RELATIONAL LEARNING IN THE ANALECTS OF CONFUCIUS: EXPLORING
THE FOUNDATIONS, PRACTICES AND PURPOSES OF CLASSICAL
CONFUCIAN LEARNING

A dissertation submitted to the
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By
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The purpose of this study was to explore the conceptual strength and consistency of the term 'relational learning' in describing the principles, practices and purposes of the Classical Confucian learning paradigm put forth by Confucius in the Analects (Lunyu). With a synthesis of Classical Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, as well as numerous English language translations of the Analects and related scholarly discourse, several insights about learning in the Analects are put forward. First of all, Confucius' language concerning Heaven (Tian) and filial piety (xiao) root Confucian learning in a sincere yet hierarchical relational dynamic that influences the learning process. Second, the daily practice of ritualization (li) situates the learner as a constant observer and performer of propriety as a coping strategy in situ, with further learning contingent on the successful recognition and integration of concepts embedded within relational settings. Third, and finally, Confucius suggests that the ultimate outcomes of learning rely upon the relational capacity of the mind/heart nurtured within a given learning relationship or community. This means higher learning is a synergistic experience involving two or more entities and contingent on the emergence of 'dual-minded' respect (ren) toward the inevitable differences and misunderstandings that arise. In this light, we move beyond the term 'self-
cultivation' and obtain a more nuanced view of Confucius as a teacher and a learner; ready to point out major areas of concern as well as potential coping strategies, but without turning into a path of learning oriented predominantly by the self or the other.
DEDICATION

FOR MELANIE
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A Confucian positions him - or herself in the center of ever-shifting, never-ending cross-currents of human relationships, and would not have it otherwise; sanctity in isolation had no meaning for Confucius.

The point is not merely that human relationships are fulfilling; the Confucian claim runs deeper than this.

(Huston Smith, The Illustrated World's Religions, 1991, p. 113)
Background

Based on his descriptions, Confucius (ca. 551-479 BC) exhibited quite early in his life a sincere and consistent love for learning, a quality which permeated his entire life’s work and approach to teaching. Ironically, this venerated teacher of China, a man later worshiped by Emperors and enshrined in the temples of foreign nations, seems to never have really intended to be the ‘Master’ of anyone. His complicated yet unyielding commitment to Tian (天), or Heaven; his emphasis on sincerity in the fulfillment of filial obligations; his polite practice of learning ritualization, his social and civic engagements and objectives; all seem to come to bear within the recursive context of East Asia's sociopolitical evolution and in small and simple ways within our global, contemporary educational environment. Despite his many efforts in the domain of civic affairs, the crowning event of his life appears to have been personal and interpersonal: based on his own appraisal there was nothing more challenging or rewarding than learning how to follow the dictates of the heart/mind while not doing harm to others (Lau, 1979; Nivison, 1996; Wattles, 1996).

The English term 'self-cultivation' has been used for nearly 40 years in conjunction with evolving scholarly descriptions of the Confucian learning project (see Tu, 1978; Tu, 1984; Ivanhoe, 2000; Koh, 2008; Kim, 2010; Flanagan, 2011; Tu, 2015; Ma, 2016; Tan, 2016; Richey, 2017). While accurate in connoting a gradual process of learning involving cultivation, unfortunately the term or phrase 'self-cultivation' generally also connotes a notion of 'self-to-the-exclusion-of-other', 'learning in isolation,' or becoming 'self-educated', meanings which actually run counter to most scholarly
descriptions of the core concept. While there are generally no problems with the deeper
descriptions of Confucian self-cultivation or self-improvement provided by experts, these
descriptions sound much more like descriptions of relational learning. From a linguistic
and educational point-of-view, the term 'self-cultivation' is both misleading and
problematic.

**Basic Argument**

My task is not simply to argue for a new descriptive term, however. There are
indeed broader implications: to put forward a view of Confucius as an imperfect learner
striving to deal with relational uncertainties, ambiguities and approximations in a
respectful and productive manner. It is in the role of a dedicated learner, rather than as a
masterful teacher, that we find Confucius most helpful to our current educational
challenges. Rather than depicting Confucius as a teacher of self-cultivation, I see it more
fair to himself, and the Confucian tradition, to portray his path as one of mutual effort and
improvement within the context of relationships and relational virtues, not of isolated or
individualistic self-improvement.

The Confucian path, defined and described as a path of relational learning, works
better for the following reasons: 1) we find in the early literature and commentary various
types of social or relational engagement as foundational and integral to learning, 2) the
relational nature of integral concepts within the learning paradigm must be observed and
acted upon appropriately if further learning is to occur, and 3) the overall relational
capacity of the mind/heart interacts with and impacts both self and others, ultimately
determining the direction and movement of the learning project.
While the terms 'relational virtue' (Luo, 2007) and 'learning' (xue) (Di & McEwan, 2016) have already been utilized in distinct ways describing the overall goals of the Confucian project, this work is the first to my knowledge to use 'relational learning' as a foundational description of Classical Confucian thought.

The Meanings of Confucian Self-Cultivation

Confucian self-cultivation defined as a process of 'becoming fully human' (Chen, 2011), or as a process of 'self-realization' and 'character-building,' has been spearheaded by renowned scholar and Harvard professor Tu Weiming since the 1970's and has been used broadly (see Tu, 1978; Ivanhoe, 2000; Ma, 2016; Tan, 2016). For Tu, the term self-cultivation expresses the idea of learning to improve the self\(^1\) (vs. learning for the sake of impressing others) as well as the Confucian notion of xiushen, meaning something along the lines of restoring or repairing the body, or becoming a fully embodied person; a development increasingly influential within Neo-Confucian discourse.\(^2\)

So how does Confucian self-cultivation work? Tu (1978) builds on our understanding by explaining that: “... in the Confucian context it is inconceivable that self-cultivation can be isolated from human-relatedness” (p. 28). This focus on 'human-relatedness' is carried out in later descriptions of key Confucian concepts, such as Tu's

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1 Tu Weiming may have been informed by the German philosophical concept of Bildung (also commonly glossed in English as self-cultivation). Deng (2015) reports that Confucian self-cultivation is like Bildung in that it “... is achieved through the interactions with the physical and cultural world, entailing the investigation of natural and social phenomena and the advancement of knowledge....” concluding that, “[Confucian] self-cultivation is different from Bildung in that the former attaches greater significance to the community or society of which one is seen as an organic part rather than (as does the latter) the individual as an almost independent and self-sufficient entity (de Bary, 1996).”

2 Oldstone-Moore (2005) refers to notions of self-cultivation as existing within Classical Confucian, Neo-Confucian and even Daoist philosophies.
discussion concerning the practice of *li*, or ritualization (described in detail in chapter five), which adds the following to our understanding of what is meant by Confucian self-cultivation:

As the most sensitive and responsive of all sentient beings, humans actively take part in their socialization. They learn to be civil, polite, and kind by living and working with others. Just as there is no private language, there is no private ritual. Ritualization as a social act requires a continuous interchange between the self and an increasingly complex network of human relationships. The creative activity of person-making and culture-making is communal rather than individualistic. Nevertheless, the dignity of the person should not be subsumed under social utility. The Confucian dictum of “learning for the sake of the self” clearly indicates that autonomy and independence are cherished values in self-cultivation philosophy.

The other aspect of the program involves realizing our distinctive personality in an other-related community. Whether or not our sense of freedom is predicated on an awareness of alienation from society, family harmony and, by implication, social solidarity is paramount. A critical consciousness of independence and autonomy need not be in conflict with the recognition that we must be seasoned in social roles. (Tu, 1978, p. 29-30)

With very minor expansion, Tu's early argument can still serve as a guide for students, scholars and instructors seeking to better understand this ancient conception of learning.
As these passages suggest, the basic meaning of what is better explained as relational learning is abundantly evident within deep descriptions of Confucian self-cultivation.

**Defining Relational Learning**

As I mentioned above, relational learning has three basic meanings already understood or mapped out broadly in scholarly literature (see Chorba, 2013; Allred, 1991). First and foremost, this concept is distinguished from being self-educated, or self-taught – relational learning entails some type of mentoring relationship involved in the fundamental learning process. Writing from a position of contemporary learning theory, Chorba argues that “Relational learning is a social constructionist approach to education that places value on the relationships built between and among learners and the impact that those relationships have on how meaning is constructed” (2013, p. 15-16). In short, the term relational learning implies social or relational engagement as integral to learning.

The second basic meaning of relational learning is the notion of a concept-based, or concept-contingent learning: one learns by appropriately relating one concept with another concept – by making the right connections and/or disassociating those concepts which do not go together. This aspect of relational learning is not only carried out by observation and study, however, but through action also. This second meaning of relational learning suggests that the ability to make connections and to quickly act on these connections is integral to learning success.

The third and final aspect of relational learning is the basic orientation, purpose
and direction it connotes: one does not learn to the exclusion of self or other, but for the benefit or detriment of both the self and the other. Relational learning entails not only a process of harmonization but also outcome(s) that influence (and are influenced) by more than one individual; a synergy which can ennoble and/or enervate, but which always influences more than one entity. This final aspect of relational learning will be shown also to be a key quality (and limitation) of the Classical Confucian learning paradigm.  

Relational learning has been described as best realized when it helps us to:

(1) See patterns that repeat themselves; (2) Extract principles and see their contrasting principles; (3) Make connections in other contexts; (4) Become empowered to make wise decisions; and, (5) Experience peace and happiness in this world.... (Allred, 1991, p. 57)

This conception aptly captures the path of Classical Confucian learning found both within the Analects and as described by scholars writing on one or more of the Confucian notions of tian, xiao, li, and ren. While ren, li, and xiao may all in one sense be considered relational virtues, I put forward an argument of relational learning due to the learning focused, incomplete and continuous nature of the early Confucian project.

While it is hoped this study will prove useful within the context of the rise of 21st century Confucian or Confucian-based educational developments (see Chen, Tolmie & Wang, 2017; Payette, 2016; Johnson, 2016), I will not be directly exploring the

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3 Here and throughout I alternate back and forth between the expressions 'learning paradigm,' meaning 'a learning example and worldview which can serve as a pattern or guide for others', and the Confucian 'learning project,' the expression favored by Tu Weiming, which focuses more on the work or task at hand.
relationship between Confucian ideals and contemporary education in China (see Bell, 2013; Li & Wegerif, 2014), nor will I attempt to construct a direct argument for the comparison (see Xu, 2010; Zhong, 2012) or current relevance of Classical Confucian thought within American or Western education (see Johnson, 2016; Flanagan, 2011; Puett & Gross-Loh, 2016, Sun, 2002). I will instead undertake an exploration and description of the learning philosophy of Confucius as recorded in the Analects (*Lunyu*) and related scholarship in order to lay a conceptual foundation for later work in this vein.

**Who was Confucius?**

The man we call Confucius (*Kongfuzi*) is broadly recognized as one of the most influential teachers, statesmen, and moral philosophers of world history (Lau & Ames, 1998). Tradition states that Confucius was raised fatherless and in relative poverty as the first male son of a weakened aristocratic line.\(^4\) Unfortunately, however, very few facts regarding his birth and earliest years remain discernible in the midst of what has become an insurmountable accumulation of commentary, myth, adulation, critique and mysticism. On most accounts, both speculative and critical, we can at least place his birth at approximately 551 BCE within the ancient state of *Lu*, a region located in modern China’s Shandong Province.

**What are the Analects?**

Fortunately, we can piece together much of what Confucius is reported to have

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4 Most scholars are in agreement that the best remaining source of understanding about Confucius is the Analects itself (Lau, 1979; Legge, 1893; Riegel, 2006). The widely cited biographical account by the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian is both laudatory and at least partially spurious, being written some 300 years after Confucius died. The account does reflect the deep religious fervor which was early associated with the name and teachings of Confucius, such as that reflected in the story of “how Confucius was born in answer to his parents' prayers at a sacred hill…” (Riegel, 2006).
said and done from the record called the *Lunyu* (論語), or the Analects, a collection of pithy sayings and brief exchanges touching on a wide variety of topics. Both eclectic and somewhat erratic, the unique structure and content of the Analects includes statements from a number of individuals, not just Confucius, and was probably written by multiple authors one or two generations after his demise. The Chinese title of the Analects is *Lunyu*, or quite literally, the language of deliberation, discussion, or debate. Hence, the core mode and question of the text seems to hinge around how deliberative learning in a social setting (i.e., that learning which involves a presentation and potential harmonization of seemingly disparate ideas, words, actions, and objectives) might be brought about. The original text has at least partially survived the impact of transcription, translation and numerous intellectual inquisitions - the most prominent of these inquisitions probably being the burning of books instigated by *Qin Shi Huang* at the beginning of his reign in 221 BC (Jiang, 2007, p. 2). The content covered within the Analects ranges from matters of governance, ritual, and etiquette to familial, political (see Hall & Ames, 1999), or moral ethics (Choi & Lee, 2016; Lai, 1995). Throughout the text the themes of teaching and learning serve to bind the text together as a cultural and educational frontispiece.

In the Analects we learn that rather than mapping out the cosmos or establishing a new religious order, what Confucius sought to transmit through example and discourse

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5 The passages within the Analects attributed to Confucius are generally indicated by the use of the short phrase ‘zi yue,’ meaning literally ‘the child said’, but figuratively something more respectful like ‘Confucius said.’ Other passages within the Analects designate Confucius by his more singular title of *fuzi* (meaning literally ‘the married father of a child,’ or ‘the child of a married man’) but later translated into the English term ‘Master’. Regardless of the original meaning of his name and title, Confucius was most definitely grown when he began his public work of moral teaching and civic engagement.
was the basic learning apparatus whereby harmonious relationships and relational virtues could persist. To what extent the Analects fulfills or completes this mapping out of relational learning is the primary question of this dissertation; can relational learning carry the descriptive burden of the Confucian learning enterprise?

Within the Analects, the best case for relations is not focused as one might expect it to be on the core familial relations. While the virtues associated with relations between elder and younger sibling, parent and child, or ruler and subject are featured somewhat, most prevalent in the Analects is an exploration and illustration of the virtues of a government-scholar, one who strives for power (de) or relational virtue (ren) through his associations and thereby elevates and improves the nation-state (see Luo, 2007, 2012).

The great irony of the text, in this respect, is that the Analects is abundant with exchanges and examples of gentleman-scholars associating outside and across the five basic Confucian relations and not the other way around. One can presume this was due to the tremendous effort put forth by the Confucians to establish a web of reciprocal understandings between the common people, government-scholars, and the leaders of government they sought to influence or become. The extent of their influence can be found not only in the exchanges between Confucius and his associates (as recorded within the Analects), but also in the persistence of historical and literary treasures like the Book of History (Shujing), the Book of Poetry (Shijing), and carried on in seminal works like Mencius (Mengzi), Xunzi, the Great Learning (Da Xue), etc.

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6 Between Subject and Ruler, Child and Parent, Friend and Friend, Younger and Elder, Wife and Husband.
Better Definitions Lead to Better Descriptions

While many modern or contemporary iterations of Confucius have emphasized the centrality of self-cultivation within the overall learning paradigm, and the use of such a term in reference to Classical Confucian ideals has served well to harmonize or blur Eastern and Western ideals of learning, identity and governance, relational learning conveys more accurately how, what and why Confucius learned. While some scholars have rightly tried to keep Eastern and Western ideals distanced, arguing that it is just not possible to convey such deep meanings in English to readers, it is also widely held that Confucius put forward a predominantly moral philosophical orientation (see Choi & Lee, 2016); a potentially global ethic permeated by a single, unified strand that could cross through and interconnect otherwise distinct and disparate aspects of life on the way towards a more unified and harmonious existence (see Lau, 1979; Tu, 1996; Wattles, 1996). Respected Harvard professor Tu Weiming has described this strand as the path of self-cultivation. I suggest and defend the use of the term relational learning.

Rather than challenging specific scholars’ descriptions of self-cultivation within contemporary Confucian scholarship, however, my main objective is to introduce a new way of talking about how the various strands found within the Analects are a recurring part of the imperfect relational nature, quality, and purpose of the Classical Confucian learning paradigm as established by Confucius in the Analects. While contemporary research and philosophy of education is focused predominantly on the direct relevance or application of Confucian thought on contemporary education, I lay groundwork for future research looking more carefully and critically at Confucius and Confucian pedagogy in
the contemporary classroom. By first improving the clarity and coherence of how we define Classical Confucian thought, we become better prepared to explore how, when and why Confucius can be presented in classroom settings.

**Methodology: How Will I Address the Problem?**

As a Cultural Foundations scholar with a substantial background in Chinese language, culture and philosophy, my goal is to explore and understand the implications of education as a cultural phenomenon; to depict Classical Confucian education within the complicated matrix of relevant historical, social, political, philosophical, religious, moral and other factors (see Pai & Adler, 2001; Ornstein et al, 2017). Because this work attempts to contribute a holistic, interdisciplinary perspective relevant to the future teaching of Classical Confucian learning philosophy, it should not be misconstrued as an expert exposition of Chinese historical or philological issues. Although I conclude this project after approximately 15 years of related study, including formal training and experience with modern and Classical Chinese, I began and conclude with a distinct limitation: I am not a trained specialist in Chinese history, Classical Chinese thought or Chinese philology. I have not taken on the significant challenge of determining which passages are authentic, and which are not. While I believe I have mitigated these limitations by considering the work of many great scholars and translators, any mistakes I make with regards to understanding or interpretation are my own. I have approached this experience with the goal of better understanding and defining the one thread that presumably runs through Confucius' teachings.

As I have mentioned, after introducing the reader to the historical, philosophical
and personal contextualization of his ideals, I investigate the Confucian learning project in three separate chapters, each dedicated to a specific aspect of his learning approach. In my efforts to model my reasoning and build my argument, I have found it necessary to explore the underlying principles, basic practices, and overall purposes of Confucian learning. As I explore Confucius' example as a learner, the notion of Heaven and of filial piety, the ritualizing practices of a learner, the cultivation of a learning community, and so on, I follow the traditional Confucian order of reformation moving from the level of the individual to the family, and then on into the overall community. The investigation of each concept includes examples and description, delineation via scholarly comparison, as well as reflective synthesis and selective representation of up to twelve different English language translations, the Classical Chinese text itself, as well as four modern Mandarin Chinese translations of the Analects. By including a variety of scholarly perspectives and translations I have sought to further enrich my own as well as the reader's understanding of the Confucian learning paradigm (see Torgerson, 2005), as well as root my conclusions about each concept in language and arguments originating from the experts. By rooting my overall thesis in the scholarly literature, I further allow the various historical, political, moral, philosophical, and textual insights of key scholars in the field to guide, challenge and inform my work.

7 In the Great Learning we read the following: “The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to order well their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things” (Legge, 1893, p. 357-358).
CHAPTER II

THE CONTESTED WORLD OF THE CONFUCIANS

(“Confucius.” n.d.)
The Weakness of History

Despite its being the world’s longest continuous civilization and boasting such a substantial historical and literary record, much of China's earliest history is still shrouded in contest and mystery. A large part of this perplexity is the direct result of some of the darkest periods of that history. While in some cases the Confucians were able to transmit historical events on to future generations, positioning cultural history as an essential part of the Chinese ethos and moral educational approach, this history has also encountered numerous recastings as new dynasties and despots came into power, not to mention several significant occasions when China suffered from a political and ideological 'purging' of the past (Jiang, 2007). Thus, in the very beginning of our exploration of the foundations of early China, if there is one historical fact that should be understood it is this; the nation-state threatens to be more powerful than history itself. So powerful is the nation-state within the Chinese Confucian cultural context that the mere reading and retelling of history encourages political allegoricism, debate, open-mindedness, and tenuity.

Confucius further challenges readers as to the exact substance and character of national life, learning, and governance. If at least some aspects of Confucian thought were perpetuated over several thousands of years, it should not come as any great surprise that there were also elements of Confucianism potent enough to be deliberately assaulted by rulers like Qin Shi Huang.⁸ While many ancient texts have survived to the

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⁸ Lewis (2007, p. 47) describes at least one extant text, called 'the Book of Lord Shang,' reporting Qin political ideology in this manner: “The effective ruler gets the people to 'forget their lives for the sake of their superiors' and makes them 'delight in war' so that they 'act like hungry wolves on seeing meat.' All
present day, they remain undoubtedly filtered and fractured - if not by a specific worldview during or shortly after the time of their recording - then certainly through the lengthy process of political reinterpretation and scholarly addendum that ensued (Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Gernet, 1982, p. 86; Lewis, 2007, pp. 1-4; Torgerson, 2005).

**The History of the Chinese Nation-state**

“According to some ancient legends, about four thousand years ago many of the Chinese communities came under the control of a strong state. The rulers of this state, who were called the Hsia [Xia], are generally considered China's first dynasty” (Kublin, 1972, p. 39). While most indicators of this period are established only by tradition or speculative science, there are at least some literary depictions of the Xia (1900-1600 BC). The fact that there have been no verifiable archaeological discoveries or reliable historical evidence establishes within the Chinese psyche a creative and mythical sense of origins even if it doesn't reveal the exact content or character of their people's earliest history.

