

China's New Confucianism

Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society

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Princeton University Press • Princeton and Oxford

7. A Critique of Critical Thinking

In 2006, I was asked to serve as an examiner for an oral examination of a doctoral student at a Chinese university. The thesis dealt with the thought of a contemporary British philosopher, and it was an impressively comprehensive and well-documented account of his ideas. But I pointed out that the thesis had more presentation than critical evaluation, and I mentioned something I had learned from one of my teachers at Oxford: that when reading a philosophical text, we should always ask, "Is this argument true or false?" and give reasons for our views.

Another member of the examination panel intervened at this point. He said that it's hard enough for a Chinese student to engage with the thought of a difficult philosopher writing in a foreign language, that the student did an excellent job explaining the philosopher's ideas in Chinese, that his thesis in published form will be an important contribution to the Chinese academic world, and that the student should be rewarded for his effort. I agreed with this. But then the panelist said something more surprising (to me): that according to traditional Chinese ideas, the task of the student is to learn about the world until age forty or so, and only then try to critically examine that world. On the face of it, it was a preposterous statement for a university professor to make. It might seem to justify an uncritical approach to education, with the teachers seen as transmitters of "truth" and students as passive absorbers of knowledge. The political implications might seem equally ominous: that people under forty shouldn't play any substantial role in political decision-making because they're not yet in a capacity to engage in critical evaluation of policies. Upon further thinking, however, I realized that the panelist's view was not as preposterous as it seems. In fact, it may stem from a long tradition of Confucian thinking about

education, and that tradition may have some merit in the contemporary world.¹ To illustrate this view, I've written a fictitious dialogue that imagines what Confucius might say if he were brought back to life (with empirical knowledge of the contemporary world) and asked to put forward his views about education.² In the present day, he would likely be a university professor rather than a failed politician and informal teacher, so let me preface his family name, Kong, with the formal "Professor." His interlocutor is Professor Hu, an American-trained Chinese liberal thinker.³ For purposes of this dialogue, both professors teach at Chinese universities, and they have been asked to debate the aims, content, and methods of university education in the humanities for a one-hour televised program in Hong Kong (where people are more free to air their views without worrying about political constraints).

The Aims of Education in the Humanities

Professor Hu: We've been asked to debate different approaches to teaching the humanities in China. Let's think of it as a normative rather than an empirical task. In my view, the main aim of liberal education should be the inculcation of critical thinking skills and attitudes. Students should learn to critically reflect, debate, and challenge old dogmas. That's the key to moving forward. And there's certainly a need for more critical thinking in China!

Professor Kong: We also need to be careful about encouraging criticism. It can be an awfully destructive force. Think about what our students did during the Cultural Revolution: they criticized anything old and "feudal" and the result was a ten-year nightmare for our country.

Professor Hu: That's a ridiculous comparison. The students during the Cultural Revolution were just blindly following Mao's orders to struggle against "counterrevolutionary" views. The teaching of critical thinking is about getting students to think on their own. They should learn to evaluate and criticize traditional

views, but not reject them automatically. Do you deny that students should be taught critical thinking skills?

Professor Kong: There's an appropriate time and place for criticism. We also need to inculcate what we might term "empathetic ability," the ability to understand and empathize with other people's feelings and emotions. In Western universities, there's hardly any emphasis on the affective side of education. Too often, liberal education seems to be about making people articulate in defending their own views and criticizing those of others. That may be a useful skill for lawyers, but it's not enough. Surely the proper aim of education isn't just to make people good at winning debates and "proving" that they are right. We also need to think about educating people's emotions. Being fully human is also about being able to put oneself in other people's shoes, to understand what they feel, and to sympathize with other people's needs and desires. My student Zigong once asked me if there's one expression that can be acted upon until the end of our days, and I answered: "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (15.24).

Professor Hu: There are limits to empathy. I can't really know what others are thinking and feeling,⁴ and it seems odd if you're suggesting that we should educate people for that purpose.

