commonalities, it must be allowed that there is significant distance between the accounts of friendship we find in Aristotle and Confucius. We must take into account the metaphysical and biological uniformities in Aristotle's foundational individualism, the self-sufficiency of final and unchanging first principles and causes that are the object of contemplation, and the centrality of rationality as the ground in making moral decisions. For Confucius, *contra* Plato and Aristotle, the ultimate source of meaning is not external, but emerges through the nurturing process of the friendship itself. And it is the ways in which friends are qualitatively superior to and different from each other that provides the opportunity for a collaborative advancement. Confucian friendship is a classic illustration of the mantra: "Exemplary persons seek harmony not conformity; petty persons are the opposite."<sup>67</sup> When Zigong was asked who Confucius had as his teacher, his reply is inclusive:

The moral vision (*dao*) of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly—it lives on in the people. Those of superior character have grasped the greater part of it, while those of lesser quality have grasped a bit. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu's way in them. Who then did the Master not learn from? Again, how could there have been a single constant teacher for him?<sup>68</sup>

The message here is that since each person is different, Confucius had something—sometimes more, sometimes less—to learn from everyone. This generous appreciation of both the positive and negative possibilities that most relations with other people provide us for moral development is made abundantly clear:

The Master said, "In strolling together with just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher in their company. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly."<sup>69</sup>

Personal growth is a function of the quality of the specific productive relations achieved among family and friends. In seeking out and developing meaningful friendships, we have latitude and a degree of freedom that is not characteristic of our relations with blood relatives. Confucius is keenly aware that broadening and expansive friendships, compensating to an important degree for family constraints, can serve as a real opportunity for personal growth. Poorly chosen, however, these erstwhile friendships can also be a source of personal diminution. He observes:

Having three kinds of friends will be a source of personal improvement; having three other kinds of friends will be a source of personal injury. One stands to be improved by friends who are true, who make good on their word, and who are broadly informed; one stands to be injured by friends who are ingratiating, who feign compliance, and who are glib talkers.<sup>70</sup>

Confucius's point here is that friendship provides a porous border on the institution of family that allows for a more deliberate and purposeful shaping of one's own personal relations, and hence, one's own person. These voluntarily chosen relations are still to be construed as familial, and yet they have a potential to provide a degree of growth and complexity that can often go beyond our more formal family bonds.

Commonality and overlap is covered in the vocabulary of friendship by the term *peng* 朋. In the oracle bone script this character originally identified a denomination of two strings of cowry shell currency as [*wei*] and later came to mean "peer" or "comrade" in the specific sense of being students of the same master. Although the power of the role of "classmate" (*tongxue* 同學) and "student older brother/sister"



(*xuexiongjie* 學兄/姐) continues down to the present day; the emphasis in Confucian friendship is on interdependence and difference rather than on sameness and self-sufficiency. Friendship as an opportunity for creative growth is built into the associations that the more frequently used term for "friend"—*you* 友—evokes. The oracle bone version of this character has "two hands" [*wu*] that are sometimes joined together [*wu*], suggesting a common bond of friendship.<sup>71</sup> *You* is first cognate with *you* 右, "the right hand," and by extension, with what is to be honored and revered. It is further cognate with *you* 佑 "to assist," and *you* 祐 "a blessing." Combining these several associations, we might observe that a true friend is an object of deference to be honored and esteemed as a blessing that assists in one's personal growth.

A second philological correlation for "friend" (*you* 友) is its cognate and homophonous relationship with *you* 有, "to have, to be around (= wealth)," a term that also appears as a loan character for it. *You* 有 is depicted suggestively on the bronzes specifically as the honored right hand grasping a piece of meat, a scarce, valuable, and sometimes sacred commodity in an agrarian community: [*ix*].<sup>72</sup> Again, the implication is that a true friend is a matter of proximity—someone who is there for you—and a resource whence to garner increased meaning in one's life.

That Confucius insists upon this restricted and specific use of "friend" (*you*) is suggested in a disagreement on the meaning of "establishing relations with others" (*yiao* 交) that involves two of his closest protégés, Zixia and Zizhang. In the years following the death of the Master, these two disciples matured into patriarchs in their own right and had their own interpretations of what Confucius had said and what he had meant by it:

The disciples of Zixia asked Zizhang about establishing relations with others. Zizhang queried, "What has Zixia told you?" They replied, "Associate with those who are worthy of your efforts; spurn those who are not."

It would seem from Zixia's definition of "establishing relations with others" that he is retaining the strictness and the discrimination with which Confucius himself approaches friendship. But such a narrow reading does not go unchallenged. Zizhang counters:

This is different from what I have learned. Exemplary persons exalt those of superior character and are accommodating of everyone, praise those who are truly efficacious, and are sympathetic with those who are less so. If in

comparison with others, I am truly superior in character, who am I not able to accommodate? If I am not superior in the comparison, and people are thus going to spurn me, what basis do I have to spurn others?<sup>73</sup>

In evaluating these two very different interpretations of Confucius's attitude to establishing relationships, it is helpful to recall the profile of these two students that emerges from frequent reference in the *Analects* and elsewhere.