China's second dynasty, called the Shang (1570-1045 BC), has been verified both by literary works but also by widely acknowledged archaeological discoveries at Anyang, including the oracle bone inscriptions as well as other structural and tangible evidences. Surviving facts strongly suggest that religion, family, and state were closely tied together during the Shang dynasty and that governance was highly centralized.

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_{other human values or activities become threats to the state order. These threats are variously described as 'lice' or 'evils': the 'six lice' (longevity, good food, beauty, love, ambition, and virtuous conduct): the 'ten evils' (rites, music, odes, history, virtue, moral culture, filial piety, brotherly love, integrity, and sophistry); or the 'twelve lice' (rites, music, odes, history, moral culture, filial piety, brotherly love, sincerity, benevolence, duty, criticism of the army, and being ashamed of fighting). Most of these vices were virtues in philosophical texts, especially those studied by Confucian scholars.”}
It isn't until the third Chinese dynasty, called the Western Zhou (1045-771 BC), where the historical and literary record allows for a more rounded and contrastive picture of what early Chinese systems of governance might have been like. Chan (1967) expands on the historical contrast between the Shang and the Zhou dynasties in this way:

Chinese thought at the dawn of civilization was dominated by the fear of spiritual beings. During the Shang dynasty... the Chinese would do nothing important without first finding out, through divination, the pleasure of the spirits. But when the Chou [Zhou] overthrew the Shang... human talent was needed to consolidate the newly established kingdom and to fight the surrounding barbarians. Human skill in irrigation proved to be more effective than praying to the spirits for rain. And the tribal anthropomorphic Lord (ti), who controlled human destiny at his whim, was now replaced by impartial and universal Heaven (T’ien). The Mandate of Heaven (divine election) for the House of Chou to rule rested on the moral ground that rule belongs to the man of virtue. In the final analysis, it was man's ability and virtue that counted. (Chan, 1967, p. 87)

Gernet expounds on this contrast between the Shang and the Zhou, arguing that:

One can see faintly how this society founded on hierarchies of family cults and the maintenance of ancestral privileges arose out of a more ancient state in which the royal authority seems to have been all-powerful. Whereas under the Shang the cult of the deceased kings and the prestige of their line seem to have animated and dominated from a much higher level the social and political organization as a
whole, the much more complex and unstable system subsequently established [during the Zhou dynasty] implies that the royal authority no longer acted as anything more than an arbiter. In principle, the responsibilities and privileges conferred by the king were revocable, but the development of the principalities and the strengthening of the families of great dignitaries tended to make them hereditary and to crystallize an order which was no doubt originally more supple and entirely dependent on the royal power. (1982, p. 55)

Thus, it appears that the major contrasts between the Shang and the Zhou dynasty governing systems were rooted in religious and sociopolitical domains. At least at the revolutionary inception of the Western Zhou, it was the religious zeal of a people intent on ending corruption which put an end to an authoritarian and cultish regime. Politically, the people favored a more benevolent form of government that functioned more simply and on a broader basis of support (Meyer, 1994, 129). Beyond this, however, very little is known about “this earlier or Western Zhou period (1122 or 1027-771 B.C.), not much is recorded in Chinese literary or historical works; no archaeological remains exist” (Meyer, 1994, p. 130).

What is relatively clear from the remaining literary record of this time period is that despite the stellar leadership qualities of the Zhou founders (Kings Wen and Wu, as well as the Duke of Zhou); leadership so admired by Confucius and those he affiliated with, these exemplary types of leaders did not remain common. On the contrary, the dirty politics of power-mongering quickly arose from within and without to sully the already rare flow of good leadership which could be readily supported by the people. By 841
BC, strife erupted and a “harsh king was overthrown and replaced...” (Meyer, 1994, p. 131). Recently converted city-states quickly found reason and room to disassociate themselves from the young federation, and the potential for political harmonization was further fractured by more locally based intrigues and factions, eventually sapping any remaining strength from the central government. This weakening led to a conglomeration of contending smaller states, tribal in their orientation and united only sporadically under loose agreements and temporary associations (Creel, 1949, p. 16). This high level of contention between city-states resulted in the whole group becoming highly vulnerable to both internal and external foes.

By 771 BC, the Western Zhou capital was overcome by a joint faction of internal and external conspirators, establishing the leadership of what would come to be called the Eastern Zhou (771-221 BC), and further agitating the fissures which already extended across Central and Eastern China in its loosely affiliated conglomeration of city-states (Cleary, 1993, p. 8-9). Meyer (1994, p. 132) suggests that this time period leading up to the birth of Confucius (approximately 551 BC) was marked by considerably more active and authoritative aristocratic structures and increasingly complex bureaucracies, resulting ultimately in a puppet-like central government and much stronger (albeit corrupt) city-state governments.

This scenario did not make it terribly difficult for the Ru, the scholarly-advisory class we now call Confucians, who could often find employment in the midst of such chaos, even if they didn't flourish in terms of importance or influence. Remaining fairly aristocratic and republican in their orientation, the Ru advocated for a strong centralized
government housed by virtuous leaders. This was a fairly moderate and safe argument to make, both socially and politically. Chinese society could persist in relative harmony, they believed, via a strong centralized government and broad dedication to correct moral and social principles, selected and practiced at the family and community level.

The Spring and Autumn Period (770-481 BC), the period in which Confucius lived, witnessed a flourishing of ideas and deliberations over governance. Confucius took an active part in this flourishing, but the efforts of the Ru, or Confucians, were ultimately unsuccessful. Verbal contentions mingled increasingly with military conquest and chaos eventually broke out in a period of China's history now called the Warring States Period (481-221 BC). Confucius himself passed away around 479 BC (Slingerland, 2003, p. xiii).

Despite contributions of later Confucians (most notably Mengzi and Xunzi) to bolster stability and respond to such dramatic sociopolitical change, bureaucracy and religio-political confusion continued to mount. The contest of words ultimately fell silent to the savagery of war, intrigue and dominion as the state of Qin, casting aside the weight of bureaucratic and religious regimes, amassed a large army and,

In 221 [BC]... defeated the other states of the period and created a centralized realm. The conquest was a direct result of the Qin having created centralized institutions that were far better at marshaling resources for war than the neighboring states had been able to do. (Puett, 2015, p. 239)
While the new emperor Qin Shihuang could be credited for establishing a cultural and linguistic monolithic empire based on a militant version of Legalist philosophy, he was only able to do so by blood and by force, and for a very short time. Interestingly, many of the later criticisms of the Qin dynasty (221 BC – 207 BC) hinged on its abandonment of Confucian virtues. For example, the Master of Huainan states the following: “The customs of Qin consisted of wolf-like greed and violence. The people lacked a sense of duty and pursued profit. They could be intimidated through punishments, but could not be transformed through goodness. They could be encouraged with rewards, but could not be urged on with reputation” (quoted in Lewis, 2007, p. 40). The historian Sima Qian wrote as follows: “Now Qin state mixed in the customs of the Rong and Di barbarians, so it placed violence and cruelty first and treated humanity and duty as secondary” (quoted in Lewis, 2007, p. 40).

The Confucian gentleman found a renewed sense of hope and revitalization during the subsequent Han dynasty (206 BC–265 AD). The Han found its strength in the counsel of the reinstated Ru bureaucratic class, who recorded their own disdain for the wrongs perpetuated by the prior regime. Note the critique of isolationism and self-sufficiency found within this writing by Jia Yi under the direction of the Han dynasty emperor:

Qin's territory was enveloped by mountains and belted by the Yellow River, so that it was secure. It was a state cut off on all sides.... The king of Qin [the first emperor] thought he was sufficient to himself and never asked others, so he committed errors without being corrected. The second emperor inherited this,
following his father without changing. Through violence and cruelty he doubled the calamity. Ziying [the third Qin ruler] was completely alone without intimates, imperiled and young he had no assistance. (Lewis, 2007, p. 41)

We can see that the efforts to rule in isolation and ignorance of Confucian counsel are strongly correlated with failure by the Han scholars. Lewis continues this narrative of failed isolationism by recounting the contrast made by Jia Yi between the Qin and the Zhou dynasty; “Lord Shang turned against ritual and duty, abandoned proper human relations, and put his whole heart and mind into expansion. After practicing this for two years, Qin's customs grew worse by the day…” (Lewis, 2007, p. 42). So why was the Confucian message of social duty, ritual and humanity cast aside by the Qin and so strongly reinvigorated by the Han? At least part of the answer lies in contemplating the broader context.

A Review of Ancient Chinese Motivations for Learning

Confucius (551-479 B.C.) … was also deeply concerned about morality. The rival 'consultants' with whom he had to contend were the new class of advisers to the hereditary aristocrats who were the heads of the various states in the loose Zhou confederacy. Some of these advisers traveled from court to court, as Confucius did…Confucius could claim no special place or privilege for his views on morals. It was perhaps for this reason that he emphasized so strongly his dependence on the past and example of the sage-kings...The morality which Confucius believed had created the golden age in early Zhou and preserved society thereafter was the answer, he contended, to the moral relativism,
internecine rivalries, and chaos of the period in which he lived. (Morton, 1980, p. 36-37)

By making itself at home within a complicated, imperfect, and shifting web of governing relationships, various iterations of Confucian learning would come to function as the mainstay, hallmark, or target of various political regimes. Confucian thought struggled for acceptance by rulers as the Way of the gentleman scholar in large part because Confucius was both principled and fearless of the personal, financial, social and political losses the path of virtue might lead to. Even if it meant loss of friend or threat from neighbor or governor, required the challenge of the status quo, or even pushed one into questionable associations and mortal peril; something within the Confucian learning mindset prompted not only Confucius, but tens of thousands of others, into paths of learning they saw as morally conducive to the building of a better civilization – a civilization in which virtue, joy, belonging and harmonization (or even the dream of such ideals) could be realized as worth the cost.

It should be fruitful, before we delve into our exploration of the methods, means and motivations for learning presented by Confucius in the Analects, to seek out related notions on the purposes of learning in ancient Chinese cultural discourse on a broader scale. I survey here, in brief, passages from history, the Art of War, Mozi, Yang Zhu, Mengzi, the Dao De Jing, as well as the ancient Chinese precepts of Yin and Yang.

**Confucian Thought in Context**

There is no historical record in China which suggests the message of the Ru was
ever universally accepted. While Confucius and his antecedents certainly did not encourage engaging force in order to promote their ideas, they were proactive in engaging the people, scholars and rulers of their time in order to teach and mentor in the Way. Confucianism, along with Daoism and other ideals, intermingled considerably and allowed for the emergence of a more robust and diversified approach to Chinese governance and learning. Within most main traditions this intermingling and diversity gave early rise to a sense of respect and caution with regards to 'the other.' Deriving from this same time period, the Art of War begins with this famous passage; “Military action is important to the nation – it is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction, so it is imperative to examine it” (Cleary, 2005, p. 1). The rest of the book suggests various considerations and strategies relevant to engaging in and avoiding warfare through careful thought and examination. While the avoidance of combat may be just as much Daoist as it is Confucian, the importance of observation, study and learning about one's environment, armies, options and enemies seems to align very well with Confucius. In Confucian China, all learning (especially in the case of methods and strategy of warfare) need to be engaged in seriously and carefully so as to avoid morally tragic and devastating outcomes. Similar to learning how to govern, learning the art of war was a necessity just as much as it was a risk; a moral obligation and a mortal danger.

Just after the death of Confucius, and in large part rising up in response to the

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9 Creel states that “The cornerstone of the ideology of the Chinese state is the conception of the Mandate of Heaven: the idea that the ruler of China holds a sacred trust from the highest deity which permits him to rule as long as he does so for the welfare of the people – but subject to the peril that if he fails in this trust, Heaven will appoint another to rebel and replace him” (1970, p. 44).

10 Li Quan's interpretation has been rendered in English; “Military action is inauspicious – it is only considered important because it is a matter of life and death, and there is the possibility that it may be taken up lightly” (Cleary, 1992, p.1).
combative times the Middle Kingdom found itself in, the man named Mozi began to teach his doctrine of universal love. This was a love which was to be without distinction or boundary, likened by Mozi to the unlimited love Heaven granted to humanity; unselfish and wedded to non-violence or pacifism, but also one which needed to be enforced and encoded “... into law and government policy” (Durant, 1954, p. 678). While Mohism (as a whole) never caught on as a majority belief or mainstream political ideology within Chinese culture, elements of it may have informed later socio-ideological developments as well as counterbalanced some of the tremendous cultural pressures and conflicts of the Warring States period. The Confucians viewed the political and legal thrusts of this moral code as not only untenable, but even dangerous. Most importantly, they felt Mohism would destroy the delicate balancing, prioritization, and harmonization of relationships so integral to civil society.

On the other end of the spectrum were the teachings of Yang Zhu,\textsuperscript{11} the egoist who taught against any non-indulgent belief and who dismissed belief in the afterlife or in deity. According to Mencius, Yang taught deadly doctrines, this time pertaining to mortal purpose, human nature, and agency. For Yang, “...men are the helpless puppets of the blind natural forces that made them, and that gave them their unchosen ancestry and their inalienable character” (Durant, 1954, p. 679), and “that one ought not sacrifice even a single hair to save the whole world” (Peerenboom & Ames, 1999, p. 985). The reasons

\textsuperscript{11} There seems to be considerable disagreement among scholars concerning the teachings of this man. I take a presumably Confucian view of Yang. Peerenboom & Ames, quoted in Audi (1999, p. 985), offer the following statement in Yang's defense; “Widely criticized as a selfish egoist and hedonist, Yang Chu was a private person who valued bodily integrity, health, and longevity over fame, fortune, and power. He believed that because one's body and lifespan were bestowed by Heaven (\textit{t}’\textit{ien}), one has a duty (and natural inclination) to maintain bodily health and live out one’s years. Far from sanctioning hedonistic indulgence, this Heaven-imposed duty requires discipline.”
for this were simple; Yang taught:

In life the good suffer like the bad, and the wicked seem to enjoy themselves more keenly than the good. The wisest men of antiquity were not moralists and rulers, as Confucius supposed, but sensible sensualists who had the good fortune to antedate the legislators and the philosophers, and who enjoyed the pleasures of every impulse. (Durant, 1954, p. 679)

This unrestrained and hedonistic philosophy is very much a 'live, drink, and be merry' approach to existence; instead of praising those who sacrificed for the greater good of humanity, he admired those who “...during their lives, had the joy of gratifying their desires...” (Durant, 1954, p. 681). It is not so difficult to imagine the impact and influence of these ideas on Chinese society. Here again, we see the main threat of a competing ideology rooted in its capacity to threaten core relationships and core relational virtues.

Mencius (372-289 BC) offered the following survey of the prevailing culture of his own time;

The teachings current in the Empire are those of either the school of Yang or the school of Mo. Yang advocates everyone for himself, which amounts to a denial of one's prince; Mo advocates love without discrimination, which amounts to a denial of one's father.... If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius is not proclaimed, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. When the path of morality is blocked, then we
show animals the way to devour men, and sooner or later it will come to men devouring men. Therefore, I am apprehensive. I wish to safeguard the way of the former sages against the onslaughts of Yang and Mo and to banish excessive views. (Lau, 1970, p. 114-115)

His purpose for attacking the spread of 'excessive views' and emphasizing the value of a more moderate path was simple; Mencius sought to protect his civilization from the threats to relationships which would ultimately result in anarchy, despotism, parricide and destruction.

Mencius worked diligently to broaden understanding of the Confucian Way through extensive writing and discussion with others, and by his emphasis on the inherent goodness of humankind. Similar to Confucius, he strove to elevate social, political and moral discourse to a respectable and productive level, and his view of the culture was rooted in the same basic historical narrative of Confucius. “What interests Mencius is the charting of the good life, and the establishment of government by good men” (Durant, 1954, p. 684). As Mencius understood it, Confucius had sought to balance and elevate the socio-political and moral landscape, even one person and one conversation at a time – to encourage a more moderate and reliable path to peace and prosperity, one that could recognize and cultivate the goodness of humanity while also safe-guarding society from the very real and present dangers of human excess, ignorance and abuse. Mencius once commented that “The reason for disliking those who hold to one extreme is that they cripple the Way. One thing is singled out to the neglect of a hundred others” (Lau, 1970, p. 188). From within the Confucian literary and philosophical tradition, Mencius played
a pivotal role in expounding on the political, social and moral educational message of his predecessor. Here again the focus was on the power of benevolence, duty, example, and influence (7.40, Lau, 1970, p. 191) in preparing rulers to rule and servants to serve; all the while defending the “...right of revolution, and preach[ing] it in the face of kings” (Durant, 1954, p. 685).

Mencius said, 'A gentleman teaches in five ways. The first is by a transforming influence like that of timely rain. The second is by helping the student to realize his virtue to the full. The third is by helping him to develop his talent. The fourth is by answering his questions, and the fifth is by setting an example others not in contact with him can emulate. These five are the ways in which a gentleman teaches' (Lau, 1970, p. 191).

Notice the transformative and exemplary based approach to teaching outlined. To these ends, Mencius taught that one should “Learn widely and go into what you have learned in detail so that in the end you can return to the essential” (Lau, 1970, p. 130).

The Daoist path involved quite a different way of life and learning than that encouraged by the Confucians. Laozi reportedly wrote; “Banish wisdom, discard knowledge, And the people will be benefited a hundredfold.” (Waley, 1934, p. 39), “Have done with learning and you will have no more vexation” (Wu, 2006, p. 41). “Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know” (Waley, 1934, p. 119). The risks, complications, failures, and frivolities often associated with human interactions led many Daoists to view social learning and societal engagement as a path of futility and
confusion with only negative side-effects (Wu, 2006, p. 25, 121).

In the ancient days... nature made men and life simple and peaceful, and all the world was happy. But then men attained 'knowledge,' they complicated life with inventions, they lost all mental and moral innocence, they moved from the fields to the cities, and began to write books; hence all the misery of men, and the tears of the philosophers. (Durant, 1954, p. 655)

The Confucian and Daoist Paths: An Interweaving of Ideas

By making itself at home within a complicated, imperfect, and shifting web of governing relationships, various iterations of Confucian learning could become the mainstay, hallmark, or target of various political regimes. It is widely recognized that Confucian thought survived as the Way of the gentleman scholar because Confucius was not afraid of the personal, financial, social and political losses the path of learning led him into – but also because of its conservative capacity to not push reforms and revolutions too hard or too fast. This meant that even if it meant political estrangement, loss of friend, threat from neighbor or governor; so long as the path did not require the absolute denial of one's living parents of an offense towards Heaven, even questionable associations and mortal peril could be deemed worthy of the cause. For better and for worse, it was the notions of filial piety and a relationship with Heaven that kept the Confucian learning mindset both rooted and grounded in the building of civilization over citizen – a civilization in which relational virtue, joy, belonging and harmonization (or even dreams of such ideals) could supersede idiosyncratic considerations.
The Confucian and Daoist Ways both centered on humanity's quest for harmonization and the significance of moral wisdom. On three points of their basic beliefs the Daoists shared a great deal with Confucius; “1) there is a way the world should be..., 2) human beings can understand this and need to have and follow such knowledge if they and the world are to exist in harmony; and 3) the world was once in such a state” (Peerenboom, 1999, p. 901). The Golden Age of China's ancient history (whether myth or material) beckoned to both philosophers. Both have been considered skeptics and realists, even if in different ways.

A key to understanding Daoism is the notion of *wu-wei*, or doing without doing. “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists. Of a good leader, who talks little, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, 'We did this ourselves'” (Quoted in Smith, 1991, p. 210). This in many ways seems to coincide with Confucius, who also valued leaders who could 'do without doing.' While Confucius believed that the task of moral leadership would require constant effort and perseverance, Laozi argued that this striving is what held the people back. “Taoists further deny that one can strive successfully to attain the Way; Taoist self-cultivation is a process not of accumulation but of paring away. One must unweave the social fabric, forsake one's cultural conditioning, and abandon rational thought...” (Peerenboom, 1999, p. 901). At least to some extent, the Daoists attributed education, writing, innovation, urbanization, and political life with failure. The more complicated life and relationships became, the more time spent learning things from books, the more difficult it was for an individual to follow the Way. While the Confucians professed to value the five relationships, the Daoist path promised
to become a more solitary and spontaneous affair. In fact, in describing the Way, Deng (1990) reports that,

Traditionally, ideal Scholar Warriors had no personal relationships as we think of them today. Their deepest relationship was probably with their master, and their masters were usually at pains to make them independent of this tie. Naturally there were some others who had families and spouses, but even among them, the ideal of the Scholar Warrior as a lone champion was still very strong.... The elite Scholar Warrior was celibate. Whether man or woman, they believed that sexual relations depleted jing and qi. (p. 238-239)

Instead of cultivating relationships, the Daoists favored an escape from engagement and entanglements with the 'developing' world; reveling in simple things, and believing that it was only in simplicity and separation from urban life that the Way could be found (Wu, 2006, p. 109; Durant, 1954, p. 655).