Professor Kong: There are limits, but it's still possible to reflect upon the perspectives of other people. And that ability must be cultivated and nourished in the proper educational environment. Experimental evidence points to important differences between individualistic Americans and relationship-oriented Chinese in that respect.⁵ But it's not enough to consider other perspectives: those lacking empathy may just want to be attuned to other people for the purpose of better manipulating them for their own ends. So people must also learn to *care* for others. I do think there's a natural tendency to seek to limit the suffering of others: only the deranged sociopath wouldn't be moved by compassion to save a child about to fall into a well.⁶ But that tendency also needs to be cultivated and developed.

Professor Kong: It depends on the context. If two enemies criticize each other, they will question each other's motives and the

Professor Kong: Of course there's always a gap between the ideal and the reality, but the same is true of Western-style critical

thinking: instead of advancing truth as it's supposed to do, it often degenerates into petty debating and humiliation of one's "opponents." How do we deal with the gap between the ideal and the reality? We should remind people of the ideals, and propose ways to realistically implement them while pointing to the dangers of misuse. That's what we can do with regard to teaching the humanities in East Asia. We should promote the ultimate ideal of "harmony in diversity," teach the kind of empathy that promotes harmonious relationships, and emphasize that critical thinking is best carried out in ways that don't undermine affective ties.

Professor Hu: Even if I agreed that we should teach about empathy and promote the ideal of harmony (which I don't—I think the bad consequences of this ideal far too often outweigh the good), I'm not sure why you say it needs to be promoted in higher education. Why not let families and religious authorities take care of it? Universities should focus on critical thinking; surely that's a big enough task.

Professor Kong: Well, I'm worried about the consequences of critical thinking, left alone. As mentioned, it all too often degenerates into hostility and aggression, and needlessly undermines relationships. If teachers simply improve students' critical abilities without improving their empathetic abilities, those critical abilities can be used for immoral purposes: "I detest glib-tongued talkers who overturn states and families" (17.18). In modern societies, with the atomistic pressures of global capitalism, there's an even greater need to educate people so they can nourish harmonious relationships. The family has an important role, but it won't be sufficient. We need to think about how higher education can also contribute to this task.

Professor Hu: In any case, it's not just a pedagogical dispute about how to educate people; there's also a political aim to liberal education: to make better citizens. And the two aims of liberal education go hand in hand. If people's critical faculties are developed, they're more likely to act as concerned and critical

citizens who help to sustain and improve democratic political institutions. We want people to critically reflect upon and assert their legitimate interests in the rough and tumble of democratic politics, as well as respect the rights of others to do so. It's widely recognized today that liberal democracy requires a certain degree of active citizenship; otherwise democratic institutions will atrophy, and elites will manage the political process for their own political purposes.

Professor Kong: But aren't universities educating elites? Let's be frank: we're not educating common people in the art of citizenship. Only a minority of talented students go on to university, and perhaps only a minority of those actually develop their critical faculties in the way favored by democratic theorists. So I think we should admit that we're training political elites, not ordinary citizens.

Professor Hu: I don't share your elitism. I worry about this assumption that there are qualitative differences in people's political beliefs. Everyone's political beliefs matter equally and everyone should have the equal right to shape the political process. That's one reason we care about democracy, because everyone's voice matters equally.

Professor Kong: But we're talking about training an elite of students. And surely we think—we hope—that we're making them into more capable political actors, meaning that they're better at thinking about politics than the large mass of people. If my students failed to make any moral and political progress after they were done with my courses, I'd regard myself as a failure.

Professor Hu: Rather than accept the political status quo that deprives large numbers of the opportunity for a decent political education, we should try to equalize opportunities so that everybody can be educated.