Zizhang with his free-wheeling altruism is repeatedly rebuked by Confucius for paying more attention to appearances than to substance, and for using language without due care.<sup>74</sup> In one telling passage,

Zizhang asked about the way of the truly efficacious person (*shunren* 善人). The Master replied, "Not following in the footsteps of others, one does not gain entrance to the inner sanctum."<sup>75</sup>

Confucius is here criticizing Zizhang specifically for not deferring sufficiently to moral exemplars—those who would be *true* friends—thereby precluding the possibility of his ever having access to those relations that open the door to real personal worth.

Zixia, on the other hand, is a man of letters, and being credited more than any other of Confucius's protégés for his scholarship, he is remembered by tradition as having played a major role in the transmission of the Confucian classics. Zixia has a central place in the last five chapters of the *Analects* where he underscores the importance of learning. Trying to compensate for his image as a pendent, Zixia insists that virtuosity in one's personal relationships is what learning is all about. Indeed, Confucius allows that he himself has gained a great deal from his conversations with Zixia. With these two profiles in mind, then, we can speculate that while many of us might admire the logic of Zizhang and prefer his seemingly more egalitarian and inclusive sentiments on the proper expression of what it means to be a friend, it is probably Zixia who, in underscoring the vital function of friendship for the possibility of personal growth, is transmitting the more genuine understanding of what Confucius himself expected from friendship.

But if Confucius has learned a great deal from Zixia, he has on his own admission learned much more from his favorite disciple, Yan Hui. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius repeatedly singles out Yan Hui for

high praise, according to this one exceptional student alone the description of being consummate in his conduct (*ren*)<sup>76</sup> and of being truly fond of learning (*haoxue*).<sup>77</sup> Indeed, he places Yan Hui far above himself and everyone else in his capacity for learning:

The Master remarked to Zigong, "Comparing yourself with Yan Hui, who is the better person?" Zigong replied, "How dare I have such expectations. With Yan Hui, learning one thing he will know ten; with me, learning one thing I will know two." The Master said, "You are not his match. Neither you nor I are a match for Yan Hui."<sup>78</sup>

Of course, "learning" here has an immediate moral and religious reference to personal growth achieved through assiduous cultivation and a demonstrated relational virtuosity in family and community. Confucius himself, far from being mysterious and aloof with his students, is candid about the limits of the mentorship that he can offer them:

The Master said, "My young friends, you think that I have something hidden away, but I do not. There is nothing I do that I do not share with you—this is the person I am."<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, Confucius insists that it is one's contribution to the community rather than one's seniority that is deserving of deference. And he encourages an appropriate respect for the as-yet undisclosed potential and possibilities that might well attend the next generation:

The Master said, "The young should be held in high esteem. After all, how do we know that those yet to come will not surpass our contemporaries? It is only when one reaches forty or fifty years of age and yet has done nothing of note that we should withhold our esteem."<sup>80</sup>

Given Confucius's critical attitude toward his contemporaries and his judicious admiration for the ways in which his students excel, we can surmise that his strict understanding of a mentoring friendship is more a matter of substantial difference than it is of hierarchical superiority. After all, since good teachers learn much from good students, we would have to conclude that on his own premises, Confucius would allow that students too can be a source of meaningful friendship. This would certainly seem to have been the case in his fervent admiration for Yan Hui:

When Yan Hui died, the Master grieved for him with sheer abandon. His followers cautioned, "Sir, you grieve with such abandon." The Master replied, "I grieve with abandon? If I don't grieve with abandon for him, then for whom?"<sup>81</sup>

### The Embeddedness and Growth of "Human Becomings"

As we have seen, in this Confucian model of what I have called a "human becoming," one's personal realization is irreducibly "other-entailing" and all relations are inclusively familial. Friends too become family. The flourishing of one's person and the thriving of one's family and community are isomorphic and co-terminus. We might bring this distinction between the "human being" and the "human becoming" into clearer focus by reflecting on Aristotle's understanding of the human being. The extent to which the contrasting understandings of person constitute a fundamental disjunction between Aristotle and Confucius is not lost on the comparative philosopher, May Sim:

Confucius appeals to no entity that we call the "self" (in several meanings of that term), much less a metaphysical *psyché*... When Aristotle asks about human well-being, he quickly turns to questions about human *being*. The focus and source of this being is the *psyché*—even more precisely the rational "part" of the *psyché* that marks what is distinctive to humankind. The well-functioning of this part of ourselves is the best thing in us and most to be prized, Aristotle argues. Although it is formally identical in every member of the species and thus what underwrites our talk of shared human nature and common basic virtues (and according to later Aristotelians, the moral equality of persons), an actual *psyché* is always *this-psyché* and hence individual.<sup>82</sup>

In what follows I will contend that the classical Confucian texts, taken on their own terms rather than on Aristotle's, appeal to a relatively straightforward account of our actual life experience rather than to abstract entities, and in so doing, provide a justification for reinstating the intimacy of family feeling as the concrete ground of an always-emergent moral order. I will further argue that there is a difference between Western ethical theories that are directed at enabling people to think and to talk about ethics more cogently, and a Confucian vision of a consummate life that seeks to inspire people to be better persons.