Perhaps in reference to those we now call Daoists, Confucius once said,

There may well be those who can do without knowledge; but I for my part am certainly not one of them. To hear much, pick out what is good and follow it, to see much and take due note of it (as I do), is the lower of the two kinds of knowledge. (7.27, Waley, 1938, p. 128-129)

Waley's commentary clarifies;

The higher being innate knowledge, which Confucius disclaims above... He thus
(ironically) places himself at two removes from the hypothetical people who can dispense with knowledge, the three stages being, (1) those who do not need knowledge; (2) those who have innate knowledge; (3) those who accumulate it by hard work. (1938, p. 129)

The interweaving of the Confucian and Daoist perspectives can be reflected quite well through an exploration of yin and yang\textsuperscript{12}; “...The complementary alternating forces of yin and yang, dark and light, female and male, which maintain the balance of the cosmos, and which had been a thought pattern of the Chinese before any philosophical schools came into being” (Morton, 1980, p. 65). Indeed, the concept of Yin-yang is a dominant thread running through most major schools of Chinese thought (Wang, 2017). While the Daoists believed generally that “the Way is like the yin or female because it is passive, yielding, receptive, not active and dominating” (Morton, 1980, p. 40), Arthur Waley comments further that “Some of them [meaning Daoists] have been greatly affected by the metaphysical theories of the Dualists, who attributed the whole constitution of the universe to the interaction of two opposing principles, yin and yang” (1989, p. 51). If this same notion existed within Confucianism, it is difficult to pinpoint. However, Wang (2017) reminds us that “…the influences of yinyang are easy to observe, but its conceptual meanings are hard to define....” Wang (2017) claims further:

Despite the differences in the interpretation, application, and appropriation of

\textsuperscript{12} “Yin and Yang always describe the relationships that are constitutive of unique particulars, and provide a vocabulary for 'reading' the distinctions that obtain among them. The complementary nature of the opposition captured in this pairing expresses the mutuality, interdependence, diversity, and creative efficacy of the dynamic relationships that are deemed immanent in and valorize the world” (Peerenboom & Ames, 1999, p. 985).
yinyang, three basic themes underlie nearly all deployments of the concept in Chinese philosophy: (1) yinyang as the coherent fabric of nature and mind, exhibited in all existence, (2) yinyang as jiao (interaction) between the waxing and waning of the cosmic and human realms, and (3) yinyang as a process of harmonization ensuring a constant, dynamic balance of all things.

Confucius' own efforts to establish balance, coherence, consistency and constancy led him through some of these similar themes and to at least some similar conclusions. Indeed, Confucius seemed to view relationships in general, and relational learning specifically, as paths toward coherence, emphasizing the human interactional process as integral towards the greater goal of respect and harmonization. The Daoists, in turn, emphasized the strength of the cosmic and natural realms; inexorable forces that would ultimately take in or override the efforts of individuals and civilizations without compulsory means (Wu, 2006).

**History Going Forward**

It can be apprised from the text, as well as from later discourse in the Mencius, that many of the contemporaries of his time were not focused on Confucian learning at all. Those we now call Daoists purposefully and intentionally avoided learning the ways of the gentleman scholar, arguing that to be filial (xiao), follow ritual (li), or contemplate benevolence (ren) was to fall into gross error, or at best, to fall into second or third-hand developments which prevented and prohibited one from actually obtaining the Way. Some Daoists became 'unlearned' for the purpose of escaping into the simplicity of nature and becoming free from the burdens and complexities of society. Confucians generally
viewed this 'escapism' as a burden to the clan or family unit and a rejection of the moral duty to work and to engage. To Confucius, Daoism was not necessarily learning for the wrong reasons, but unlearning and detaching from others for the right ones.

Even worse, according to Mencius, were those adherents of Yang and Mo, who not only attacked the Confucian Way, but also promoted their teachings quite vigorously. Durant (1954) reports that (to the Confucians) Yangism was an extreme form of self-centered, pleasure-seeking egalitarianism devoid of any moral concern for others, living or dead. At the other end of the spectrum stood the Mohists, who professed to love purely and indiscriminately - a presumably universal love rooted in religious belief but which neglected the limitations and levels of relational learning, subsequently threatening traditional family ties, not to mention the prevailing political order. To Confucius and the Ru either one constituted serious learning failure.

This was not to mean that Confucius did not perhaps value the role and concreteness of other sociopolitical and religiomoral orientations, but that he viewed his work of balancing and moderating between these various factions as the only way forward for himself. To pull away from the self-centered pleasure-seeking of Yangism, the independent and isolated love of nature in Daoism, the communal love for humanity in Mohism, all at the same time, was no simple or easy task, but it certainly helped to position the Confucian path in a coherent center of the cultural context. As “Confucius said, ‘The best neighbourhood is where benevolence is to be found. Not to live in such a neighbourhood when one has the choice cannot by any means be considered wise’” (Lau, 1970, p. 83). This pursuit became arguably the first and most important consideration of
his time.

As we have turned to the Daoist school for insight, a school many associate with yin philosophy, we have learned that as the philosophical counterpart to Ruism, the Daoist school viewed the Way or Path as a “...fundamental force nurturing and moving everything in the world...”; a power and beauty found more readily and easily by an individual living in isolation from others (Hwang, 1999, p. 165). Of course, this notion reminds us of the problematic use of self-cultivation as an exclusively Confucian term. It may well be that the term self-cultivation is far more useful in describing the Daoist, and Daoist influenced Neo-Confucian learning projects than it is in describing the early or Classical Confucian.

Confucius and Laozi did share some common ground. For example, Confucius did not only believe in learning by doing, he also believed in properly 'not doing', a concept very similar to the Daoist notion of wu-wei. The core difference between the two schools seems to rest on the fact that within Confucianism the Way of Heaven (or Tiandao) was best approximated in the knowing, doing, and becoming in relation to others, whereas in Daoism direct connection or communion with the Dao remained predominantly an individual or isolated affair beyond the powers of human expression to convey. It should come as little surprise then, when the focal point of Confucian philosophy has fallen predominantly on global ethics while Daoism has remained far more detached from public discourse as well as steeped in mysticism.

The Confucians also saw the Path in sociopolitical and moral terms. In fact,
scholars widely agree that Confucianism holds the virtue of “...benevolence as its core value” and that some argue this is why the Confucian Way “... has positive significance in the dialogue between civilizations and in the construction of global ethics” (Guo & Cui, 2012, p. 1). In comparison to the philosophical soliloquy and spiritual mysticism of the Dao De Jing, the chaotic chorus of the Analects (Lunyu) reverberates more of the majesty, iconoclasm and mystery of humankind than its ephemeral and isolated textual counterpart.

As we shall see in the following chapters, while Confucius did not, indeed could not, rule out the possibility of a more intimate connection with Heaven – this relationship, like so many others, also seems to have been distant, strained, and/or tenuous at times. By not delving into superstitions, speculations, or spelling out his metaphysical concerns (if he indeed had any), Confucius exemplified considerable distancing from the unknown, focusing his life and followers on the rigors of a temporal and moral relational process, complete with familial foundations (xiao), social rituals (li), and lofty (albeit complicated) motivational qualities (ren) (Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Puett, 2014, p. 218; Slingerland, 2003, p. xix).
CHAPTER III

CONFUCIUS AS THE IDEAL LEARNER

CONFUCIUS

(Yamada, n.d.)
Confucius in Historical Context

The most common title for Confucius in the Analects is (zi), meaning literally 'a child' or 'a son' (Legge, 1893, p. 137), but most commonly translated into English as 'master,' due to textual and cultural interpretation. While the frequent use of 'Master' in English translation serves as a reflection of the cultural veneration and respect broadly afforded to Confucius, we must also remember that this interpretive consensus is far from universal and has emerged out of an almost insurmountable mass of commentary and interpretation. As a textual and historical achievement, the Analects stands as a witness of the most universally known 'mystery-man' in human history; billions have heard his name and been presumably influenced by his teachings, yet few can quote a reliable fact about him or a single expression he uttered.

According to Oldstone-Moore (2005, p. 324), Confucius “…came from a poor but respectable family. After serving in the government of Lu, he spent thirteen years traveling the various Chinese states asking their rulers to put into practice his ideas about government.” As to his beliefs and vantage point;

Confucius believed that the early years of the Zhou dynasty (1027-256 B.C.) were golden years of social harmony. In his own lifetime (551-479 B.C.) Confucius saw only growing disorder. The king’s authority was greatly reduced as ambitious lords fought each other for power. This increasing turmoil led Confucius to develop a new moral outlook. It was based on kindness, respect, and the strength

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13 It is interesting to note that both Zhang's (2011) and Liu's (2010) modern Mandarin translations use the name Kongzi, rather than a title indicating any type of elevated social status.
of the family. He said that a good ruler should set an example by dealing fairly with his subjects, using force only as a last resort. In return, subjects had a duty to respect and obey their ruler. Confucius believed that family relationships should also be governed by mutual respect, since strong family bonds formed the basis of a stable society (Cotterell, 2005, p. 12).

The dearth of reliable information in conjunction with the immensity of myth which has cropped up (see Dawson, 1978, p. 71) align us with the decision to not cast away the title of ‘son' or 'master'. However we interpret Confucius, and as he is portrayed within the Analects, we are struck with both the singularity and the commonality of this man. Both profound and mundane, Confucius is presented as the exemplary and the ordinary 'every-man.' It is our implicit faith in history and our intrinsic belief in the potential of humanity to produce moral genius that allows us to uncover and examine his exemplary character as well as his idiosyncrasies. It is our inbred skepticism and affinity to matters of this world that endear us to his 'this-worldly' orientation. It is our faith in the unseen and our own sense of reality which encourages us to take stock of his strengths and weaknesses as our own. Experience supports the historical conclusion that hermeneutic interaction with this text has served as the cultural wellspring of Confucianisms for over two thousand years. Indeed, Confucius' duality and diversity don't just derive from his name and title; the depth and range of his character and his approach derive also from his recorded interactions as interpreted through translation and in correspondence with over two thousand years of commentary. Just as much as the Analects sets him apart as an exceptional teacher, in the end, the Confucius encountered
within its pages appears more like the nuanced image of a determined pupil than the stone-chiseled and reverential sage we might expect, or that the potentially patriarchal title of 'Master' might portray (Cummins, 1983, p. 39). Because he is elevated more so by his pupils than by himself:

Confucius' views are known only through later works, and it is not easy to distinguish between his own teachings and the elaborations of his followers. Basically, he was concerned with the relation of man to man, and declined to engage in metaphysical speculation. As he saw the past, men had lived together in harmony under the sage rulers of the golden age. They had been truthful and wise, good and righteous, and had fulfilled their ceremonial obligations meticulously and with understanding of the moral content. Man had degenerated since then, but he is fundamentally good and can be salvaged through education. The key to this education is moral example, emanating from the top. If the ruler possesses the qualities of a Superior Man, his virtue will influence those around him. They, in turn, will be examples to others, until all mankind has been permeated. (Garraty & Gay, 1981, p. 115-116)

This view of learning is powerful, and arguably inclusive of all members of society even if it does emphasize the importance of top-down or cascading moral relationships. Other scholars concur that Confucius had much bigger goals than merely establishing self-cultivated moral exemplars at the head of nation-states, believing also that the inherent moral hierarchy of most relationships would proffer the needed tension to motivate good pupils forward and upward in their efforts to observe, learn, and advise (see Ing, 2012).
We see this early on and consistently in the example of Confucius, who believed there was always something to learn and someone to learn from. For example, Chai & Chai (2007) argue:

[Confucius] emphasized the study of classic works of literature, the worship of ancestors, and submission to authority. The five principal relationships upon which all society should be based, according to Confucius are as follows: filial piety between father and son (meaning the son must obey and respect his father, in both life and death), loyalty between ruler and subject, harmony between husband and wife, precedence of the elder over the younger in family relations, and trust between friends. Trust between friends is the only horizontal relationship; the rest are hierarchical. However, these guidelines also insist upon reciprocity. For example, the filial piety of the son should be reciprocated by the love of the father, and the obedience of the subject should be reciprocated by the fairness of the ruler. (Chai & Chai, 2007, p. 41)

When painted in broad strokes such as this, the Confucian combination of hierarchical relationships and relational reciprocity appears both compelling and problematic; just who was responsible to lead out and set the tone in these matters? How could one learn effectively from others while also maintaining such a host of relational virtues? While “Confucianism, the philosophy based on the teachings of this man, has probably influenced the lives of more people than any other body of thought in all history” (Kublin, 1972, p. 47) it has done so considerably more as “…an ethical system rather than a religion” (Kublin, 1972, p. 47). This was not to mean that Confucius had no belief in
the supernatural. We will find that his beliefs about correct behavior were still very much tied to an existing discourse and belief in Tian (Heaven):

He believed that not until men learned to behave properly in this life could they turn their minds to problems of the afterlife. Confucianism may thus be considered a guide to proper behavior based on ethical principles. Confucius' aim was to help people to improve themselves so that both the individual and society would benefit...[He] hoped that if people knew what was expected of them in their relations with other people, they would behave correctly. (Kublin, 1972, p. 47-48)

To this end, Confucius urged the study of the Classics so as to encourage the cultivation of humanity (Chen, 1986), and promoted social engagement and civility (li) as pivotal on the path of relational virtue. Even if this relational focus would ultimately lead to the type of rare dual-mindedness (ren) exhibited by one concerned and dedicated enough to be set apart as a witness and a warning by Heaven (3.24, 9.5), Confucius' positioning as a warning bell did lead to considerable isolation, and we have evidence to suggest that his capacity to respectfully cope with the elements of life outside of his own control or understanding were both integral and ingratiating to his path to “...becoming fully human” (Oldstone-Moore, 2005, p. 344).

Oldstone-Moore's (2005) discussion of early Confucianism, which includes individual, familial, social, legal, and political levels of consideration, suggests that a learned person is one who finds fulfillment in their learning on each of these levels
because they have come to sincerely love the ancient path towards virtue (ren), the principles of filial piety (xiao), and the proper practice of the rites (li). It is this sincere love for virtue that sets one apart. One who believes and acts in a manner conducive to progression on the relational path of learning, by definition, also has properly fulfilled their personal and familial obligations in order to properly support the aid of the broader community. In this way, the Confucian emphasis on relational goodness does not limit or squander one’s potentiality for societal, familial, political and/or spiritual triumphs, but seeks rather to avoid squandering these authentic joys on meretricious distraction, duplicitous prosperity, the unjust use or acquisition of power and subaltern popularity.

Confucius came to believe that there would always be elements of himself and those around him which would make learning difficult. While this did not long discourage him or deter him in his efforts, it did seem to ground and perpetuate his own journey and the learning adventure he urged others on into more humble and esoteric outcomes. If he truly did anticipate that his message would catch on, he knew also that it would require the slow emergence of a special class of learned and learning individuals who would first prepare themselves to lead, counsel, and lift the Chinese empire towards correctness (zheng), harmony (he) and benevolence (ren). “… Confucius views individuals … as possessing ultimate control over their own choices and behaviors, thus minimally fulfilling what it means to be a morally autonomous agent. For a certain type of person, the aspiring junzi (“gentleman”), Confucius envisions a larger role – one of moral authority and responsibility for the betterment of society and culture” (Brindley, 2011, p. 257). So, by definition, a learned person, or what we might more accurately
entitle a 'learning person', is someone who is able to not only desire, discern, and determine a better path for themselves (e.g., self-cultivation) from within the relational matrix of society, but one who is also simultaneously able to inspire and guide their associates into their own path of virtue, knowledge and moral excellence by the virtue of their learning (e.g., relational learning).  

Confucius as an Exemplary Learner

It should come as no surprise that as the central figure of the Analects, Confucius is built up within the text as the prime example of a student and a gentleman-scholar. “I have listened in silence and noted what was said, I have never grown tired of learning nor wearied of teaching others what I have learnt” (7.2, Waley, 1938, p. 123). Based on his own words, Confucius seemed ever eager and capable of learning from others; “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly” (7.22, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 116). But why would Confucius boast of himself in this regard? The problem here may be one of translation and cultural interpretation, as the character ‘Wo’ can be translated as our/we. Confucius very well may have been saying “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, [we are] bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, [we] follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, [we] reform [ourselves] accordingly.” Regardless of the interpretation, Confucius clearly sought to share what worked for him. He saw learning more as a relational attitude and a process, rather than an individual altitude or attainment; it did not

14 Luo (2007, 2012) explores ren as a relational virtue, suggesting that de, often translated as virtue or power, plays a key role in both reflecting and forming the relational project.
come naturally for himself and needed to be nurtured. His self-proclaimed love for learning from others coupled with his self-reported fears of failure were born in a world of political and social turmoil, his primary concern was that he would fail “...to cultivate excellence (de)”... fail to practice what he learned, fail to attend to what he understood as appropriate (yi) in a given context or circumstance, or fail to “...reform conduct that is not productive...” (7.3, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 111). In others words he was constantly concerned about his ability to perform the task of learning from others or improving himself in relation to others.

This commitment to relational learning is reflected also in the way he described his teaching focus. For example, on one occasion he said; “I transmit but do not innovate; I am truthful in what I say and devoted to antiquity” (7.1, Lau, 1979, p. 86), or as Leys (7.1, 2014, p. 18) interprets; “I transmit, I invent nothing. I trust and love the past..” Confucius wanted his interlocutors to know that he was seeking to connect them with their own past as well – to restore those loose or lost connections which brought him joy and purpose. On another occasion he described himself as someone who was “...driven by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat, he enjoys himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way” (7.19, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 115). This enthusiastic forgetting of self is striking, especially in context of the dark and difficult times in which he lived, the dangers he faced, and the overall failure of his ideals to take hold. Confucius sets himself apart from his peers by being able to practice and exemplify that which he encouraged others to do, recognize with precision the failures of others, while at the same time being able to
recognize and admire in others those principles he had not yet attained to.

Confucius did not see learning as a quick or seamless program of moral improvement that one could easily package, export, or complete. He said; “Give me a few more years, so that I may have spent a whole fifty in study, and I believe that after all I should be fairly free from error” (7.16, Waley, 1938, p. 126). Sincere love for learning was forever a close neighbor to perceived weakness or deficiency. So how did one man, coming from such a position of weakness, put forward such a grand and perpetual argument for lifelong learning? At least part of this answer is because the Confucian approach did not attempt to achieve the most lofty learning objectives in isolation, this was a path of political and intellectual engagement, it never fully divorced itself or locked itself into only one set of spiritual or religious ideals (Dubs, 1960), nor did it conceive of learning as being divorced from socio-moral or ethical considerations (Hutton, 2008). That learning was a collaborative affair is something the Analects makes abundantly clear, not only by its inclusion of various teachers, worthies, and examples, suggesting that the Way of Confucius was not the doctrine or property of one man alone, but also because Confucius speaks of himself in such humble terms. Confucius once said, “I am not the kind of person who has gained knowledge (zhi) through some natural propensity for it. Rather, loving antiquity, I am earnest in seeking it out” (7.20, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 115). Confucius set his own learning goals high; the goal of becoming a junzi entailed no less than becoming a spiritually, morally, emotionally, and intellectually sound, socially responsible, politically mature, and culturally minded individual enlightened by proper ethical concern for others and who could effectively navigate the
hazards of societal privilege and political sophistication (if necessary).

By placing greatest emphasis on that which was right, the teacher did not forget his place or his imperfections. Confucius was respected as a teacher because he was constantly cultivating a love for learning. He seemed to relish his membership with the human race, even if he also set himself apart as one who had uniquely sought to understand or elucidate wisdom, character, and morality. In recognizing his limitations, Confucius was not afraid to take pride in his accomplishments; “There are, in a town of ten households, bound to be people who are better than I am in doing their utmost (zhong) and in making good on their word (xin), but there will be no one who can compare with me in the love of learning (haoxue)” (5.28, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 102). By recognizing his own limitations and strengths, not to mention the challenges and contributions of those around him, Confucius mapped out a path of learning available to a much broader range of people.

But it was not the learner’s confidence in his own capacities that made him so memorable to others; Confucius transformed the learning culture because he saw both himself and others as not having fully arrived. Not so near to perfection as the ancient sages, yet able to praise and evaluate even his most advanced pupil, Confucius revealed himself as a true member and friend to civil society; someone who could be trusted to authoritatively chart the main markers on the path without dissociating himself from humanity, to explicate the lay of the land, as well as effectively spur others on in their own path of imperfect and (hopefully) unquenchable learning.
This spurring on was not all positive, however. In fact, more often Confucius resounded as a critic of his pupils and contemporaries (see 15.14, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 187). He devalued and talked down overall capacities to exemplify correct principles, and depicted the contemporary culture (himself included) as one which had not fully superseded or overcome the challenges of relational ignorance, distraction, and absorption. Perhaps for these reasons, Confucius has become established as the image of the learned and learning person; a common man who had rediscovered the uncommon moorings needed to avoid the major pitfalls so common to humanity.

By not allowing his wisdom, age, failures, or frailties to congeal, Confucius invited others to lose themselves in more than a mere love affair with learning – this was to be a more lasting, binding, and fulfilling relationship where one could become both wed and welded to the pursuit of relational knowledge, promising joy and virtue through a demanding process of observation, study, practice, and becoming. Confucius lifted learners’ sights just above the trials of individual imperfections towards the simple and refined joys of human relational experience.