Professor Kong: Agreed. "In education, there aren't any social classes" (15.39). Everybody should be given the same educational

opportunities regardless of class, race, or sex.⁸ As for me, "I've never denied instruction to anyone who, using their own resources, could only afford a gift of dried meat" (7.7). But that's not to say everyone has the same talent: in private, university professors often say that "student so and so is smart and talented," but they rarely come clean and admit that there may be qualitative differences in that respect. And sometimes, the students have more talent than the professors! For example, I don't measure up to my best student, Yan Hui: "From one thing he learns, he deduces ten; from one thing I learn, I only deduce two" (5.9) Nor does every student have the same level of motivation. If it were up to me, I'd "only instruct students who are driven with eagerness" (7.8). In my experience, such students are quite rare. "Yan Hui truly loved learning. He didn't take his anger out on others, nor did he make the same mistake twice. Unfortunately, he was to die young. Nowadays, there's no one—at least, I haven't come across anyone—who truly loves learning" (6.3). Besides, I'm not sure if everybody wants to be educated in the political sense. Some people prefer to stick to family matters, others to religious matters. Even if we lived in a society where nobody was deprived of educational opportunities for financial or other reasons, I suspect you would have only have a selected few with the motivation and talent to play a substantial role in their society's political affairs. And the political purpose of higher education should be to train that elite.⁹

Professor Hu: In my view, the question should be how to distribute political power to the people, not how to train an elite of decision-makers. Societies governed by elites aren't likely to do things for the people. Or perhaps you disagree that politics should be for the people.

Professor Kong: Of course politics should be for the people. "Exemplary persons should cultivate themselves by easing the lot of the common people" (14.42). But we need to accept that only a minority of people will actually govern society.

Professor Hu: Are you against democracy? Don't you think ordinary people should also be participants in the political process?

Professor Kong: Let's not get into that. We're discussing the purpose of education in the humanities for Chinese universities. We're talking about educating a minority of talented students, and we should come clean and say that we're educating future leaders, not ordinary citizens.

Professor Hu: But we also need to think about the overall political system they're supposed to fit into. If they're supposed to be educated to rule in nondemocracies, let's also come clean about that.

Professor Kong: I'm not sure if that's the key question for education. In reality, we need to recognize that people's views seldom have impact on actual policies and that modern countries tend to be ruled by educated elites—democracies are no exception. So the question is, how should we educate that elite? Political education, in my view, should stress the virtue of humility, so that elites recognize their own limits and not try to impose grand schemes upon reluctant members of the public. "Exemplary persons are distinguished but not arrogant" (13.26). The governing elites should also develop their empathetic skills, so that rulers empathize with those who are subject to the effects of policies. We want our political elite to be both intelligent and morally sensitive.

Professor Hu: A fine ideal, but difficult to realize in practice. Look at our East Asian leaders. In Singapore, the political discourse is elitist, and leaders aren't exactly known for their humility. In fact, there's nobody more arrogant than Lee Kuan Yew; he doesn't even bother to conceal his arrogance. And look at our leaders. If they're supposed to be morally sensitive, why are they so corrupt?

Professor Kong: One reason is that they weren't educated in the humanities. As you know, Lee was trained in law, and many of

our leaders are trained in engineering. If political leaders only learn about the technical skills of law, engineering, management, and so on, they're missing something important, no matter how smart they may be. Future political leaders should study the great literary and philosophical texts of the past. That's where they learn about the sorts of ethical virtues—humility, sensitivity, temperance, and genuine concern for the people—that they ought to exhibit in political action.

The Content of Education in the Humanities

Professor Hu: Personally, I worry about that approach. If the aim is to teach works that promote democratic citizenship, the students shouldn't just learn about great thinkers and what they wrote. This way of teaching causes students to assume that great texts of philosophy and literature were produced by very special, unique people—the Great Thinkers. The students come to the conclusion that they could never theorize about these questions, and they often just repeat what these scholars wrote without critically examining the texts. Consider the history of our imperial examinations.

Professor Kong: The imperial examinations should have tested for both memorization and independent thinking.¹⁰ Memorization is an important part of the learning process,¹¹ but at some point we must begin to think about we learned: "Learning without thinking leads to confusion" (2.15). Still, we need to recognize that the Great Works of the past serve as the foundation for future learning; don't you think we should seek out the best the past has to offer? "Loving the past, I am earnest in seeking it out" (7.20). We need to stand on the shoulders of giants.