**The Learner Seeks, Sacrifices, Works and Teaches – But Not Too Much!**

We find much evidence in the Analects for a construct of learning which requires sacrifice, seeking, hard work, and effective teaching of others. In Ames and Rosemont's (1998) translation of Analects 1.14, we read the following:

“In eating, exemplary persons (junzi) do not look for a full stomach, nor in their lodgings for comfort and contentment. They are persons of action yet cautious in
what they say. They repair to those who know the way (dao), and find improvement in their company. Such persons can indeed be said to have a love of learning.” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 74-75)

Confucius's pupil

Zixia said: “As for persons who care for character much more than beauty, who in serving their parents are able to exert themselves utterly, who give their whole person in the service of their ruler, and who, in interactions with colleagues and friends, make good on their word (xin) even if it were said of such persons that they are unschooled, I would insist that they are well educated indeed” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 72-73). 15

Clearly a learner on the path was expected to be morally motivated, willing to sacrifice worldly gains, humble and trustworthy.

Confucius believed that the opportunity to learn was coupled with considerable responsibility; he once remarked that he had “...never failed to instruct students who, using their own resources, could only afford a gift of dried meat” (7.7, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 112), but note how a gift was still expected. He further expected his students be “driven with eagerness” (7.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 112) and do their very best to learn;

15 “Zixia was a man of letters, and is remembered by tradition as having had an important role in establishing the Confucian canon. He has a major place in the last five chapters, where he underscores the importance of learning. Confucius allows that he himself has gotten a great deal from his conversations with Zixia. Although Zixia tries to compensate for his image as a pedant by insisting that virtuous conduct in one's personal relationships is what learning is all about, Confucius criticizes him at times for being petty and narrow in his aspirations” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 230).
I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to get knowledge, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson. (7.8, Legge, 1893, p. 197)

or as Slingerland translates this same passage:

I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again. (7.8, 2003, p. 66)

While in some ways this presented a great challenge for Confucius's pupils, it seems it was no greater than the burden Confucius himself carried. For him, the burden of relational learning required no less; Confucius understood that a person’s agency, motivation, and direction were crucial elements in the path of learning.

Confucius and his pupils believed that the natural outcome for someone who pursued and followed the way of the ancients in a context so different and disparate from those times would be the springing forth of a rooted (and moral) problem solving energy, a love for learning in conjunction with a righteous sense of enjoyment in honest labor (see Analects 1.1 & 19.5). While there remained considerable tension between the way things should be and the way they were, this space created a productive learning tension wherein the Confucians could learn to act properly in relation to others even as they learned to respect that which they did not understand;
If any means of escaping poverty presented itself that did not involve doing wrong, I would adopt it, even though my employment were only that of the ...(most menial)... But so long as it is a question of illegitimate means, I shall continue to pursue the quests that I love. (7.12, Waley, 1938, p. 125)

There is a powerful stream of 'this-world' sacrifice and ascetic joyfulness running through Confucius's thinking; “To eat course food, drink plain water, and pillow oneself on a bent arm- there is pleasure to be found in these things. But wealth and position gained through inappropriate (buyi) means – these are to me like floating clouds” (7.16, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 114). It seems, then, that a strict reading of the Analects would place a form of unique 'this-worldly' asceticism and honest labor at the apex of worthwhile learning rather than at its base, casting aside the ease, wealth, power or pleasure commonly associated with learning outcomes.

Through understanding and imitating the Way of Heaven (tiandao), Confucians constructed the Way of Humanity (rendao), which consists of two aspects; ethics for ordinary people and ethics for scholars. Ethics for ordinary people adopts the principle of Respecting the Superior for procedural justice and the principle of Favouring the Intimate for distributive justice; the person who occupies the superior position should play the role of decision-maker and should allocate resources by favouring intimate relationships. Because Confucian cosmology suggests that the Way of Humanity corresponds to the Way of Heaven, Confucians required individuals to cultivate themselves with the Way of Humanity. Ethics for scholars further endows Confucian disciples with the
mission of benefiting the whole society with the Way of Humanity (Huang, 2001, p. 179).

While Huang's (2001) explanation may reveal a good deal more about how and in what manner Confucian thought has evolved, it does not tell us how Confucius originally conceptualized what a learned person was like. Huang's holistic view of Confucian thought is correct in making an overall distinction between the path of the learned gentleman-scholar (junzi) and the path of the learned commoner, the difficulty is that Confucius did not define himself as either one. Considering Confucius' efforts to bridge this duality and inequality, we can see this connective aspect emerging as one of the philosophy's most substantial strengths. By striving to connect societies perceived strengths with its weaknesses (the rich with the poor, old with the young, ruler's to the ruled, etc.), Confucius could lead others toward more peaceful paths to reconciliation or coping based on a better understanding of how, why, where, and when a common individual, as well as an exceptional, fortunate or gifted individual, could learn better how to learn.

**Confucius on Becoming a Gentleman and a Scholar**

Throughout the Analects, one gets the impression that Confucius anticipated the quasi-spontaneous emergence or restoration of an aristocracy of virtue, composed of individuals similar to himself, who despite personal limitations, would be prepared to lead the way forward without undue concern for family connection, worldly success, or recognition. In the midst of an often misguided, distracted, degraded and fractured empire,
Confucius remarked: “There are men who seek for the abstruse and strange and live a singular life in order that they may leave a name to posterity. This is what I would never do. There are again good men who try to live in conformity with the moral law, but who, when they have gone half way, throw it up. I never could give it up. Lastly, there are truly moral men who unconsciously live a life in entire harmony with the universal moral order and who live unknown to the world and unnoticed of men without any concern. It is only men of holy, divine natures who are capable of this.” (Lin, 1938, p. 107, emphasis added)

Note how Confucius may or may not be one step shy of classing himself with those who are 'truly moral' – nonetheless, he seems to see himself as just between; never able to give up in his journey, seeking and trying to connect and adhere to correct principles, but not holding himself in as high esteem as those who are able to live spontaneously and privately in congruence with the Way.

Following the Way meant tempering and learning to control individual passions and prejudices in favor of the Way of Humanity and the will of Heaven (Tianming). This congruence could not come quickly or easily, however. According to Confucius, studying the Way required individuals to learn and follow a host of moro-spiritual, social, and civic principles, called li; habits and rituals which could be fairly easily transmitted and applied as needed in appropriate contexts and situations. The key to proper application was to maintain a commitment to zhi (knowledge/wisdom) while also practicing a spirit of humility, civility, purpose, and mutual improvement – never allowing one's learning or behavior to ossify into something absolutely incoherent to or
Exemplary persons (junzi) lacking in gravity would have no dignity. Yet in their studies they are not inflexible. Take doing your utmost and making good on your word (xin) as your mainstay. Do not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as you are. And where you have erred, do not hesitate to mend your ways. (1.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 73)

Waley puts the passage in this way;

If a gentleman is frivolous, he will lose the respect of his inferiors and lack firm ground upon which to build up his education. First and foremost he must learn to be faithful to his superiors, to keep promises, to refuse the friendship of all who are not like him. And if he finds he has made a mistake, then he must not be afraid of admitting the fact and amending his ways. (1938, p. 85)

Note how Waley's interpretation includes a very strong social and hierarchical emphasis, whereas Ames & Rosemont seem to view this as more reflective and personal. Liu's (2010, p.2) modern Mandarin rendition hints at a more socially correlative meaning; that the junzi, if he does not behave himself, will not be respected by the people. He also suggests that by actively studying, one's thinking remains open to change ...if he does make an error, he is not afraid to fix it. Another way to present Analects 1.8 is as follows; “Confucius said, a gentleman and a scholar does not rule by force, nor does he command the fear of the people; he is learned yet not inflexible; is faithful to his word and a man of integrity, yet has no close friends who are not like unto himself; he has faults to improve
upon, but not of the serious sort.” These qualities not only epitomized a noble character, but also activated a young gentleman-scholar to become a positive influence within Chinese society. Regardless of the interpretation, Confucius believed that a learned person earned their respect through their actions, by maintaining their integrity, choosing their friends wisely, and by continuing to learn and to improve throughout their life, even when this meant the toleration of a considerable degree of discomfort and ambiguity.

The Students of Confucius: Is Anyone Really Good at Learning?

As one pieces together the qualities and values of the ‘main characters’ appearing within the Analects (which is not by any means an isolated biography of Confucius), as well as how Confucius interacted with and expressed himself to these individuals, we gain further insights into who Confucius was and how he exemplified relational virtues. While I could spend a good deal of time discussing each individual, I choose instead to focus briefly on only three main ones: Yan Hui, Zigong, and Zilu.

First, Yan Hui. On one occasion Ji Kangzi inquired, “Which of your disciples truly loves learning (haoxue)?” Confucius replied, “There was one Yan Hui who truly loved learning. Unfortunately, he was to die young. Nowadays, there is no one.” (11.7, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 143). This was the pupil Confucius most admired and for whom he would mourn so powerfully. In Analects 8.5, a certain Master Tseng likewise mourned the loss of a learned person that he had known; a man who was “…Clever, yet not ashamed to consult those less clever than himself; widely gifted, yet not ashamed to consult those with few gifts; having, yet seeming not to have; full, yet seeming empty; offended against, yet never contesting – long ago I had a friend whose ways were such as
this” (Waley, 1938, p. 133-134). While tradition states that this passage was in reference to Yan Hui, other references to him serve as a more clear indicator of his unique strengths and endearment to Confucius. For example,

When Duke Ai asked which of his disciples was eager to learn, Confucius answered, 'There was one Yen Hui who was eager to learn. He did not vent his anger upon an innocent person, nor did he make the same mistake twice. Unfortunately, his allotted span was a short one and he died. Now there is no one. No one eager to learn has come to my notice. (6.3, Lau, 1979, p. 81)

When we look closer at the original language we have to wonder if the phrase haoxue did not mean something along the lines of adept or good at learning. Other passages insist that, as a student of the Way, Yan Hui did accomplish much more than fleeting desire or even persistent commitment to study; Confucius once said, “Such was Hui that for three months there would be nothing in his mind contrary to perfect virtue. The others may attain to this on some days or in some months, but nothing more” (6.5, Legge, 1893, p. 186), or as Lau expresses the same passage; “In his heart for three months at a time Hui does not lapse from benevolence. The others attain benevolence merely by fits and starts” (6.7, Lau, 1979, p. 82). How Confucius came to know the heart and mind of Hui is not made clear, what we do learn is that Confucius praised Hui on more than one occasion for his steadfast and joyful practice of the Way; “How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!” (6.11, Lau, 1979, p. 82). Creel (1949) in some ways challenges the sincerity of
Confucius's praise, stating that:

This favorite disciple, Yen Hui, is hard to appraise. A great deal is said about him, but when we add it up it comes to little more than a catalogue of virtues. Confucius himself admitted that “it is not until one knows a man's faults that one can truly judge whether he is virtuous.” If we read between the lines however, it is easy to suspect Yen Hui of serious shortcomings. Unlike a number of the other disciples, we almost never find Yen Hui saying anything; usually he just agrees with Confucius, or accepts his pronouncements without comment.... Confucius himself wondered what to make of the unusual docility of Yen Hui. He said, “I can talk with him the whole day and he never disagrees with me, as if he were stupid. But when I inquire into what he does when he is away from me, I find that his conduct fully demonstrates what I have taught him. No, Hui is not stupid.”... Confucius praised him as far superior to all the others, both as a diligent student and as one who could hold, unvaryingly, to the ideal of conduct. (Creel, 1949, p. 67-68)

This appraisal and admiration of Yan Hui has had a lasting impact within the Confucian tradition, effectively elevating the learning philosophy above a potentially more practical and conventional learning approach to a path of almost limitless potential and difficulty.

Another equally revealing relationship with a disciple or pupil of Confucius, named Zigong, is helpful for different reasons. Zigong is important because he rises up as an example of someone who can truly take a prominent position in government based
on the principles and learning Confucius espoused. Waley reports that Zigong featured in Chinese history at large, playing an important role in “…interstate diplomacy from 495 to 468 [BC]” (1938, p. 20). Zigong's increasing popularity seems affirmed by his increased representation near the end of the Analects, as well as several passages questioning whether or not he was greater than Confucius. Of course Zigong defers to his honorable teacher, meanwhile offering up an enriched understanding of how Confucius learned;

Zigong said: 'The Way of Wen and Wu had not crumbled to the ground. It was still there among men. The worthy remembered its major tenets; the unworthy remembered its minor tenets. None did not possess a portion of the Way of Wen and Wu. From whom did the Master not learn? And yet what regular teachers did he have? (Huang, 1997, p. 182)

This passage gives us more than one reason to believe that the notion of having one formalized teacher was not a part of the ancient Confucian learning mindset – Zigong saw Confucius as part of a much bigger teaching and learning community. Somewhat inflexible and perhaps overly specialized (see Slingerland, 2003, p. 246), earlier on in his career, it is reported:

Zigong excelled as a statesman and as a merchant, and was perhaps second only to Yan Hui in Confucius' affections. Confucius was respectful of Zigong's abilities, and in particular, his intellect, but was less impressed with his use of this intellect to amass personal wealth. Putting the many references to Zigong together, that Confucius was not entirely comfortable with his lack of
commitment to the well-being of others, choosing to increase his own riches rather than taking on the responsibilities of government office. Zigong was aloof, and not a generous spirit. And in his readiness to pass judgment on others, he acted superior. Coming from a wealthy, educated home, Zigong was well spoken, and as such, Confucius' most persistent criticism of him was that his deeds could not keep pace with his words. Even so, much of the flattering profile of Confucius collected in the Analects is cast in the words of the eloquent Zigong. (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 231)

According to Ames & Rosemont, “Zilu was another of Confucius's best-known and favorite protégés” (1998, p. 233). Constantly interested in action and believing that boldness and courage were the best path forward, Confucius warned him against the ills of being rash (see Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 233).

It is recorded in Analects 5.14 that “When Zilu heard something and had not been able to practice it as yet, he was apprehensive that he might hear something else” (Huang, 1997, p. 75). Presumably because the demands of filial piety had not yet been fulfilled, Confucius tried to rein in his rash approach to learning by turning him toward the teachings and examples of his father and older brother. When “Zi-lu asked: 'Should I practice something as soon as I hear it?' The Master said: 'How can you practice something as soon as you hear it when your father and eldest brother are alive?'” (Huang, 1997, p. 121).

Confucius's feelings for Zilu were mixed. On the one hand, he was constantly
critical of Zilu's rashness and immodesty, and impatient with his seeming
indifference to book learning. On the other hand, Confucius appreciated Zilu's
unswerving loyalty and directness – he never delayed on fulfilling his
commitments. But being nearer Confucius in age, Zilu with his military temper
was not one to take criticism without giving it back.

On several occasions, especially in the apocryphal literature, Zilu
challenges Confucius's judgment in associating with political figures of
questionable character and immodest reputation – the concubine of Duke Ling of
Wei, for example, where Confucius is left defending himself. At the end of the
day, enormous affection for the irrepressible Zilu comes through the text. (Ames

On one occasion Confucius “... went to see Nanzi, and Zilu was not at all happy
about it. The Master swore an oath to him, 'For whatever I have done to offend, may tian
abandon me! May tian abandon me!'” (6.28, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 109-110), or as
Huang puts it; “If I have done anything improper, may Heaven forsake me, may Heaven
that ritual dictated the meeting. Nonetheless, Confucius remains intent on further
assuring Zilu of his integrity by evoking Heaven in the process.

Zilu's example within the Analects brings to mind the relevance of action within
the Confucian learning paradigm. Constantly concerned about behaving the part as well
as watching over his own teacher with regards to his behavior, Zilu may have struggled in
maintaining a sincere and respectful connection with his mentor. We learn better in the context of his relationship and interaction with Confucius how principles of filial piety could serve a younger and rasher learner, and begin to recognize the impact of age and development in resolving issues which arose.

Through the lens of each of these unique teaching and learning relationships we find some commonalities worthy of note. First, each and every one of his pupils is represented as having asked questions of Confucius. This act alone sets him apart as their mentor. Secondly, each pupil was subject to some kind of scrutiny; mostly positive, such as in the case of Yan Hui, but often constructive and critical. Third, and last, Confucius saw each of his pupils in large part as a friend and even a teacher; praising openly and taking up all the good that they possessed while also caring deeply for them and their happiness.

The Personal Integrity of Confucius: Learning Li as a Maintenance of Trust

“If a benevolent man was told that there was another benevolent man in the well, would he, nevertheless, go and join him?’ The Master said, ‘Why should that be the case? A gentleman can be sent there, but cannot be lured into a trap. He can be deceived, but cannot be duped.’” (6.26, Lau, 1979, p. 84)

Ames & Rosemont wrote the following comments about this passage;

The authoritative person (renzhe) and the exemplary person (junzi) are used interchangeably in this passage. The exemplary person would not be able to rescue the person in the well if he were to jump in after him. There is an
important difference between being deceived, which involves quite properly having taken people at their word, and being duped, which involves having done something that would diminish one as a person. (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 240)

What is clear from this passage is that Confucius believed certain qualities of the gentleman-scholar could be attained which would prevent serious or substantial folly. The learned person could be led to a problem, but would not be easily tricked into getting him or herself into the same predicament. So what cognitive, moral, rational, or emotional apparatus would be specifically utilized to avoid moral peril?

The answer is li, translated in various places as sacrifice, etiquette, good manners, propriety, and ritual. Etiquette can be defined as dynamic manners, or 'guidelines for living', the particulars of which change over time, but which are rooted in a sincere respect for others, thoughtful consideration, as well as in honesty (Post et al, 2011, p. 5-6). This coincides very much with how li functioned in Confucian China.

The word li ('ritual') is expressed in writing by a picture of a ritual vessel. The original meaning is said to be 'arranging ritual vessels'; and this may very well be true for it appears to be cognate to a number of words meaning 'to arrange in proper order,' 'to put in sequence,' etc. (Waley, 1934, p. 64)

Li functioned to align disposition and social behavior in a healthy way, but they could not supersede the primary importance of one's basic disposition; “It is only when one's basic disposition and refinement are in appropriate balance that you have the exemplary person
The Confucius of the Analects is not much concerned with the details of ritual, either public or domestic. Correct observance of small social rites, what we call 'good manners,' belongs, of course, equally to the Chinese and to our conception of the gentleman, as does also the insistence upon 'giving a fair chance' both to one's competitors in sport and to one's victims in the chase. But the actual text of the Analects is concerned with the general principles of conduct, with morality rather than manners; and so little guidance on the details of behavior could the composers of the work find in the traditional sayings of the Master that they were obliged to insert in it, in order to meet the demands of a later Confucianism that was preoccupied above all with the details of ritual, a long ritual text, dealing in reality with the behavior of gentlemen in general, but adapted and amplified in such a way as to read as though it were a description of Confucius's own behavior. (Waley, 1938, p. 55)

While this adaptation, expansion, or complication of li in later times makes it difficult to ascertain how li worked in the original Confucian learning project; there is much evidence that even in his own time Confucius viewed much of the prevailing ritual practice as incorrect, corrupted, and/or incomplete (see Waley, 1938, p. 65).

This incompleteness allows Confucius to create, adapt and/or restore ritual to blend more perfectly with his own understanding and intentions. In this way, Confucius
shows a unique way forward to others who would have to study, interpret, and apply *li* in their own lives. He taught by example that one should begin their study, or find their motivation, in the Book of Poetry (*Shijing*), take their stand with ritual (*li*), and find their completion or fulfillment through music. (8.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 122; Slingerland, 2003, p. 80; Zhang, 2011, p. 109).

Huang (1997) suggests that “the rituals were a code of propriety, a set of rules and institutions by which … those of the *shi* class... were supposed to conduct themselves in their relations with the gods and spirits as well as with other human beings...” (p. 19-20). By involving consideration of a particular sociopolitical class or strata coupled with a politico-religious dimension, Huang reminds us of the meaning inherently reflected in the character itself; a ritual vessel.

Huang's (1997) view in large part coincides with that of Slingerland, who describes *li* as:

A set of traditional religious and moral practices, which in the Confucian context were believed to have been revealed to the Zhou kings by Heaven. The scope of ritual is quite broad, encompassing not only sacrificial offerings to the spirits, but also aspects of one's daily lives that we might be tempted to label as 'etiquette,' such as the manner in which one dresses, takes one's meal, approaches one's ministers, etc. (see especially Book Ten). By submitting to and internalizing ritual forms, an aspiring gentleman is able to restrain improper inborn tendencies (8.2, 12.1), acquire the means to 'take his place' (*li*) among other adults in society (2.4,
8.8, 16.13, 20.3), and thereby win the favor of Heaven. Ritually-acquired virtue is also portrayed as the only proper way to rule the world (3.11, 12.11, 14.41).

(Slingerland, 2003, p. 241)

Creel (1970, p. 197) supports Huang's point about the religious origins of *li*, citing Legge's translation of a passage in the classical text called the *Zuo Zhuan*, which concluded that *li* is “what the former Kings received from Heaven and Earth, in order to govern [literally, 'to form'] their people.” He argues further:

> The fundamental criterion of 'Chinese-ness', anciently and throughout history, has been cultural. The Chinese have had a particular way of life, a particular complex of usages, sometimes characterized as *li*. Groups that conformed to this way of life were, generally speaking, considered Chinese. Those that turned away from it were considered to cease to be Chinese. (Creel, 1970, p. 197)

But Creel also states that *li* meant different things at different times to different people. For much part of the Western Zhou dynasty, *li* was part of the aristocratic creed and was not practiced by commoners. As time progressed the use of the term came to include “the course of proper conduct for all men, of whatever station...”, perhaps because “…the decorum observed in religious ritual became the standard for conduct in other spheres” (1970, p. 336). It would appear that Confucius was both preceded and followed by a blurring of religious, moral, and sociopolitical beliefs.

Ames & Rosemont (1998), choosing to present the graph in English as “observing ritual propriety”, emphasize its deep, layered significance in Confucian thought as a
representation of those “...meaning invested roles, relationships, and institutions which facilitate communication, and which foster a sense of community” (p. 51). They reason further that, “Full participation in a ritually constituted community requires the personalization of prevailing customs, institutions, and values. What makes ritual profoundly different from law or rule is this process of making the tradition one's own” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 51). They conclude with this reminder:

'Ritual' in English is almost always pejorative, suggesting as it often does compliance with hollow and hence meaningless social conventions. A careful reading of the Analects, however, uncovers a way of life carefully choreographed down to appropriate facial expressions and physical gestures, a world in which a life is a performance requiring enormous attention to detail. Importantly, this li-constituted performance begins from the insight that personal refinement is only possible through discipline provided by formalized roles and behaviors. Form without creative personalization is coercive and dehumanizing law; creative personal expression without form is randomness at best, and license at worst. It is only with the appropriate combination of form and personalization that community can be self-regulating and refined (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 52).

Indeed, Confucius taught that “When natural substance prevails over ornamentation, you get the boorishness of the rustic. When ornamentation prevails over natural substance, you get the pedantry of the scribe. Only when ornament and substance are duly blended do you get the true gentleman” (6.16, Waley, 1938, p. 119). Note how there are three levels of learning represented here by three titles; the rustics, the scribes,
and the true gentleman and three types of practice; boorishness, pedantry, and proper blending. It is apparent within the Analects that Confucius himself sought to become (or remain) a true gentleman by retaining this kind of blending and balance of disposition that li both encouraged and embodied.

A three layered view of learning is represented elsewhere within the Analects. For example, Confucius believed that,

You can study with some and yet not necessarily walk the same path; you can walk the same path as some, and yet not necessarily take your stand with them; you can take your stand with them, and yet not necessarily weigh things up in the same way. (9.30, Ames & Rosemont, 1989, p. 133)

If we interpret this passage developmentally, we could argue that studying together precedes walking together, walking together precedes taking a stand together, taking a stand together precedes thinking or weighing things up together. Zhang's presentation of the Classical Chinese text coupled with the modern Mandarin translation support the notion of togetherness or association along each step of the learning journey (represented by yu and yiqi, respectively), but also ending in relational impediment (2011, p. 131). Chin's (2014, p. 145) translation of the same passage reads as follows:

The Master said, “A partner in learning may not be good enough as a partner if you are on a quest for moral meaning. A partner on a quest for moral meaning may not be good enough as a partner if you intend to use the rites to help you find a steady frame and an equitable position. A partner who, like you, intends to use
the rites to find a steady frame and an equitable position may not be good enough as a partner if you are in the act of exercising moral discretion.”

Rather than simply stating that moral discretion simply cannot be exercised with another person, Confucius implies that there are varying layers or degrees of learning relationships that support one in moral progression and development. Confucius seemed to feel some frustration in finding good mentors, both for himself and others. His goal or objective was to learn how to do the right thing and make the right choice all the time, an exercise of discretion which Soothill (1995, p. 52) describes as 'associating in judgment,' Huang (1997, p. 107) as applying expediency or standing firmly on ritual together, Waley (1989, p. 145) as joining in counsel, Slingerland (2003, p. 96) as joining together in the employment of discretion.

Within the shi class, the emergent sense of right and wrong coupled harmoniously with the more collective spirit of learning from others and a communal spirit of compassion. “Tsze-kung once asked, saying, 'What qualities must a man possess to entitle him to be called an officer? The Master said, 'He who in his conduct of himself maintains a sense of shame, and when sent to any quarter will not disgrace his prince's commission, deserves to be called an officer’” (13.20, Legge, 1893, p.271). Ames & Rosemont translate the character shi, which Legge interprets as officer, into the term “scholar-apprentice”, suggesting that the effective learner focus on establishing a harmonization of internal knowledge and external practice, not necessarily bringing wealth, power, or even honor upon his prince, but not bringing disgrace upon him either. It was believed that by paying heed to one's own sense of shame, or one's conscience, an
individual could blend together personal integrity with a path of virtue in the service and integrity of a given ruler and his empire.

**Introducing Ren in the Life of Confucius**

In a famous passage of the Analects, Confucius summarizes the meaning of the entire book of poetry (*shijing*) as “swerving not from the right path” (See Lau, 1979). The imagery of an arrow being shot, or a horse running head-on, may have been invoked intentionally so as to excite the moral imagination of a people frequently engrossed in military conflict and martial affairs. As in archery, so in thinking and living; Confucius valued hitting the mark, and if one attempt failed, he would simply try again, striving for greater depth or accuracy. Ren as a core virtue establishes Confucian thought and identity as deriving more from association, the fulfillment of duty, and sincerity than from inspiration, individuality and innovation. In this sense, becoming ren would not be in total contradistinction to the presumably lower, or more basic virtues of *xiao* and *li*, it just functioned on a higher level. At the same time, Confucius consistently put limits on the virtues and learning attainments of himself and others. He once quipped, “I have yet to meet the person who is fonder of excellence (*de*) than of physical beauty” (9.18, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 130). While not condemning the love of physical beauty or the desire to look good before others, Confucius made a point of the disparity between how relationships should be governed and how they were typically conceived.

Waley recounts in Analects 9.1 that Confucius “... seldom spoke of profit [*li*] or fate [*ming*] or goodness [*ren*],” reminding us that Confucius “...seldom spoke of matters from the point of view of what would pay best, but only from the point of view of what
was right. He did not discuss whether Heaven determines what was right. He did not
discuss whether Heaven determines all human actions (question debated by the school of
Mo Tzu in later days and evidently already raised in the time of Confucius). He refused
to define Goodness or accord the title Good to any of his contemporaries” (Waley, 1938,
p. 138). Zhang's (2011) modern Mandarin translation of the same passage seems to
 coincide with Waley's reading, suggesting that Confucius very rarely spoke of material
benefit [li], trusting in fate [ming], or in praise of the virtuous [ren]. Another way to read
this passage, based on a different grammatical interpretation, would be as follows;
“Confucius rarely spoke of li, ming, and ren (in relation to one another).” An appreciation
of the grammatical function of yu in this short passage, which appears between each of
the keywords just listed and generally functions as a connector (rather than as an element
of contrast) between key terms, communicates the idea of 'together with' rather than
'either/or'. This slight re-configuring of the passage establishes something perhaps more
cogent with other existing text, as we see no other evidence that Confucius saw a
connection between obtaining profit, the mandates of Heaven, or relational benevolence,
or at the least, if he did consider some connection between these, he didn't like to talk
directly about such a connection.

Based on other comments in the Analects, we may presume he had an overall lack
of concern over temporal gain (see 4.16). With ming and ren, however, we are given
reason to pause. Why wouldn't Confucius be concerned about sharing his beliefs on
these crucially important topics? At least part of the answer lies in Confucius' desire to
not deal with things he didn't fully understand.
The gentleman stands in awe of three things. He is in awe of Heaven's mandate, of great men, and of the words of sages. The petty man is unaware of Heaven's mandate; he belittles great men; and he regards the words of sages with mockery. (16.8, Chin, 2014, p. 275)

Perhaps his reticence was associated with those things over which he was awestruck? Perhaps he wanted to avoid the instigation of belittlement and mockery? While it is unlikely that he classed himself as not knowing anything about Heaven's mandate, or of belittling great men, it is possible that he awaited good questions on these topics, viewed them in isolation of one another, and/or believed that they would be best learned through observation and proximity.

On one occasion Tsze-kung said, “What do you mean by thus saying-- that no one knows you?” The Master replied, “I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men. My studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven;-- that knows me!” (14.35, Legge, 1893, p. 288)

On another occasion Confucius stated,

“I would prefer not speaking.” Tsze-kung said, “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?” The Master said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?” (17.19, Legge, 1893, p. 326)

By striving to pattern his own desired teaching and learning approach after the pattern established by Heaven, Confucius perceived a relational space he was not able to take full
advantage of (for whatever reason) but which appeared ripe for learning through observation, action and example more so than through meretricious verbal communication.

Ever ready to praise the proper example and reticence of others (see Analects 2.9, 13.1), Confucius also publicly approved of an individual's ability to speak accurately and quickly get to the heart of a matter. It is written that

Some parties in Lu were going to take down and rebuild the Long Treasury. Min Tsze-ch’ien said, “Suppose it were to be repaired after its old style;-- why must it be altered and made anew?” The Master said, “This man seldom speaks; when he does, he is sure to hit the point.” (11.13, Legge, 1893, p.241)

Of course, it didn't hurt Min that his approach included an appreciation for the right ways of antiquity.

Confucius claimed that being a friend with those who are upright was the most beneficial kind of friendship (16.4), and great joy could be found “...in commending the excellence of others, or in possessing many worthy friends...” (16.5, Slingerland, 2003, p. 194). Intriguingly, Confucius did not appear to limit these associations to those living or to those successful in their political careers, however. For example, Confucius said;

“Truly straightforward was the historiographer Yu. When good government prevailed in his State, he was like an arrow. When bad government prevailed, he was like an arrow. A superior man indeed is Chu Po-yu! When good government prevails in his state, he is to be found in office. When bad government prevails,
he can roll his principles up, and keep them in his breast.” (15.6, Legge, 1893, p.296)

This was not to say that Confucius was always prone to praise, however. Analects 11.18 is a good example of some of his remaining criticisms; “Zigao is simple-minded. Master Zeng is dull, Zizhang is prone to excess, and Zilu is wildly fierce” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 118).

One of the longest passages in the Analects reveals much more about how Confucius carried out his relational learning project and how he also might have failed to understand and appreciate those around him. Whether he was exercising wisdom or folly, it becomes evident that he longed to better understand those he taught as well as acknowledge the virtues and triumphs of his pupils even if he also sought to have a positive influence on the youth of his time. The story, presented here in the language of James Legge, goes like this;

Tsze-lu, Tsang Hsi, Zan Yu, and Kung-hsi Hwa were sitting by the Master. He said to them, “Though I am a day or so older than you, do not think of that. From day to day you are saying, ‘We are not known.’ If some ruler were to know you, what would you like to do? Tsze-lu hastily and lightly replied, “Suppose the case of a State of ten thousand chariots; let it be straitened between other large States; let it be suffering from invading armies; and to this let there be added a famine in corn and in all vegetables:-- if I were entrusted with the government of it, in three years' time I could make the people to be bold, and to recognise the rules of
righteous conduct.” The Master smiled at him.

Turning to Yen Yu, he said, “Ch’iu, what are your wishes?” Ch’iu replied, “Suppose a state of sixty or seventy li square, or one of fifty or sixty, and let me have the government of it;— in three years' time, I could make plenty to abound among the people. As to teaching them the principles of propriety, and music, I must wait for the rise of a superior man to do that.”

“What are your wishes, Ch’ih,” said the Master next to Kung-hsi Hwa. Ch’ih replied, “I do not say that my ability extends to these things, but I should wish to learn them. At the services of the ancestral temple, and at the audiences of the princes with the sovereign, I should like, dressed in the dark square-made robe and the black linen cap, to act as a small assistant.”

Last of all, the Master asked Tsang Hsi, “Tien, what are your wishes?” Tien, pausing as he was playing on his lute, while it was yet twanging, laid the instrument aside, and rose. “My wishes,” he said, “are different from the cherished purposes of these three gentlemen.” “What harm is there in that?” said the Master; “do you also, as well as they, speak out your wishes.” Tien then said, “In this, the last month of spring, with the dress of the season all complete, along with five or six young men who have assumed the cap, and six or seven boys, I would wash in the I, enjoy the breeze among the rain altars, and return home singing.” The Master heaved a sigh and said, “I give my approval to Tien.”

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16 Legge (1893, p. 249) explains in his footnotes that to wash in this context was “...not 'to bathe,' but is used with reference to a custom of washing the hands and clothes at some stream in the 3rd month, to put away evil influences.”
The three others having gone out, Tsang Hsi remained behind, and said, “What do you think of the words of these three friends?” The Master replied, “They simply told each one his wishes.”

Hsi pursued, “Master, why did you smile at Yu?” He was answered, “The management of a State demands the rules of propriety. His words were not humble; therefore I smiled at him.”

Hsi again said, “But was it not a State which Ch'iu proposed for himself?” The reply was, “Yes; did you ever see a territory of sixty or seventy li or one of fifty or sixty, which was not a State?”

Once more, Hsi inquired, “And was it not a State which Ch'ih proposed for himself?” The Master again replied, “Yes; who but princes have to do with ancestral temples, and with audiences but the sovereign? If Ch'ih were to be a small assistant in these services, who could be a great one?” (11.26, Legge, 1893, p. 246-249)

Hsi’s redeeming quality in this exchange appears to have been his overall focus on the small and simple relational joys and positive mentoring opportunities made possible through association with young men and boys preparing for lives of virtue and learning themselves. It appears that Hsi’s humility in seeking out a simple opportunity to associate positively with youth, but also his willingness to express this desire vocally in the midst of friends with seemingly more substantial contributions to make, wins the strong affirmation and steady approval of Confucius. Hsi’s comments may have struck a chord
with Confucius because he shared the same “...insight about the turbulent age and his desire to live in seclusion, further cultivate himself, and wait for the right time to emerge and take office” (Huang, 1997, p. 124). It's even possible that the whole passage was fabricated by Daoist rivals anxious to prove that Confucius had finally abandoned his ambitions (see Chin, 2014, p. 176). Whatever the case, the scene has an odd mixture of religious and recreational undertones, with Huang (1997), Legge (1893) and Waley (1985) describing the scene with language like 'perform', 'prayer', 'ceremony', and 'chant', while Slingerland assumes this place had become “...merely a pleasant destination for an excursion” (2003, p. 123-124).

It is further interesting to note how Confucius allowed the character of each person to emerge spontaneously, then pressed forward to teach a powerful lesson about himself and his own exclusivity by expressing his own contrasting emotions. The other three men and their lofty goals, while their intentions or expressed desires are not attacked or refuted directly by Confucius, are indeed set apart and denied a particular type of association with Confucius. Deeper learning and bonding then occurs between Hsi and Confucius, Confucius making clear that a learned person who is understanding focuses naturally and predominantly on the simple joys of virtuous association (and ritual practice) above recognition or influence in the empire.

Concluding Thoughts: On Learning and Knowing

In his description of Confucius as the greatest thinker of all time, Durant (2002, p. 11) hinges his claim on his definition of a great thinker as one whose secular reason has had great influence on the world (see also Fingarette, 1972). Durant goes on to describe
Confucius as a man whose thinking (on matters of society, morality, education and governance) rather than his religious actions or passions, has had the greatest influence on civilization.

By what Canon shall we include Confucius and omit Buddha and Christ? By this alone: that he was a moral philosopher rather than a preacher of religious faith; that his call to the noble life was based upon secular motives rather than upon supernatural considerations; that he far more resembles Socrates than Jesus. (Durant, 2002, p. 11-12)

While some scholars may rightly question this casting of Confucius as a purely rationalist thinker devoid of “...feeling and noble passion,” as lacking “...a mystic vision...” or “... an incorrigible faith...”, we can likewise see the wisdom in contrasting the characters of Christ and Confucius for another reason. While Jesus would come to establish a kingdom not of this world by knowing and doing His Father's will, Confucius's admittedly imperfect life and ideas would go on to harness the strength of earthly empires. It has been suggested that this strong sociopolitical influence is rooted in the humanistic focus of Confucianism:

The central teaching of Confucius was that nothing is more important to man than man. He himself refused to have anything to do with four kinds of thing: what was violent, what was disorderly, what was strange and what had to do with the supernatural. “One should revere the ghosts and gods,” he once said, “but still keep them distant.” His disciples say that he took part in sacrifices as if the gods
were present. Ritual and music were the best influences on a man's character. Ritual formed him and kept him in order, music united him to other men and brought him joy. (Clayre, 1985, p. 38)

While these notions of humanism and secular motivations for goodness are thrown into question in chapter four's exploration of the foundations of Confucian learning, as well as in my overall argument for a relational learning approach, let it suffice for now that Confucius did not see the world as we sometimes do now in contrast between religious and secular sources of knowledge (Fingarette, 1972). Knowledge was defined simply as knowing what one knew and recognizing what one did not know (see 2.17).

For this reason, Confucius was both a learned and a perpetually learning individual; a man who purposefully positioned himself between the levels of a superior man (junzi) and the petty commoner (xiaoren), but never so much so as to entirely disassociate himself from either one. He seems to have believed in the theoretical possibility of any person providing or receiving fruitful instruction, but also insisted in the importance and struggle of individual discernment. Confucius's childlike exuberance and commitment to learning may have proven just as redemptive as his sagely wisdom and insights would be.\textsuperscript{17} His courage melded with his reserve in a manner that has both inspired and confounded millions.\textsuperscript{18} In the constantly unfolding story of Confucius, it is myth, emotion, and spirituality (see Ching, 2003), just as much as it is historical.

\textsuperscript{17} Confucius said, “Am I knowledgeable? No. A bumpkin asked me a question, and my mind went blank. Still, I hammered at his problem from all sides, till I worked out something” (9.8, Leys, 2014, p. 24).

\textsuperscript{18} Confucius said, “Virtue is not solitary; it always has neighbors” (4.25, Leys, 2014, p. 12).
understanding, fact and reason, which can elucidate our view of the man and his message.

As we have considered passages from the Analects relevant to describing the ideal learner, we begin to see a substantial difference between who Confucius was and who he sought to become. It becomes clear that Confucius was disappointed yet oddly contented by the disparity between the ideal and the individual learner. Chin reminds us that Confucius “...stayed away from four things: he did not put forth theories or conjectures; he did not think that he must be right; he was not obdurate; he was not self-centered” (9.4, Chin, 2014, p. 131). Even if he did practice the profession of a teacher, counselor, and a mentor, he appears to have sought, just as much if not more so, to be a great observer, student and listener. Within the Chinese Confucian mindset of the *ru* (the weak), this positioning did not diminish Confucius's strengths or truly unique attainments, it in large part defined them:

The Confucian tradition actually began well before Confucius (the latinate form of Kong Fuzi, “Master Kong”), and is known in Chinese as *rujia*, or the “School of the Ru,” *ru* meaning “weak,” or “yielding.” *Ru* also referred to the learned aristocracy of the defeated Shang dynasty (ca. 1766 – 1050 BCE), who nevertheless continued to serve as specialists in *li* (ritual and protocol) – that is, in determining appropriate behavior and techniques of government. The willingness of the *ru* to serve their conquerors appears to have been motivated at least in part by their devotion to the principles of *li*. Over time, *ru* came to refer to one trained in the *li* who worked in the government, and was later used more loosely to refer to an educated person. The layers of meanings of this term – including devotion
to *li*, motivation by virtue, service to government, and dedication to education—have been key components of what, according to Confucian tradition, constitutes the ideal person. (Oldstone-Moore, 2005, p. 316-317)

While Confucius well represented the cultural value of a lifelong commitment to learning; all at once chosen, found, and required, this accomplishment was not without a cost. The basic premise of his relational learning project was that the mind and heart and actions of a given person would best find its way forward via careful and thoughtful association with the minds, hearts and actions of others. The irony is that his principled push for understanding and engagement was not often convincing enough or deeply enough reciprocated, even during his lifetime, leading Confucius to remark that if he was understood at all, it was by Heaven (*tian*) (see 14.35).

In the end, we see a Confucius who demanded perhaps too much of himself and of his pupils (see 7.3, 7.8). His was a path fraught with sociopolitical peril and moral monotony, darkened by Confucius' own frustrations and foreboding, yet strengthened by the unseen and the unknown. Even his very useful tools of modesty and humility posed substantial problems as strands of clarity, consistency and authority were thereby frayed or severed. Perhaps history itself required a distancing from the man in order to accept (and define) his message; that by sincerely honoring one's parents, fulfilling one's ritual obligations, one could ultimately unlock the mind and heart and become an integral part of a new learning foundation.
Conclusions: Confucius as an Example of Relational Learning

In chapter three we have explored Confucius as the central figure of the Analects. We saw how Confucius was built up within the text as the prime example of a good teacher, learner and gentleman-scholar. Because the so-called Confucian tradition actually began well before Confucius, it is important to remember Confucius was part of the rujia, or the “School of the Ru,” ru meaning “weak,” or “yielding.” This weakness, or yielding tendency, encouraged premises, practices and purposes of learning that were limited in scope, or in other words, admittedly imperfect, collaborative and messy. By including various texts, teachers, worthies, and examples (both positive and negative), we see a focus on the value of relational learning and discourse. By his almost constant reliance on ambiguity, context, distancing and dialogue, Confucius insists that his path is not one of perfection (having already become self-cultivated), but of perfectibility. The Way is broadened by people, not the people by the Way. In this light, the path of filiality, propriety and relational goodness/humaneness must not be viewed as the doctrines or property of one man alone, or the path intended for all to follow. We begin to see not only how Confucius carried out his learning project successfully but also how he (and we) in many ways fail to understand and appreciate others.
CHAPTER IV

THE FOUNDATIONS OF LEARNING

Asking about divinity, an interlocutor gets the response: “What is divine is the heart/mind (xin) [the single seat of the intellect and emotions].” “May I ask more about it?” “Divinity is to immerse oneself in Heaven and become Heaven; to immerse oneself in Earth and become Earth. Heaven and Earth are divine patterns of unfathomable greatness. Yet when the heart/mind immerses itself in them, it can nearly fathom them...”