Professor Hu: That's exactly what worries me. This idea of making students think they're standing "on the shoulders of giants" is detrimental to their potential as good citizens. Students learn the Great Works and when asked to apply the methods they've

studied, they balk at the task, thinking, "Who am I to say something about that issue?" Being a good citizen involves being reflective and critical about politics, and teaching the history of Great Works conflicts with this aim. The students feel dwarfed by the stature they ascribe to the Great Thinkers, and so devalue their own abilities as critical thinkers and as critical citizens.

Professor Kong: But why should they come to that conclusion? In sports, we don't get discouraged from doing exercise by watching great athletes: quite the opposite. Usually they inspire us, especially children who dream of making it big. So why not for learning? As for me, I'm impressed by the achievements of the Zhou dynasty: "Such a wealth of culture! I'm with the Zhou" (3.14). If we learn about great minds and moral exemplars of the past, why should that discourage us from thinking further? The right response is to try to improve so we can live up to the ideals!

Professor Hu: With all due respect, that response may be atypical. In my experience, there are better ways to get students to improve than to teach them the classics.

Professor Wong: So what do you suggest instead?

Professor Hu: Rather than teach the history of ideas as the history of scholars, we should teach it as the history of issues and questions, with greater emphasis on popular sources such as newspaper articles.¹²

Professor Kong: Newspaper articles! I think students are far more likely to develop their critical faculties—if that's your aim—by engaging with the works of Great Thinkers. Again, I'm not saying students should simply be asked to memorize classic texts. They should try to understand what the Great Thinkers are saying. It takes great mental effort to grasp the ideas of Great Thinkers, to make sense of the inner logic of classic texts, and critical faculties are improved as a by-product of studying the classics. And I don't see anything wrong with the idea that such

works should be approached with a certain degree of reverence and humility. As mentioned, I think it's important to inculcate the virtue of humility, particularly with regards to the future leaders of society.

Professor Hu: But don't you think students should also be encouraged to critically evaluate what the Great Thinkers are trying to say? It's rather optimistic to think that critical faculties will be improved as a by-product of the effort to understand the material.

Professor Kong: It can be dangerous to emphasize critical thinking at an early stage: "Thinking without learning leads to danger" (2.15). Learning the classics is meant to open possibilities, to teach students about what's important in life so that they have the resources to improve the way they lead their lives. Once students have a good grasp of the possibilities, then they can try to sort out for themselves what's important and what's not, to balance the different goods, and to think about the implications for the contemporary world. But if they're encouraged to criticize before they understand what kinds of things are really of value, they might come to lose faith in the possibility of any kind of good life. That's why there's a kind of vulgar relativism—any perspective is as good as any other—so prevalent among university students these days. Or else they might develop an inflated sense of their own capabilities. An all-too-common flaw of students these days is that they jump to conclusions too early, without having an adequate grasp of the depth and complexities of the ideas of the Great Thinkers.¹³ That's the sort of intellectual arrogance I'd worry about, both in students and in political leaders. In my view, we need to understand the Great Works and then we can innovate: "Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new: that's what it means to be a teacher" (2.11). What's the big hurry with critical evaluation? Why should we ask students to do it early on, when they haven't properly understood the texts?¹⁴

Professor Hu: So it's just a question of staging. We agree upon the end—to further critical thinking—but we disagree about

how to implement that end. You think it's best implemented by saving it till the end of the learning process, whereas I think critical skills are best developed if they constitute every stage of the learning process. Certainly at the university level, it's absurd to tell students they shouldn't think about critical evaluation until they've mastered the texts!

Professor Kong: I didn't say "master the texts." My point is that effort should first be directed at understanding the material, rather than evaluating it. I'd say university students should also approach texts that way, especially if it's their first encounter with the texts.

Professor Hu: It still seems like we agree upon the end: to further critical thinking. Our dispute is just about how to get there.

Professor Kong: That's not all. Remember, my view is that critical abilities should be developed only if they contribute to harmonious development, and we need to structure the educational curriculum with this end in mind. An important reason for teaching the Great Works of the past is that they offer insights that can help us to improve our social lives today.

Professor Hu: I wonder if you're overestimating the power of Great Works. Not only do you think they can improve critical abilities, but you also seem to think they can lead to moral growth and social harmony if taught in the right way.