Yang Xiong (quoted in Nylan, 2001, p. 13)
Introduction

This chapter focuses in on the notions of filial piety (xiao) and the conceptions of Heaven (or tian) fundamental to the exploration, and explanation, of the relational learning project of Confucius. By better understanding the more fundamental cultural principles and learning tensions of his own time, we become better prepared to appreciate the pros and cons of the relational learning practices and purposes Confucius both innovated and inherited. Because it deals with the family unit, Xiao serves as a perfect backdrop of the Confucian relational learning project; an ideal interpretive and historical lens whereby we may consider Confucian learning strengths and limitations. Likewise, by exploring Confucius's notions of tian we uncover the very roots of the reciprocal and relational foundations of Confucian learning, even if we also begin to unfold some of the more difficult and troubled states of learning Confucius experienced. As we immerse ourselves deeper in his own teachings and example we begin to better understand how the family, and family related virtues, were both fundamental to the Confucian relational learning experience, even as much as they were in a state of confusion, conflict or turmoil.

Defining Xiao

Within the Analects, the use of the term xiao (孝), a character commonly translated into English as 'filial piety,' generally connotes the respect children should maintain for their parents. While the complete meaning and purpose of xiao may be far from this simple, due to the fact that it's life and influence within the context of the millennial long Confucian tradition is broad, deep, and evolutionary, according to the
Classical Chinese Character Dictionary (*Gudai Hanyu Zidian*, 2005), the basic meaning conveyed by *xiao* (孝) derives from its composition: in the upper portion rests the symbolic representation of an 'older person' (found also in the top half of the character meaning 'old,' *lao* 老, with the lower portion depicting a 'child' (*zi*, 子), 'son,' or 'posterity,' presumably of the older person. Thus, the graph itself implies some kind of association or relationship between the older generation and its offspring.

Assuming that the English language translations utilized for this study are accurate in their depiction, we must interpret *xiao* as referring overwhelmingly to the moral imperatives of youth towards their parents. For example, “The Master said, 'Give your father and mother no other cause for anxiety than illness”’ (2.6, Lau, 1979, p. 64). The English rendition of the passage conveys an imperative given to the younger generation to live in such a manner such that one's father and mother will have little cause for anxiety. In Analects 11.5 we learn of Confucius' praise for one of his pupils: “How filial is Min Ziqian! No one would disagree with what his parents and brothers said about him” (Chin, 2014, p. 163). Chin (2014, p. 163) recounts the Han dynasty version of Min Ziqian's story as follows:

...the story of Min Ziqian involved the familiar narrative of a nasty stepmother who thought only of the welfare of his half brothers and showed no love for him. Yet, unlike the father in many other stories of the kind, his father was quick to notice the inequity and quick to act. But when the father tried to drive his wife out, Min Ziqian stopped him. He told his father “With our mother home, only one child is neglected. With her gone, all four children will suffer.” These words, as
the story goes, managed to move his stepmother and his half brothers so deeply that they changed their ways, and thereafter had only love and affection for him. Some scholars consider this an example of a son who disobeys the command of his father and yet fulfills a larger sense of filiality.

Also, in a passage recorded in Analects 19.18, also attributed to Confucius, we find the English language description of *xiao* as a political and social commitment to the continuation of a father's ways. All three referenced passages seem to imply that *xiao* is a moral and social principle to be applied by young people toward the older generation.

Why didn't *xiao* also convey the notion of concern and care that parents could and should grant their children? The relational virtue receives a considerable amount of emphasis within the text of the *Lunyu*, but instances of the parents’ duty towards their child are rare indeed. While the Classical and even some modern Mandarin renditions are somewhat ambiguous, none but a few interpret instances of *xiao* as applying to the older generation towards their offspring. This near universal interpretation serves as an intellectual keystone (and/or stumbling block) within the Confucian learning paradigm – without it the project falls apart, with it the project is in peril. The importance of children having a sense of devotion or duty towards one's parents is not the problem, but it is the lack of the inverse - or even a more balanced parent-child reciprocal relationship – that conveys one of the greatest relational learning flaws of the Confucian learning paradigm. Why? Because this flaw is placed in a foundational sense to establish most other relational learning objectives and outcomes, including and particularly the process of *li* and objective of *ren*. Whereas Confucianism desperately needed a more comprehensive
argument for the harmonious association of all family members, it developed with little more than a dismissive and distant attitude toward true relational equality.

**Stuck Between Heaven and Earth**

The foundations of relational learning in Classical Confucianism become more clear as we consider not only filial piety, but also include an investigation of Confucius' relationship with Heaven (*tian*) and ancestors. After the death and mourning period for parents was over, one was at least partially free to change their ways and determine one's own path. But why and how? Polite rituals, including paying respect towards one's ancestors, were of course crucial parts of the path forward, as was the goal of dwelling among virtuous humanity (see *Analects* 4.1). If desired, sought after and respected, Heaven might guide one on in this relational quest, but a relationship with Heaven did not come easily or by force. Within the pages of the *Analects* a considerable impulse and impetus for action and change was found in one's relation to Heaven (*tian*), as Confucius clearly exemplifies (see *Analects* 3.24, 6.28, 7.23, 9.5, 9.6, 9.12, 14.35), and as his counterparts and culture clearly dictate (see *Analects* 5.13, 11.9, 12.5, 20.1). In contrast, we find no references explicitly drawing a connection between his chosen path of learning and the respect and honor of his own parents. While a few minor passages, later commentaries and speculations partially fill in the gaps, Confucius' silence can leave the reader feeling a little unsettled. Without any specific examples of his own childhood or upbringing presented, the reader is left wondering how much these examples, if recorded or retained, might have done to strengthen our understanding of how relational learning
within the primordial Confucian family actually took place.19

Note for example the explication of *xiao* in Analects 2.6 as translated by Lau (1979, p. 64): “Give your father and mother no other cause for anxiety than illness,” or by Ames & Rosemont (1998, p. 77) who interpret the passage as: “Give your mother and father nothing to worry about beyond your physical well-being,” or as “Give your mother and father nothing to worry about beyond their own physical well-being” (1998, p. 232). Liu (2010, p. 5), Leys (2014, p. 5), Huang (1997, p. 53), Slingerland (2003, p. 10), and Chin (2014, p. 15) along with three Han dynasty scholars Chin references, all concur that the obligation is on the part of the child and not on the parent. While an examination of the original terms and grammatical structure reveals the slight possibility that this was not purely a principle to be applied by children towards their parents, and may have at least hinted at a reciprocal relational duty (See Legge, 1893, p. 148; Soothill, 1995, p. 6), it has most certainly not been broadly interpreted this way.20 If one could look at the passage with fresh eyes and interpret it strictly based on the Classical language present, we would see that the text itself leaves open not only the question of who the main actors should be, but also whether the illness to be prevented is the parents or the child's (see again Huang, 1997, p. 53; Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 77, 232). Either way, we see the underlying principle of relational learning emphasized. My argument for

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19 Confucius’ teachings certainly point to the importance of *xiao*, but specific examples from his own life could have been left out of the Analects due to their presumed unimportance, their widespread acceptance or normality, or for some other reason. If Confucius did maintain a healthy respect for his own mother and father as he taught others to do, these likely had already led him on his way to a complex relationship with the unseen power of Heaven and the focus on relational ritual and virtue adopted in his adulthood.

20 (Analects 2.6) 孟武伯問孝，子曰、父母唯其疾之憂。
relational learning is only strengthened by the fact that other key passages within the Analects portray Confucius's emphasis not to be on parents towards their children, but on the responsibility of children towards their parents. Based on the exchanges and information made available to us in the Analects and in historical commentaries, it is evident that Confucius was teaching an age demographic generally younger than himself, and which presumably needed to continue forward in consideration of their still living parents. It would not have likely been necessary or fruitful to teach men to take care of children they did not yet have. Even as a gradual case emerges that it is children that owe their parents, and the famous hierarchy of family obligations emerges, even if this was slightly off-track from the message Confucius intended, this development indicates the relational learning approach of his pupils, as well his own concern for relational context.

As early as the time of Mencius, a considerably patricentric precedent for the Confucians emerges, rooted either in an actual failure to establish close reciprocal family relationships as part of a more balanced approach to the basic social unit, or else due to a substantial 'gap in the literature' which could have portrayed Confucius and his antecedents in a more balanced and philosophically cogent familial light.21

While the context provided within the Analects, as well as the later sketching of the overall family scene in postmortem biographies, etc., can make Confucian learning seem more comprehensible, it also creates a considerable amount of uncertainty. Part of

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21 This possibility is supported both within the Analects and in other texts. For example, in Lau's (1970, 125) translation of Mencius, Book IV, Part A, v. 19 we are asked rhetorically by Mencius; 'What is the most important duty? One's duty towards one's parents. What is the most important thing to watch over? One's own character.... There are many duties one should discharge, but the fulfilment of one's duty towards one's parents is the most basic. There are many things one should watch over, but watching over one's character is the most basic.'
this derives from the lack of verifiable history surrounding Confucius and his personal family situation.

Given that family is such a central theme and crucial paradigm in Confucian philosophy, it is surprising how little is known of Confucius's own family circumstances. Nothing is known of his relationship with his wife apart from one hint in the Analects when he remarks that 'In one's household, it is the women and the small men that are difficult to deal with. If you let them get too close, they become insolent. If you keep them at a distance, they complain' (17, 25). A comment typical of patriarchal (if not misogynistic) thinking in any culture of any age! (Flanagan, 2011, p. 30–31)

Hence, it is Confucius's silence and dismissive attitude, not his overall philosophy, which boxes him into a patricentric orientation. While Zhang's (2011) modern Mandarin translation of Analects 17.25 suggests that the original passage may not convey the idea of 'difficult to deal with', but rather, the notion of 'difficult to nurture or take care of', this still does not resolve concerns as to why Confucius uses the Classical term 'wei,' translated into modern Mandarin phraseology as 'zhi you' and into English as 'only' to single out the difficulty of dealing with women, children or subordinates (p. 276-277). Considering the many questions Confucius is asked within the Analects, the fact that he is never asked the question why “being close can result in disrespect, distance can lead to negative feelings”, reflects something of the authoritarianism and stratification which probably persisted at the time. Could it be that Confucius's own experience in proximity to women, children or so-called subordinates brought about personal misgivings and
imperfections to bear? Did Confucius have a tendency to look outside himself in order to place blame or fault? In any event, what seems clear is that Confucius was concerned about the degree or level of closeness with both women and children and the subsequent difficulty such association entailed. Because of his excessive focus on hierarchy in relationships, we feel at times left with only half of an otherwise holistic and efficacious relational learning philosophy, and one that often appears overly controlled, planned and unfeeling. Beginning with such a problematic and limited/limiting concept as *xiao*, it becomes very difficult to understand how harmonious relational learning was supposed to proceed. For Confucius, *xiao* implied but did not require a heartfelt and sincere respect for family members across the ages. It eventually came to emphasize more the subordination of the son to the father, and hence the wife to the husband, the younger to the elder, the subject to the ruler, than it tended towards reciprocity.

**Towards Reverence and Sincerity**

Thankfully other passages containing uses of the term *xiao* aid us in our interpretive efforts. For example, in Analects 2:7, we find clear indication that Confucius was arguing for an internally motivated *xiao* for the external purposes of aiding the older generation: “Nowadays 'filial' means simply being able to provide one's parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?” (2:7, Slingerland, 2003, p. 10). In fact, all ten translations of this passage utilized in this study agree in that *xiao* demands respect and care for one’s parents. The additional contribution here is that we also understand the crucial importance of sincerity and respect. On this count, Waley seems to be able to best
drive the point home in his translation; “Filial sons nowadays are people who see to it that their parents get enough to eat. But even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no feeling of respect, wherein lies the difference?” (2.7, Waley, 1938, p. 15).

It is difficult to argue with Confucius on this point because he adds an element of emotion and sincerity; the child who truly cares for their parents will not only see to it that their parents are taken care of, but will feel respect towards them. Perhaps Confucius is most positively interpreted here as primarily concerned with establishing a linkage between good actions and right intentions (in the younger generation), but one is still left wondering why. Why was respect of the parents such a pivotal concern? Was the state of the family at such risk that this preventative measure was necessary? It is tenable, at least, to consider that he fully intended his sayings to guide young men, as he would have sought potent yet concise principles which could remain open to individual needs, and the various roles being fulfilled.

Other passages build on this notion of sincere respect. On one occasion, Zi Xia asked about how to have a strong family (xiao). Confucius said that it is one's countenance that is most difficult to master. The young taking on the burden of labor, and the old receiving the first servings of a meal, is this all that it requires to have a strong family?22 The rhetoricism in this question insists that it is not simply in the acts associated with the principle of filial piety that one realizes a strong family bond, but in the proper motivations and attitudes as well. Lau expresses the same idea in his rendition;

22 (Analects 2.8) 子夏問孝，子曰、色難、有事、弟子服其勞、有酒食、先生饌、曾是以為孝乎。
“What is difficult to manage is the expression on one's face. As for the young taking on the burden when there is work to be done or letting the old enjoy the wine and the food when these are available, that hardly deserves to be called filial.” (2.8, Lau, 1979, p. 64)

Concerning this passage, scholars agree that Confucius was speaking to children of aging parents. They also agree that Confucius is making clear distinctions between so-called filial actions, and the ideal underlying motivational or attitudinal aspects of such actions (such as would be reflected on one's countenance) and which connect this principle with the practice of li (ritual). This emotional and internal moral quality is further expanded upon in Analects 2.5, wherein Confucius associates the internal aspects of xiao with the clearly visible practices of ritual propriety, or li (禮).

When Meng Yi-zi asked about filial piety, the Master said: “Do not act contrary.”

When Fan Chi was driving, the Master said to him: “When Meng-sun asked me about filial piety, I replied: “Do not act contrary.” Fan Chi said; “What do you mean?” The Master said: “When your parents are alive, serve them in accordance with the rituals; when they die, bury them in accordance with the rituals; offer sacrifices to them in accordance with the rituals.”

Another way of interpreting this passage is as follows;

Meng I Tzu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, Never disobey! ... Fan Ch'ih said, In what sense did you mean it? The Master said, While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them
according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual. (Waley, 1938, p. 15)

While scholars on this passage may naturally disagree as to the exact interpretation of what filial piety required, they do not disagree as to the direction of filial obligation or to its relation to ritual propriety. Obeying and honoring of xiao principles connect to and encourage the practice of li.

By linking xiao (孝) to the principle of li (禮), Confucius effectively expanded the severity of his problem. Rather than inviting an opportunity based on mutual relational considerations, Confucius established 'the right choice' based on an individual seeking to know and assimilate the Way of Heaven while also teaching others to honor and seek the well-being of their parents. This balancing and moderation between two potentially competing spheres was incorporated within a specific social framework and set of processes gleaned from ancient ritual and contemporary cultural demands. The discipline of Xiao and practice of Li were moral imperatives to care properly for one's parents during mortality as well as chosen actions to carry out with implications that extended beyond the grave. We will see in chapter four how starting with a relational imbalance and spiritual insecurity, Confucius still determined to carry his beliefs a step further through the implementation of a specific set of practices. Finally, it is also evident that beyond the direct social and spiritual linkages the xiao-li principle created, Confucius further saw xiao functioning at the heart of public service and government (see Analects 8.21; 13.20; 19.18).
Examples and Teachings of Xiao in the Analects

This political thrust of xiao is reflected very well in Analects 2.21. Chin's translation presents it as follows:

Someone said to Confucius, “Why do you not take part in government?” The Master said, “The Book of Documents says, 'Filial, only be filial [xiao, 孝] and a friend to your older and younger brothers – this has an influence on the way of government. Why must I take on a position in order 'to take part in government.'”

(2.21, Chin, 2014, p. 21)

Ames & Rosemont's (2.21, 1998, p. 80-81) translation further concedes with Legge's (1893), Lau's (1970), and Waley's interpretations of this passage as an example of Confucius's reanimation of “…the ancient text, in order to prove that a virtuous private life makes a real contribution towards the public welfare” (Waley, 1938, p. 21). But why was the virtuous private life so one-sided? Why did Confucius say little to nothing concerning the obligation of parents towards their children? What kind of society existed wherein deference toward and care for parents would be the preeminent concern? If we can assume that this teaching was both beneficial and necessary during his own time period, perhaps the lesson to be learned here is that relational learning requires a cultural sensitivity and nuance toward the prevalent social order. Whereas the notion of being a filial son is established firmly within the overall Confucian focus on community and nation building, it can be argued this ultimately created an expansive problem rooted on the most basic social level. If the nature of family responsibilities in his time were being

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23 (Analects 2.21) 或謂孔子曰，子奚不為政。子曰，書云孝乎，惟孝友于兄弟，施於有政，是亦為政。奚其為為政。
contested, or if the traditional family power structures were being threatened, why couldn't Confucius present at least leave open the notion of an ideal family life for continued discussion and debate? What did Confucius stand to lose by renegotiating his position on parental authority?

In Analects 17.21 we learn of a conversation wherein Zai Wo questioned and challenged Confucius on the length and nature of mourning for one’s parents. Zai Wo concluded that he did not feel any reservation relishing good food, enjoying music, etc., even before the end of the conventional three year mourning period. After his interlocutor had left, Confucius commented how Zai Wo lacked ren (humaneness or benevolence). He further remarked that “A child does not leave his parent's arms until he is three. The three-year mourning is the practice observed...”, did he “...not also have three years of love and affection from his parents?” (Chin, 2014, p. 293). While this passage does something to move us toward a reciprocal interpretation of the virtue, reciprocity is constrained by several presumptions, even if Confucius does admit parental love and affection did exist. First of all, why should one be held to mourn for only three years - did parental love and affection cease after three years of a child's life? Based on his logic, the duration of loving parental care determined the duration of mourning for the parent’s death. ?? Was Confucius's concern rooted in Zai Wo as an individual and cogent with relational benevolence, or was he making a judgment based solely on his own views and experience? And most importantly to our purpose, what can we conclude about learning from this passage? First of all, it is likely that both individuals failed the test of learning from one another, at least to some extent. Confucius did not connect with Zai
Wo's point of view, and Zai Wo lacked the sensitivity to appreciate the underlying reasons why the mourning ritual was so important to Confucius. We do not see any type of real equality or mentoring going on here, unless it was towards those indirectly involved and who had little to gain from the exchange but intellectual stimulation.

It may very well be that Confucius found the honoring of his parents in the path he pursued. But xiao did not dictate every aspect of his teachings and belief, especially if the teachings recorded in the Analects reflect the path he followed after their demise. We should remember that Confucius never once mentions explicitly when he is teaching or following something his mother or father taught him. On the other hand, his teachings reflect a clear association with ancient note-worthies, respected contemporaries and Heaven:

Exemplary persons (junzi) hold three things in awe: the propensities of tian (tianming), persons in high station, and the words of the sages (shengren). Petty persons, knowing nothing of the propensities of tian, do not hold it in awe; they are unduly familiar with persons in high station, and ridicule the words of the sages (16.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 198).

Waley puts it this way;

There are three things that a gentleman fears: he fears the will of Heaven, he fears great men, he fears the words of the Divine Sages. The small man does not know the will of Heaven and so does not fear it. He treats great men with contempt, and scoffs at the words of the Divine Sages. (16.8, Waley, 1938, p. 206)
Note the use of the word fear instead of awe or reverence; here again, we have a difficult
time unpacking the precise meaning of tianming, a concept that has been variously
translated in English as fate, the will of heaven, heaven's mandate, etc. In James Legge's
translation of the same passage we read how “Confucius said, 'There are three things of
which the superior man stands in awe. He stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven.
He stands in awe of great men. He stands in awe of the words of sages” (16.8, Legge,
1893, p. 313). Ordinances conveys the notions of laws and actions carried out. By
considering heaven, great men, and sages as semantically related terms, we might further
consider Tian as a potentially anthropomorphic deity, possibly a Great Ancestor, even if
Tian was also clearly associated with the sky or the place where ancestors dwell (see
Slingerland, 2003; Creel, 1970). Because Confucius and others frequently insisted on his
own personal connection/relationship with Heaven, it is not surprising that he claims a
similar respect and connection to the words of the shengren, or sage persons, even though
he probably never met any personally.

**Tensions between Heaven and Earth**

These examples serve as prime evidence that Confucius believed in the extra-
familial transmission of knowledge and understanding, not only across generations
through the written and spoken word, but also possibly through the experimental
functions of ritual, conscience, communication and fate. There are some strong
indications that Confucius sought out universal laws and principles of morality, nature,
and/or providence as a transmitter of Heaven's works and will (see Feng, 1952). If filial
piety and an individual’s place and role in the family did not prove adequate as to the
building of a learning foundation, perhaps Heaven would.

His consideration of four different types of entities or beings and their respective levels or degrees of knowledge provides greater insight perhaps into why or how Confucius believed he could learn from virtually any person, in any setting as well as how well he had rooted himself in the knowledge and wisdom available to him. Again, while he does not once mention his parents in the context of his learning, he frequently mentions his relation to Heaven (tian). By not going into any specifics as to his own family learning opportunities, we are forced to study the foundations of relational learning based on Confucius's other chosen sources of relational learning: ancient texts, contemporaries, and his relationship to Heaven. Indeed, Confucius was in constant consideration of the words and wisdom of those that had gone before him, the will of heaven, the feelings of his own heart/mind, and the teachings/examples of his contemporaries – but never a mention of appreciation for his parents.

This creates a relational learning tension within the very foundation of Confucian learning, one that would both problematize and perpetuate the philosophy throughout the ages. So, if Confucius did have a belief in some sort of supreme being or entity, why did his beliefs not carry him out of this world? Palmer & Keller (1990) further explore the tension between matters of society and spirituality, suggesting that:

...Morality is a social cement in Confucianism. It is a human tool concerned with the here and now. The role of ethics is to stabilize society, to bring about good government, and to bring family members into harmonious relations with one
another. It is a benefit that is accomplished through outward formalities and restraints. It works from the outside in, not from the inside out. (Palmer & Keller, 1990, p. 81)

This indicates a prime difference between Confucian and Christian learning, perhaps; while Christ generally teaches and transforms from the inside out, Confucius works from the outside in. Lin (1938, p. 116-117) provides further insight on the impact of family bonds in establishing the moral sense by reminding us that for Confucius:

The moral sense is the characteristic attribute of man. To feel natural affection for those nearly related to us is the highest expression of the moral sense. The sense of justice (yi or propriety) is the recognition of what is right and proper. To honor those who are worthier than ourselves is the highest expression of the sense of justice. The relative degrees of natural affection we ought to feel for those who are nearly related to us and the relative grades of honor we ought to show to those worthier than ourselves: these give rise to the forms and distinctions in social life (li, or principles of social order). For unless social inequalities have a true and moral basis (or unless those being ruled feel their proper place with respect to their rulers), government of the people is an impossibility. (Lin, 1938, p. 116-117)

In this context, and within this narrative of propriety and hierarchy of learning, good government, the family, and relationships in general begin to converge and become intertwined.

That Confucius saw society as divided into classes was directly related to his view of
how knowledge could be obtained.

Confucius said, “Those who are born with the possession of knowledge are the highest class of men. Those who learn, and so, readily, get possession of knowledge, are the next. Those who are dull and stupid, and yet compass the learning, are another class next to these. As to those who are dull and stupid and yet do not learn;-- they are the lowest of the people.” (16.9, Legge, 1893, p. 313-314)

Liu's (2010) modern Mandarin translation suggests a slightly different interpretation describing the highest level of learning as that knowledge which is born of heaven. This belief in the transmission of zhi, whether it was written, spoken, perceived, or observed, may have inspired Confucius to greater fear or reverence, and seems to run parallel with his views of authority in other key relationships.

Despite potential flaws and failings in the learning foundation rooted in authoritarianism, we can understand that Confucius's experiences in relation to others, including Heaven, substantially influenced and molded his thinking about learning. For example, if for Confucius, Heaven doesn't speak but follows specific patterns, we can start to reconsider why Confucius said:

If you govern them with decrees and regulate them with punishments, the people will evade them but will have no sense of shame. If you govern them with virtue and regulate them with the rituals, they will have a sense of shame and flock to you. (2.3, Huang, 1997, p. 52)
Speaking out against the harsh focus on uniformity relied upon so heavily by some,
Confucius further explains reasons why this won't work:

If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by
punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment but have no sense of shame. If
they be led by virtue and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of
propriety, they will have the sense of shame and moreover will become good.

(2.3, Legge, 1893, p. 146)

This coincides with Confucius's belief that “The common people can be induced to travel
along the way, but they cannot be induced to realize (zhi) it” (8.9, Ames & Rosemont,
1998, p. 122). Learning requires something more than force. This separation or
distancing between master and subject, teacher and student has direct and powerful
correlations with how Confucius seemed to view his relationships.

It can be difficult at times to decipher whether Confucius was encouraging the
type of social performance that would be externally directed toward the selfless service of
one's parents, or if he hoped to engender a type of internal respect which would transform
itself into a 'personally directed' self-maintenance and thereby (subsequently) lessen the
worries and concerns of the older generation. Confucius may have been trying to speak
out against what he perceived to be self-serving or self-aggrandizing actions and
intentions being maintained by others in his day. Confucius clearly wanted to decrease
elderly family members’ reasons for worry. But why? While this may appear at first to be
philosophical quibbling, lack of historical evidence specific to Confucius' time period
makes this seemingly minor detail very important when one considers what *xiao* does to build the conceptual foundation as well as the basic direction of relational learning. Problems or gaps within the family learning ethic become important not only because they establish disequilibrium from the outset, but also because they throw Confucius's later arguments about sincerity and autonomy into question. Whether one should first and foremost assume a social orientation, or establish a psychological stance may not be as important as the nature of the relationships being pursued. Hence, we turn our attention to one of the few relationships that Confucius does explain.

**The Quintessence of *Tian* (天) in Classical Confucian Thought**

As one begins to explore the fabric of early Chinese thought, one thread that quickly emerges – twisted and faded by time, and yet intact – is what most scholars consider to be a strong moral and spiritual-religious strand associated with Heaven, or *Tian* (天). For thousands of years the Chinese have quietly pondered as to the meaning of Heaven, and this mental deliberation is reflected well in the literature as well as the overall psyche and scholarship of the Chinese people. *Tian* or Heaven was a being, power, or entity considered by Confucius to be foundational (and cognizant) not only of himself, but also of the culture/civilization Confucius sought to preserve (9.5, Waley, p. 107).

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24 The spiritual, social, moral, and political strands pulled together within the context of Confucian thought by the *Tian* concept are very difficult to arrange in a hierarchical order of importance; suffice it to say that *Tian* functions as a hub within the web of Chinese civilization's major historical and cultural strands.
Ames and Rosemont (1998) have argued that the Confucian tradition, unlike the Western Judeo-Christian tradition, was primarily focused not on the “essence of things” but rather on the essence of relationships; “not a concern to describe how things are in themselves, but how they stand in relation to something else at particular times” (p. 23). In matters of social ethics and spirituality, one can see how Confucius himself maintained a relational focus akin to what Ames and Rosemont (1998) describe. Indeed, we shall see how the Confucian approach towards learning was rooted in an approximate yet deeply salient relationship between Confucius and Tian. It is important to point out, however, that this relational learning focus was both limited and troubled because it was reflected by and rooted within the limited and troubled interpersonal relationship Confucius retained with Heaven (Tian) and his pupils, the only well documented relationships Confucius maintained. As a moralist, Confucius believed that an individual's character and filial piety were the most important aspects to a learner. As a pragmatist, Confucius persuaded that the virtue of one's choices rested in their proximity to the will of Heaven and that a good and virtuous person would transmit rather than innovate knowledge (7.1). For these reasons he encouraged others to “set your heart upon the Way, support yourself by its power, lean upon Goodness, seek distraction in the arts (music, archery and the like)” (7.6, Waley, 1934, p. 81).

**Scholars’ Views on Heaven**

Let us take a moment to consider the various interpretations of Heaven presented by scholars. Chin (2014, p. 361) summarizes references to Tian in the Analects as predominantly “...meaning the supreme moral force and that which decides human
destiny” with some minor referencing to heaven meaning 'nature' or 'the sky.' Edward Slingerland depicts Tian as a tribal god:

...who is deliberately conflated in Zhou writings with the Shang's god, the Lord on High. Early graphic forms of tian seem to picture a massive, striding, anthropomorphic figure, which is from the earliest times associated with the sky. Hence “Heaven” is a fairly good rendering of tian, as long as the reader keeps in mind that “Heaven” refers to an anthropomorphic figure – someone who can be communicated with, angered, or pleased – rather than a physical place. From Zhou times on, Heaven is viewed as the source of normativity in the universe, the all-powerful Being who, when pleased with proper ritual conduct, charges its representative on earth with the Mandate to rule, as well as the power of virtue that made realizing the Mandate possible. Heaven is also viewed as responsible for everything beyond the control of human beings (things relegated to 'fate') and – in Confucius' view – for supporting him in his efforts to preserve the set of cultural practices and principles collectively known as 'the Way.' (Slingerland, 2003, p. 239)

Creel suggests a more nuanced view of Heaven, arguing that tian was both the place where great ancestors resided as well as representative of a highly venerated and deceased ancestor (Creel, 1970, p. 502-505), but also reminding readers that even in Confucius' time, Tian was variously conceived of as an impersonal and naturalistic order (see Shijing). In other contexts Tian is implicitly compared with the Judeo-Christian God of Israel (see Legge, 1893, p. 95), as well as the intellectual and emotional center-piece of
an 'atheistic religion' (Ames & Rosemont, 1998). In the end, we find we can leave space for each one of these disparate views held by respected scholars, not only because there seems to be logical arguments supporting each one of them, and each one of these arguments linked to historical developments of their own, but also because the passages found in the Analects support such notions. The alternative route is to prove that which is scientifically non-verifiable; to convince others that our one interpretation of an ancient religious icon is the only interpretation that fits properly. If we accept that the ancient Chinese mind functioned not so differently from our own with regards to the diversity of religious beliefs; in other words if we learn to accept the range and diversity of belief concerning Tian, we find that rather than trying to prove or disprove which perspective is the most accurate, we can proceed to investigate the plausibility of each interpretation, or a variety of interpretations, based on the language and context provided in the Analects, exploring more fruitfully how Tian functioned within the religious and intellectual learning order of Confucius.

The Chinese conception of Tian (天), commonly translated as Heaven, remained at the core of religious and political ideology throughout the length of China's dynastic history, and played a particularly important role at various stages and in various periods throughout China's past. One such period is the beginning of the Zhou dynasty (1027-221 BC), the time period in which Confucius lived, a period of political revolt and revolution founded on widespread beliefs concerning Tian and the associated functioning of the principle of Tianming (天命) (see Schwartz, 1985, p.39). Tianming is generally described as the will or mandate of Heaven, as generally reflected by the will of the
majority of the people. The beginning of the Zhou dynasty was directly influenced by the understanding that if the leading class or ruler (in this case the Shang) lost the mandate of Heaven due to a leader's neglect of the people and/or abuse of their powers, a new Son of Heaven would be chosen and rise up to take over the administration of the government on the basis of a 'new' Heavenly mandate. This appears to have been the prevailing notion in the case of the Zhou rulers obtaining political power over their Shang predecessors.25 The newly appointed *Tianzi* (天子), or Son of Heaven, was expected to restore good government by administering justice and equity as a morally upright leader and servant of the people.26 In this particular case, the sons of Heaven were to surface as the much to be acclaimed Wen and Wu, along with the Duke of Zhou, each of whom was praised later on by Confucius and his followers. Examples of the importance of *Tian* can be found not only throughout the sayings of Confucius, however, but throughout much of the Classical Chinese texts which flowered out of this dynasty; Confucian, Daoist, Mohist and otherwise. For example, within the 'Book of Poetry' (*Shijing*) we read:

*Heaven in producing mankind,*

*Gave them their various faculties and relations with their specific laws.*

*These are the invariable rules of nature for all to hold,*

*And all love this admirable virtue.* (Legge, 1985, p. 863)27

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25 Ode 235 from the Book of Odes claims that, “The descendants of Shang Exceed a hundred thousand in number, But because God so decreed, They submit to Chou. They submit to Chou Because the Mandate of Heaven is not immutable” (Quoted in Mencius Book IV, A7, Lau, 1979, p. 120).

26 “Confucius said, 'Against benevolence [ren, 仁] there can be no superiority in numbers. If the ruler of a state is drawn to benevolence, he will be matchless in the Empire.'” (Mencius, Book IV, A7, Lau, 1979, p. 121).

27 See also D.C. Lau's translation of the same passage: “Heaven produces the teeming masses, And where
This excerpt from the *Shijing*, which may even predate Confucius, clearly places emphasis on the importance of abiding by rules or laws. It is intriguing to note that these laws are also in some way associated with the human faculties and relations granted by Heaven, and are (either additionally or subsequently) highly esteemed by the people. Not only do passages like this encourage one to conclude that Confucius was indeed a transmitter of an ancient world-view, it is also readily apparent that the meaning and nature of *Tian* (at least as depicted within early writings) played a key role in influencing the social, political, religious and educational foundations whereon Chinese/Confucian civilization was to be built and perpetuated over the next two thousand years (see Analects 9.5; Analects 20.1).

The great teacher and philosopher seemed to maintain a complex relationship with Heaven that included, based on his own assessment, his never complaining against *Tian* (14.35), coming to know *Tian's* will (2.4), and being understood, or known by *Tian* (14.35, Lau, 1979, 129). Confucius also spoke of *Tian* in connection with matters such as the continuation or obliteration of societies (7.22; Analects 9.5), the death of individuals (11.8), as well as the attainment of affluence and honor (Shun, 1997, p. 18). Confucius further claimed that he came “to know the Decrees of Heaven,” and believed *Tian* gave him the “mission to clarify the Doctrine and to practice the Way” (Hattori, 1936, p. 105-106). These beliefs in a Heavenly mandate did not appear limited to Confucius either; it is recorded within the Analects that at least one other man spontaneously declared that

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there is a thing there is a norm, and because the people hold on to their constant nature, They would be drawn to superior virtue. Confucius commented, “The author of this poem must have had knowledge of the Way.”
Tian was going to utilize Confucius to sound as a warning bell for the people (see Analects 3.24).

The link between Confucius and religious influence has been found in many ways more proximal and integrated within the antiquated Chinese mind than it is within Western theomorphic religious cultures. For example, Confucian expert Benjamin Schwartz observes the following:

As far as the organismic order of nature is concerned, it may be regarded as a perfect order in which an immanent Heaven realizes itself directly in all the diverse entities and patterns of nature. Even when we turn to the human sphere, it is clear from the Analects as a whole that there is the notion that the normative pattern of a good human order has been set forth, as it were, in the teachings of the 'sage-kings', which derive from Heaven itself and even at times have been realized in the course of past history. Its pattern is present both in the normative rituals and ceremonial rules that govern the network of roles that maintain the harmony of family and society and in the realized virtues of sages and noble persons. The notion that these patterns of the good human order are all, as it were, 'close at hand' may account for what may seem to be both the epistemological and moral optimism of Confucian ethics (Schwartz, 1985, p. 59).

Whether these guidelines and patterns came from modern or ancient exemplars, the heart (Chang, 1998, p. 112), or Heaven itself, it is important to note that Confucius himself reported that it was only after turning fifty years old and knowing “what Heaven intended
me to do,” that his ear could become “attuned to what [he] heard,” and finally, at the age of seventy he could “...follow what [his] heart desired without overstepping the line” (2.4, Chin, 2014, p. 13). This does not come across merely as the conscience of a man functioning in a secular or humanistic mindset; this is a conscience rooted in a deeply historical and religious sensibility also. If we allow for the possibility that the essential goodness of an action could be determined by an individual pondering their actions in their relation to Tian, we find considerable grounds for diversity of belief and practice in conjunction with a higher degree of ideological and behavioral contrasts being accepted within Confucius's thought. While Chang (1998) is of course correct in suggesting that the internal source of moral answers was a key part of the Confucian conception of human learning, he may be incorrect in limiting this to the exclusion of other integral components of this complex moral and relational understanding put forth by Confucius. Akin to what Chang argues, Confucius did differ from many of the prevalent religious and superstitious voices of his day, inviting those he interacted with to consider more carefully the level of sincerity they were exhibiting towards learning, life and ritual, even what appeared to be temporally dissolved and socially (de)constructed forms of worship and devotion.

What have often been labeled as the purely 'humanistic' views put forth by Confucius, including the ideas of his philosophical antecedents Mencius and Xunzi, continue to rely upon moral standards that were inextricably linked to the religio-spiritual principles in the Tiandao or Way of Heaven. Now, because the Confucians did arguably put forth that the will of the people and the rule of law were in some way co-equal with
the will of Heaven, and because these aspects of social and intellectual fruition were in some ways considered to be Heaven's correlates, should not in any way diminish the relative importance of heavenly directives or associations within the overall framework of a relationally oriented, pragmatic educational philosophy. Thus, even underlying some scholarly extrapolations of the Confucian push to “...make human relations the basis of norms...” (Chang, 1998), certain threads of Confucius's own words and actions suggest that Confucius additionally (or even in parallel fashion) sought to make “Heavenly” relations the basis of norms also, thereby retaining a fundamentally complex sociospiritual commitment to seeking out and following a moral and joyful life. That scholars have presumed his anthropocentricity is due just as much to Confucius's hesitancy in religious matters as it is in the down-to-earth realization that not everyone has appreciated and accepted such polemic reasons for learning and living in the world. Indeed, Confucius believed that all other success rested upon relational choices of the good and virtuous, not merely on social pressures or conventions for self-righteous action. It was only when the individual was firmly rooted in their relationship to Heaven and humanity that true social well-being, political balance, and good government could emerge. Hence, while this presumably human-centered element necessarily let “...every individual ascertain his own rules of behavior,” this was never intended to encourage unlimited moral license (Chang, 1998, p. 119).

**Learning from a More Expansive View of Heaven**

Other foundational aspects of his learning views derive from his self-described intellectual and moral antecedent relationships with the ancients Yao and Shun, Wen and
Wu, and other noted leaders and heroes of virtue from the golden days of China's prehistoric past. We will see how despite the dynamic tendencies of Confucius's relational views, neither Confucius nor his disciples viewed his teachings as a creation of 'new knowledge,' but merely as a transmission of an ancient faith; the way of Heaven; a socio-religious world-view which consisted of the wisdom, practices, and powers of both Heaven and man. It is noteworthy that there are no mentions of praise concerning his own parents.

As one studies the Analects for an understanding of relational learning, one of the first things that strikes home is how the text itself is structured. The entire text is simply a series of meaningful discussions that took place between the master-teacher and his interlocutors, and which were sometime after recorded. If Confucius considered himself to be the preserver or renovator of an ancient faith and endowed with a life mission that he (and others) considered not to be of his own making, one also quickly gets the idea that Confucius was respected by only a small cluster of individuals during his lifetime. There is also an immediate and striking aspect of humility portrayed to the reader of Confucius. Rather than putting himself across as 'the chosen one,' called by Heaven (Tian 天) for the betterment and preservation of his own civilization, the way Confucius communicates, and indeed, the way the teacher engages in pointed self-disclosure and listens to his students suggests a considerable degree of equanimity and reciprocity. This sense of relational reciprocity, while it was clearly rooted in the principles he taught, seems to have also been associated with a shared, and less explicit discourse concerning Tian - showing up over 100 times in the Book of Poetry (Shijing), throughout the Book of
History (Shujing), as well as featuring quite importantly within most of the writings of the other major philosophical schools of that time period (Torgerson, 2005). But even beyond this, more specific 'this-worldly' concepts related to Heaven, such as tianxia (天下), is translated as ‘all under heaven,’ or ‘the kingdom,’ seems to connote the people of the land also.

The way of Heaven (tiandao, 天道), human nature (xing, 性), and the decrees or ordinations of Heaven (tianming, 天命), were each integral considerations on the path of the Ruist and could potentially lead to one becoming a junzi (君子). “Confucius said, 'The gentleman [junzi] is fair-minded and generous; he is not partisan or divisive'” (2.14, Chin, 2014, p. 18). But none of this learning could be done in isolation. The junzi was to be a moral exemplar and/or political representative; a 'gentleman,' as Lau (1979, p. 14) and Chin (2014, p. 359) have interpreted, or a ‘complete person,' according to Legge (1893). The junzi both obtained and exhibited virtue within their interactions and relations to others. What is interesting to note is that Confucius clearly considered the path to becoming a junzi as being one for both poor and privileged alike; while it required proper honoring of the past and of the unknown as its foundation, it seemed one only needed to be willing to learn in order for Confucius to open up or restore a space for travelers on the Way. Confucius's implicit invitation is to explore one's own personal relationships with the unseen by learning properly from those that were seen; an intimate path of indirect learning he had found integral to his own journey towards greater relational peace, happiness, and harmony.
Examples of Spiritual Relationships in the Analects

Based on one interpretation of Analects 3.12, we learn that Confucius “sacrificed to the dead, as if they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, as if the spirits were present”... and that he remarked on one occasion that “I consider my not being present at the sacrifice, as if I did not sacrifice” (Legge, 1893). Slingerland (2003, p. 22) and Chin (2014, p. 33) concur that for Confucius there is a deep psychological component to this ritual. This interpretation entails a highly relational aspect of worship and sacrifice, with the presence and activity of both the physical and spiritual worlds coming together.