Professor Kong: Reading books is important, but it's not sufficient. Moral education is key, and for that purpose we need to consider the role of poetry and art. Most important, arguably, is musical education. "Be stimulated by the songs, take your stand on the rites and be perfected by music" (8.8). It's by participating in musical activities that we come to feel part of a harmonious community: "Music begins with playing in unison. When it gets into full swing, it's harmonious, clear, and unbroken" (3.23). The right kind of music can bring people together and they will experience a sense of togetherness.

Professor Hu: Yes, that's what happens at rock and roll shows I've attended. But once the music stops, what happens then? The sense of togetherness doesn't last.

Professor Kong: There's music and there's music. "The *shao* music is both superbly beautiful and superbly good. . . . Once I heard the *shao* music, and I couldn't appreciate the taste of meat for three months after that. I had no idea that music could reach such heights!" (3.25, 7.14).¹⁵

Professor Hu: Perhaps the animal rights activists should play more of that music.

Professor Kong: My point is that musical performers, and maybe even audiences, often undergo more long-lasting moral transformation. If I hear people singing and they sing well, I "ask them to sing again and then join in their harmony" (7.32). Performers try to be sensitive to other people's styles while being aware of their own roles, and together they create beauty and harmony beyond the capacity of any one individual. The ideal of "harmony in diversity" is like an orchestra, where each player contributes to the whole.

Professor Hu: Are you suggesting that musical education should be part of the university curriculum?

Professor Kong: That's exactly what I'm saying! Studying music well requires years of diligent practice. People become experts in their own areas, and when they play together, they gently criticize each other so as to improve the common good. Those musical virtues are the same ones we should encourage if we're training political leaders: diligence, hard work, self-improvement, innovation, and gentle criticism designed to improve the harmonious whole. The performers who master an instrument and perform well in groups are more likely to have the sort of traits that contribute to "harmony in diversity."

Professor Hu: U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is an excellent pianist and plays with an ensemble in her spare time.

"That didn't stop her from campaigning for the invasion of Iraq. Harmony isn't the first word that comes to mind if we want to describe the results of that invasion."

Professor Kong: Musical education is important, but it's not sufficient. As mentioned, we also need to devote years of study to the Great Works to get the right kind of moral education.¹⁶ If it were up to me, I'd choose political leaders well versed in the classics who also have musical ability, especially the ability to perform well in groups. And I do think universities should promote both traits. We should regard musical education as contributing to moral growth, and it should be taken more seriously as part of the educational curriculum.¹⁷

Professor Hu (*shaking his head in disbelief*): I think it's absurd to think that musical education can help to train political leaders.¹⁸ Politics is about the distribution of scarce resources, and politicians must make hard choices between winners and losers. We hope they will make those decisions in principled ways, but whatever they do, it can't be compared to playing in an orchestra and creating a harmonious whole that's greater than the sum of the parts.

Professor Kong: We have different ideas about politics. As I see it, the aim is to balance different goods in appropriate ways so as to produce a more harmonious outcome.¹⁹ It might be tempting for politicians to sacrifice some goods for others—particularly if those goods do not serve their interests—but if our leaders are trained in music, they may be more inclined to think in terms of balancing different goods that contribute to the harmony of the community.

The Methods of Education in the Humanities

Professor Hu: Well, I agree that learning isn't just about reading books. But I wonder about your emphasis on music. If we want

to promote critical thinking, the Socratic method is more appropriate for higher education in the humanities. The teacher should ask questions, rather than providing the answers and telling the students what to think. The student will eventually realize his or her errors and be open to new ideas. There's no better way to improve critical thinking and prepare the student for democratic citizenship.

Professor Kong: I'm not sure if Socrates should be emulated. He neglected his family so that he could pursue the good life, but my view is that the family is an important part of the good life. "Filial and fraternal responsibility is the root of humanity and compassion" (1.2).

Professor Hu: Whatever. My concern isn't the historical Socrates, it's the method that bears his name. And if the aim is to promote critical thinking, then we should adopt his method in higher education.

Professor Kong: I worry about the Socratic method. Too often, the student can be subject to ruthless scrutiny. The aggressive questioning techniques often lead to the shaming of students and an adversarial approach between teacher and student. As mentioned, we should try to promote critical thinking in a harmonious context, not critical thinking that undermines affective ties. If Socrates had been more concerned with harmony, he wouldn't have made so many enemies, nor would he have paid with his life to defend his ideals.

Professor Hu: But don't you realize the emphasis on harmony undermines the aim of critical thinking? East Asian students in American universities are often very reluctant to express their own views, not to mention criticizing the views of others. In my case, it took several years of immersion in Western liberal universities before I could shed my cautious ways.

Professor Kong: I'm not sure if caution is a bad thing. As I see it, "Exemplary persons should be slow in speech but quick in action" (4.24). Yan Hui, my best student, rarely spoke: "I could

speak with Yan Hui for an entire day without his raising an objection, as though he were not very bright. But when I looked into his private conduct after he withdrew, it illustrated perfectly what I'd been saying. Indeed, there was nothing slow about Yan Hui!" (2.9). It's puzzling to me why some teachers seem to emphasize class participation, as though students must be able to immediately grasp and engage with the material being taught. Surely what matters is that the students reflect upon the material and manage to understand it in due course, as well as live their lives in accordance with their new understandings. Why should we encourage students to speak up if they haven't developed good understanding of the material?²⁰

Professor Hu: It seems like you're encouraging students to be passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge. They should follow the teachings and never criticize their teachers in class.

Professor Kong: With all due respect, that's not my view. "In striving for humanity and compassion, do not yield even to your teacher" (15.36). The student should try to learn from the teacher, but not at the cost of pursuing humanity and compassion. If the student really thinks the teacher is espousing mistaken or immoral views, he or she can say so.

Professor Hu: I doubt the students will dare to criticize the teacher if they're supposed to stand in awe of the teacher's superior knowledge and not participate in class until they have a good grasp of that knowledge.

Professor Kong: The student shouldn't stand in awe of the teacher. Rather, "The younger generation should be held in awe. After all, how do we know that those yet to come will not surpass our contemporaries? It's only when one reaches forty or fifty years of age and still has done nothing of note that we should withdraw our sense of awe" (9.23).

Professor Hu: Fine words, but how can we encourage students to develop their critical skills if they're supposed to promote harmony and refrain from putting forward uninformed views?

Professor Kong: It's possible. For example, the classroom can be divided into groups. The teacher can pose a question, let the students debate among themselves, and then group representatives can present their conclusions to the whole class. The teacher can then evaluate the various conclusions in front of the whole class. No individual student need take responsibility for uninformed views if the teacher criticizes the conclusions of the whole group. Students' critical skills are improved when they debate among themselves, and they can also learn from the teacher's evaluation of the group conclusions. All this can be done without undermining group harmony.

Professor Hu: The Socratic method needn't undermine group harmony. If teachers are sensitive, they can criticize the students' views without embarrassing them, for example, by praising their effort and guiding them toward the answer by different questions. What's distinctive about the Socratic method is that knowledge is elicited by means of the teacher's questioning—the teacher questions the student rather than asserts and defends his or her own views—but such questioning need not be rude or unpleasant. More than that: the teacher can model “modest” questioning. If that's the way to improve critical thinking, then that's the way to go.

Professor Kong: In your view, the main task of the teacher is to improve the student's critical abilities. The teacher is like a technician—

Professor Hu (interrupting): Now you're being unfair. I recognize that the teacher has more experience and insight than the student. If the teacher didn't have more expertise than the student, then he or she wouldn't be a teacher. And during the learning process, the students learn knowledge as well as improving their critical skills. They may also learn certain “thin” virtues like tolerance as a by-product of watching the teacher in action. But teachers should refrain from espousing their own views to the extent possible; they should let students make up their own minds and settle difficult questions without being told how to do so.

Professor Kong: We have different conceptions of the role of the teacher. In your view, the teacher is supposed to be an intellectual authority, but she should transmit knowledge and promote critical thinking while trying to be as neutral as possible. In my view, the teacher is supposed to be an ethical model, not just a source of intellectual wisdom. “Being strong, resolute, honest, and reticent is close to compassion and humanity” (13.27).²¹ When teachers present material, they should do their best to tell students what they take to be correct understandings, and they should try to steer students on the right path. We need to be concerned about the moral character of students. It's not just a matter of improving their critical abilities and knowledge of the world.

Professor Hu: And the teacher should require the student to hold the moral views of the teacher.

Professor Kong: No. “Exemplary persons make demands on themselves, while petty persons make demands on others” (15.21).

Professor Hu: But professors must make demands on students! We're supposed to evaluate what they do.

Professor Kong: It's also the other way around. Once they have good understanding of the material, the students should evaluate the teacher. They should raise objections so that teachers can improve. Admittedly, they don't always do that. Even Yan Hui didn't question me as much as he should have: “Yan Hui was of no help to me. There is nothing I said that he didn't like” (11.4). Of course, he died young; he was only thirty-one. He would have been more helpful had he lived longer. He was so modest (*voice begins to crack*) . . .

Professor Hu: I'm sorry.

Professor Kong: I can't get over his death. My students ask me, “Sir, why do you grieve with such abandon?” I reply, “If I don't grieve for him, then for whom?” (11.10).

Professor Hu: I'm really sorry . . . (*waits a few seconds*) But the point I was trying to make, if you'll allow me, is that we need to evaluate students in the sense that we need to grade what they do. And it's unclear to me how we can grade "improvement of moral character."

Professor Kong (*regaining composure*): Here's what I do. On exams, I pose an ethical dilemma and ask the student to think about implications from different points of view. Those who do this well are more likely to have empathetic ability. At the very least, I can filter out the dogmatic and demagogic personalities—the "petty persons"—who seem congenitally unable to understand moral complexities and consider matters from other points of view, traits that are crucial for the pursuit of harmony. Mao, Hitler, and Stalin would have failed such questions.

Professor Hu: OK, you'd filter out some, but not the very clever candidates who have the intellectual ability to consider matters from different points of view without the motivation or desire to do so in real life. So I don't think examination questions can test for "character" in ways that matter.

Professor Kong: Again, music is crucial. As I say to my students, "Why don't you study the songs? Reciting the songs can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and allow you to express your grievances" (179). If my students do well in musical performances, I think it reflects well on their moral character.

Professor Hu (*incredulous*): So you think students in the humanities should be graded according to their musical ability?

Professor Kong: At the very least, we should value musical ability when we're choosing which students to admit to university. We can also do encourage students to participate in group musical events; that's an important way to instill the motivation to pursue harmony. And we have other ways of judging the student's moral character, such as letters of recommendation.²²

Professor Hu: You're assuming teachers are good judges of moral character. That's a bit of an arrogant assumption, don't you think?

Professor Kong: Yes, well, when I teach, I appeal to the examples of the great teachers of the past.²³ I try to avoid talking about myself; that would indeed seem arrogant.

Professor Hu: But you're the one doing the evaluating. So there's an assumption that you're a good judge of moral character; you can't always hide behind others. So how do we know that you're a good judge of moral character? How do we measure that?

Professor Kong: The best measure is the way I'm actually leading my life: It needs to reflect the moral ideals I espouse in the classroom. At the very least, there shouldn't be a radical inconsistency: If an authority leads an ethically problematic life, we'd wonder about the validity of the ideas expressed by that person. That's why teachers should be held to higher moral standards than common people. I regret to report I still have a long way to go: "As far as realizing the life of the exemplary person, I have accomplished little" (7.33). But I won't give up trying: "To quietly persevere in storing up what is learned, to study without flagging, to instruct others without growing weary—is this not me?" (7.2)

[*Director of television program informs participants that the taping is over.*]

Professor Hu (*looking at his watch*): I'm growing a little weary, I must confess. Perhaps we should retreat to our quarters.

Professor Kong (*surprised*): What! We haven't started yet! I'm inviting you for drinks. Let's have a real conversation! After that, we'll go for karaoke.