Other renditions of the same passage emphasize somewhat more the human side of the equation, such as in Ames & Rosemont's contrastive interpretation:

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.' (1998, p. 85, emphasis added)

Note how this insertion of the contrastive phrase 'but the Master said,' in conjunction with the phrase 'If I myself' nuances the entire meaning of the passage towards a humanistic interpretation. Another key passage by the same translators, however, seems to hone in on the religiously grounded acts of devotion for which each person would be held personally accountable.

Wang-sun Jia inquired of Confucius, quoting the saying: “It is better to pay homage to the spirit of the stove than to the spirits of the household shrine. What
does this mean?” The Master replied: “It is not so. A person who offends against 
*tian* （天） has nowhere else to pray.” (3.13, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 84)

It is implied that Confucius saw *tian* as the highest subject of devotion. The safeguarding of this relationship took precedence over any other.

**Learning to Respect the Unknown**

According to other passages in the Analects, there were some topics that Confucius did avoid, some because of their lack of educational or practical quality, others due to his general lack of interest (see Analects 3.10), but some also due to his own lack of knowledge; such as when “Someone asked the meaning of the great sacrifice. The Master said, 'I do not know. He who knew its meaning would find it as easy to govern the kingdom as to look on this;-- pointing to his palm’” (3.11, Legge, 1893, p. 158-159). Other passages build on this notion that Confucius was primarily interested in teaching fundamental principles and avoiding speculative details; for example, when

Lin Fang asked about the basis of the rites. The Master said, “A noble question indeed! With the rites, it is better to err on the side of frugality than on the side of extravagance; in mourning, it is better to err on the side of grief than on the side of formality.” (3.4; Lau, 1979, p. 67)

But, here again, Confucius was primarily concerned about the moral aspects of one's character, aspects which he believed to be prerequisite to any proper practice of religious rites and ceremonies (see Analects 3.3). Analects 9.1 reports one disciple's claim that

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28 (3.11) 或問禘之說，子曰，不知也，知其說者，之於天下也，其如示諸斯乎。指其掌。
“The occasions on which the Master talked about profit, Destiny, and benevolence were rare” (Lau, 1979, p. 96), or as Legge (9.1, 1893, p. 216) puts it, “The subjects of which the Master seldom spoke were - profitableness, and also the appointments of Heaven, and perfect virtue.” However, these claims coming from his disciples do not seem altogether in agreement with the overall composition of the Analects, nor are they supported by any statements from the great teacher himself. Perhaps Arthur Waley's explication is accurate in the sense that Confucius

...seldom spoke of matters from the point of view of what would pay best, but only from the point of view of what was right. He did not discuss whether Heaven determines all human actions (question debated by the school of Mo Tzu in later days and evidently already raised in the time of Confucius). He refused to define Goodness or accord the title Good to any of his contemporaries. (9.1, Waley, 1938, p. 105)

It seems that Confucius' beliefs resulted in considerable caution in his teaching approach; learners would have to earn their knowledge through a crucible similar to his own.

There were also some subjects of which Confucius did not talk about at all, presumably due to their spiritual or moral hazard. “The Master had nothing to say about strange happenings or things, the use of force, disorder, or the spirits” (7.21, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, 115). However, various translation discrepancies make the specific nature of the topics Confucius avoided difficult to discern. For example, while all agree that in Analects 2.16 Confucius taught that something does harm, the ambiguity of the
four-character phrase *gonghuyiduan* (攻乎異端) in Analects 2.16 translates variously as a harm deriving either from “‘The study of strange doctrines...’” (2.16, Legge, 1893), setting “to work upon a different strand,” (2.16, Waley, 1938, 19), attacking “...a task from the wrong end...” (2.16, Lau, 1979, p. 65), becoming “accomplished in some heterodox doctrine,” (2.16, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 79), or even pursuing “oddities” (2.16, Cleary, 1992, p. 49). Of course, the upsides of such a wide breadth of interpretations is that they provide a whole cluster of wise recommendations while still leaving the important task of determining the topics of avoidance to individual moral interpretations. All together, these scholars reflect (and perhaps expand) the robust nature of Confucian moral education by instilling the importance of moral discernment and caution.

Analects 7.22 elucidates the fact that Confucius viewed himself as being involved in a direct relationship with *Tian* (天), a relationship that gave him both the protection and purpose needed to persist.

The Master said, “Heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me. What can Huan T'ui do to me?” (According to tradition, this was said on the occasion when Huan T'ui, the Minister of War in Sung, attempted to kill him). (Lau, 1979, p. 89). However, Waley translates the same Chinese in this manner; “Heaven begat the power (*te*) that is in me. What have I to fear from such a one as Huan T'ui?” (Waley, 1938, p. 87). While Cleary and Legge stick to “virtue” (see Cleary, 1992, p. 71; Legge, 1893), Ames & Rosemont (1998, p. 116) render the same character translated by Lau as virtue
into modern English as “excellence.” The alternation here between the expressions virtue and power and excellence may at first glance seem confusing to native English speakers unfamiliar with Classical Chinese or Classical Chinese thought; however, once it is understood that during this time period all authentic political and spiritual power derived from following principles of moral and/or civic virtue, it will be easy to understand how the graph de (德) has been interpreted as both 'virtue' and 'power,' or their shared modern equivalent of 'excellence,' because these concepts are virtually synonymous.

**The Power of Faith & Skepticism**

We have seen how Confucius most certainly had a religious worldview or framework under girding the moral teachings he provided and the learning he pursued. As I mentioned above, in Analects 7.22, after hearing that a particular Minister of War in a neighboring state wanted to have Confucius killed, Confucius proclaimed; “Heaven is the author of the virtue that is in me. What can Huan T’ui do to me?” (Lau, 1979, p. 89). Yet again

When the Master was trapped in K’uang, he said, “When King Wen perished, did that mean that culture (wen) ceased to exist? If Heaven had really intended that such culture as his should disappear, a latter-day mortal would never have been able to link himself to it as I have done. And if Heaven does not intend to destroy such culture, what have I to fear from the people of K’uang?” (9.5; Waley, 1938, p. 107)

While the precise nature of his beliefs will continue to be debated, we can see that
Confucius' beliefs, in particular his beliefs about his personal relationship with Tian, had a tremendous influence on his teaching and learning approach.

On one occasion he taught that, “To offer sacrifice to the spirit of an ancestor not one's own is obsequious [chan 諂]. 'Faced with what is right, to leave it undone shows a lack of courage'” (1.15, Lau, 1979, p. 66).\(^{29}\) While translators disagree as to the precise interpretation of the graph chan (諂), translated above as 'obsequious' (ibid, p. 66), 'flattery' (Legge, 1893), 'presumption' (Waley, 1938, p. 23), and 'unctuous' (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 81), the various interpretations together present a fairly clear consensus as to the pejorative functioning of the word. It is additionally noteworthy to consider the possibility that Confucius was claiming that the performance of religious rituals for one’s ancestors, while generally best performed by direct descendants, may be performed with courage by others not directly related when it becomes a moral exigency. Unfortunately, illustrations or further details concerning these rituals are not to be found within the Analects, leaving this passage open to a number of possible meanings.

Confucius further saw the moral purposes of his own education as leading to an even deeper spiritually or religiously salient transformation of his being. He said of himself:

“All fifteen I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firm upon the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with docile ear. At

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\(^{29}\) (Analects 2.24) 子曰、非其鬼而祭之、諂也. 見義不為、無勇也。
seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.” (2.4; Waley, 1938, 13)

Confucius, it seemed, was leery of speculating about the mysterious religious and political details of the ancients, and generally didn't entertain speculative questions of which there were no ready or reliable answers. Instead, the teacher answered such questions with moral principles to be applied and practiced. For example, in Analects 3.21, when Confucius was told that Zai Wo had replied to Duke Ai's question about an altar by claiming that; “'The Hsia sovereign planted the pine tree about them; the men of the Yin planted the cypress; and the men of the Chau planted the chestnut tree, meaning thereby to cause the people to be in awe,'” he replied by stating “'Things that are done, it is needless to speak about; things that have had their course, it is needless to remonstrate about; things that are past, it is needless to blame’” (Legge, 1893, p. 162), or in Lau's rendition; “'One does not explain away what is already done, one does not argue against what is already accomplished, and one does not condemn what has already gone by’” (Lau, 1979, p. 70).

Other passages not attributed to Confucius but presumably predating and concerning the ancient sage-kings Shun and Yao do suggest that the concept of a Heavenly Mandate was very old; “Yao said, 'Oh – you Shun! The line of succession

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30 Cleary presents Analects 2.4 in this manner; “Confucius said: At the age of fifteen I set my heart on learning. At thirty I was established. At forty I was unwavering. At fifty I knew the order of Heaven. At sixty I listened receptively. At seventy I followed my heart's desire without going too far” (Cleary, 1992, p. 115).

31 Here again Cleary's translation of Confucius's words takes a slightly different nuance or tone; “Don't talk about what is already done; don't remonstrate about what is already over; don't criticize what has already happened” (3.21; Cleary, 1992, p. 129). Note the strength of Cleary's language, presented as an imperative 'don't,' in comparison to Lau's and Legge's softer uses of 'one does not,' and 'it is needless.'
conferred by Tian rests on your person. Grasp it sincerely and without deviation. If all within the four seas sink into dire straits, Tian's charge will be severed utterly” (20.1; Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 226). Lau presents the same passage in this way; “Yao said, Oh! Shun, The succession, ordained by Heaven, has fallen on thy person. Hold thou truly to the middle way. If the Empire should be reduced to dire straits The honours bestowed on thee by Heaven will be terminated forever” (20.1; Lau, 1979, 158). Note the connection between Tian and the ruler in question, and how action is required in order to maintain this bond.

In Analects 11.11, “Chi Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, 'While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?”’ (Legge, 1893). When he was further questioned “‘May I ask about death?’” Confucius remarked; “‘You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?”’ (11.12; Lau, 1979, p. 107). It seems here that Confucius was not saying that the dead cannot ever be served or that death could never be understood, but that one must first learn to understand the purposes of life and how to serve the living before they would be able to understand how to serve the dead. Action and learning were to remain rooted in the knowledge that had already been received and in a healthy respect for the unknown.

Apparently after the rejection of Confucius and/or his followers, “A border official at Yi asked for an interview with the Master, saying: 'I have always been accorded an interview with those distinguished persons who have made their way here.' Confucius' followers presented him. On taking his leave, he said: 'Why worry over the loss of office, my friends? All under tian have long since lost their way (dao 道), and tian is going to use
your Master as a wooden bell-clapper” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 88). Waley further reveals that by comparing Confucius to the wooden bell, or “a rattle, used to arouse the populace in times of night-danger” (Waley, 1938, p. 37), Confucius was being recognized by others as one who was commissioned by Heaven to do a great work, to sound a warning to all who would hear.

On one occasion when Confucius became severely ill and was thought to be near death, some of his followers decided to provide him with some of the same formal honors given those in office, even though Confucius did not then hold an office. When the great teacher began to recover he asked them; “In pretending that I had retainers when I had none, who would we be deceiving? Would we be deceiving Heaven?” (9.11, Lau, 1979, p. 98). He then let them know that he would much rather die in the arms of those near and dear to him than to receive worldly honors. On another occasion Confucius remarked,

“There is no one who understands me.” Tzu-kung said, “How is it that there is no one who understand you?” The Master said, “I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven.” (14.27, Lau, 1979, p. 129)

Confucius's beliefs in Tian seemed to have a direct connection to his moral life, and he invoked the name Tian on at least one occasion when vouching for the moral integrity of his actions. “The Master went to see Nanzi (who had a rather colorful and
unseemly reputation) and Zilu was not at all happy about it. The Master swore an oath to him, “For whatever I have done to offend, may tian (天) abandon me! May tian abandon me!” (6.28, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, pp. 109-110). Legge (6.26, 1893, p. 193) supports this basic interpretation; “Wherein I have done improperly, may Heaven reject me, may Heaven reject me!”, as does Huang (6.28, 1997, p. 85): “If I have done anything improper, may Heaven forsake me! May Heaven forsake me!”

Despite the central importance attributed to Heaven in shaping the motivations and meanings of Confucius' relational learning philosophy, Confucius also retained a clear focus on the moral and civil relational environment - including appropriate human thoughts, actions and desires in relation to other people. Over time it was these more public aspects which would remain central to the ongoing Confucian educational and political philosophy, especially during the Han Dynasty's promotion of Confucianism as a state-religion, and even through its eventual spiritual reinvigoration/reconceptualization during the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties.

These quotations, and I could include more, evince a transcendent and yet simultaneously practical, civic and moral basis for Confucian learning. It is evident that despite their association with supernatural or metaphysical conceptions, Confucius' teachings had a ‘this-life’ or ‘this-world' focus, emphasizing the proper cultivation of

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32 Cleary (1992) interprets the end of this passage as something like 'may Heaven reject it,' meaning reject my behavior, but Waley (1996) stands alone in his claim that Confucius responded with “Whatsoever I have done amiss, may Heaven avert it, may Heaven avert it!”

33 It is important to note that a historical and intellectual argument advocating a purely humanistic or atheistic bent of original Confucian thought has not stood well the test of time, nor has it been supported by the majority of related scholarship, primarily because of the historical and textual reality of Confucius' teachings within the Analects.
one’s moral nature according to consistent yet dynamic relational principles. By not dictating the details of a particular religious belief to his pupils, but focusing attention first on honoring their living parents and developing a healthy respect for Heaven and their venerable ancestors, Confucius paved the way for a transition into a more mature faith than that which persisted in his time. In fact, Confucius seemed certain that societal unity and harmony were contingent on both citizens and rulers retaining and cultivating good learning relationships, not only with one another, but also between Heaven and Earth. Through all this, Confucius builds a strong case for a politically salient focus on moral and spiritual relational learning. While this case for relational learning can (and has) been interpreted as a predominantly secular or sacred experience (depending on the content encountered, cultural context and/or vantage point one stems from), in many ways the very mention of these terms creates a false dichotomy. There is much evidence to suggest that Confucian relational learning was built on the foundation of both social and spiritual misgivings rather than knowledge; one pressed their way forward by honoring the past and maintaining a healthy respect for both the known and the unknown. Despite Confucius's tendency toward this-worldliness, then, it is important to not draw inaccurate distinctions between the so-called 'secular' and 'spiritual' within his ideology. For Confucius each of the steps or stages in life's relational learning journey were integral to ultimately achieve what he described as the way of Heaven (Tiandao), a spiritual and rationally rooted attainment culminated by one's being able to listen to their heart without going astray.
Remaining Questions

As I mentioned above, this connectedness between Confucian explanations of the decrees of Heaven and the nature and purposes of human relational learning had a direct and powerful influence on how the Chinese would discuss and relate to their rulers and to one another. Just as Heaven didn't speak directly or make itself directly known to the people, but manifested itself in the seasons and patterns of nature, so Confucius desired to teach by pattern and example (17.19). Questions as to how well he accomplished this will remain, as will questions concerning how well his various antecedents fully grasped his intended message. Why so little documentation as to the relational achievements in his life? Why no mention of or praise of his own parents? Why no accounts in the Analects of his own marriage relationship? If proper relationships were to be taught and established primarily by example and intellectual understanding was only the beginning of a challenging and refining relational process, why don't we have a greater focus on these key relationships in the Analects? Did Confucius inadvertently put the relationship of teacher and student at the core of his message?

Conclusions: Relational Learning Needs Room to Grow

The internal ingredients and end-game derivatives of Confucius's social message is perhaps best reflected in Analects 4.15, wherein;

The Master said, “Ts'an! There is one single thread binding my way together.”

Tseng Tzu assented. After the Master had gone out, the disciples asked, “What did he mean?” Tseng Tzu said, “The way of the Master consists in doing one's
best and in using oneself as a measure to gauge others. That is all.” (Lau, 1970, p. 74)

At first glance this passage might be construed as self-initiated and self-oriented learning (self-cultivation). We must note, however, how Confucius does not clarify the one thread, but how this is left to others to resolve. Confucius himself, like Heaven, in this case remains silent. It is perhaps implied by his calm insistence that “‘I will not be afflicted at men's not knowing me; I will be afflicted that I do not know men’” (1.16, Legge, 1893, p. 145) that Confucius patterned his own words on the Way of Heaven. By not fully explaining his beliefs Confucius gives space to both skeptics and believers. He allows one to seek the path of their own choosing. Even if he does inspire some anxiety that we have not learned enough, he can encourage us to reverence that which we know in part, and interest in that which we do not yet fully understand. Happiness, order and harmony were to be established by both retaining and cultivating one’s relationships, not in severing them, yet women, children and/or inferiors were kept distant. Rooted in his own confusing albeit sincere relationship with Tian, and in congruence with his verbal support of filial piety, we see the foundation of all his other learning relationships taking shape.

34 (See Analects 4.15) 子曰、參乎、吾道一以貫之。曾子曰、唯。子出、門人問曰、何謂也。曾子曰、夫子之道、忠恕而已矣。Chin (2014, p. 51) writes that “Zhong and shu, in the view of most traditional scholars, represent an accurate summary of Confucius' teaching – a position that the Analects could easily support. Thus Zeng Can was probably right in this regard, but whether his idea of zhong and shu concurs with that of Confucius is another question. Zeng Can's teachings gravitates toward self-cultivation, while Confucius' covers more ground and is inseparable from government and politics. Thus the Qing scholar Jiao Xun was right to associate Confucius' idea of zhong and shu to the latter's perception of the sage ruler Shun. He writes, 'What is zhong and shu? To fulfill oneself and others.'"
All told, Confucius introduced a complicated path of relational maintenance which could be easily lost. Because Confucius's encouragement towards the higher relational practices and purposes of learning extended well beyond mere transmission of parental tradition, we can see his message as a way towards a more gradual blending of social and spiritual mores; the gradational development of fortitude, the removal of doubts, and the eventual coming to know the decrees of Heaven (Tian), each step involving considerable social interaction, experimentation, failure and engagement with others.

While Confucius may have hoped his teachings would eventually lead others to be able to follow the Way of Heaven (Tiandao) by simply listening to one’s heart, he was perhaps not so naive as to believe they could attain such peace and relational virtue quicker or more easily than he had. His beliefs and experiences reminded him that he could not presume to know precisely how, if, or when, this would work for others. While his assertions about the honoring of parents and ancestors could point one in the right direction, so also could his insistence that matters of faith and spirituality should not trump the contemporaneous rules of propriety and human decency. Ironically for a relational moralist, nowhere does Confucius suggest that the distancing effect of human practices or behaviors takes us away from the desired goal. On the contrary, Confucius views the disparity of human practices, the 'natural' stratification of society, the
distancing of otherwise close relationships as pivotal habits and behaviors which would
function as a vehicle toward becoming either a junzi or a xiaoren. 35

As one understood the proper way to act in relation to one's parents, the individual
would become aligned with the cultivation of healthy spiritual and temporal associations,
even if this meant the creation or maintenance of proper distances. Remember,
Confucius felt if he was understood at all it was only by Heaven (see 14.35). As one
understood the will of their ruler and submitted to all that was proper they could be
preserved but there was also a sense that respect of the unknown demanded patience,
observation and study (see 2.18). As one contemplated the Way of Heaven, and followed
it adequately, they could carry on peacefully even in the midst of chaos – and a
continuum of chaos is what the Chinese received – no other nation in the world can boast
such a long and tumultuous history. However we interpret the ancient teacher and
learner, we can surmise that Confucius had been through enough relational struggles and
seen enough conflict and strife in his lifetime to offer his pupils considerable pause for
thought. His own path of learning had laid the foundation for a more humble and
practically oriented relationship with the known and the unknown.

My next chapter explores the practices of learning Confucius exemplified and
espoused in more depth by investigating the practices of polite ritual (li). It will be
shown how within the ritualization of learning Confucius continued to promote a healthy
and productive interaction with the unknown and uncontrolled aspects of the Confucian
relational learning environment, while also building on the foundation of filial piety and

35 The aversion to human action overall is a theme encountered much more within Daoism.
personal faith. While we have not yet seen a full reconciliation of self-cultivation with relational learning as reflected in the transcendence of knowledge within Confucian uncertainty or humility, exploring how Confucius learned and encouraged learning will support a more authentic appreciation of the knowledge he obtained and the ultimate learning goals he encouraged.
When one is present in a ritual activity, s/he is in a reflective dialogue in the space structured by 'self', with 'others'... this dialogue is an ongoing interpretation of what one is experiencing in a family or a community, it becomes part of the socialization which transforms a person without linguistic articulation. In the Confucian tradition, pedagogic meanings are situated in the ritual activities.

(Wu & Hu, 2010, 110)
In this chapter I describe how *li* (as composed of ritualizing relational tasks and practices) was integral to the establishment of Confucian learning virtues and relationships. I argue for a conception of ritual within the original Confucian learning practice as a form of sincere, polite seeking, rather than a formulaic religious ritual transmitted directly from Heaven. As Confucius sought to grow in knowledge and to not do to others what he did not want done to himself, he was cautious not to overstep the bounds of respect in his interactions with others, including spiritual beings. Here, I follow the trajectory of recent scholarship on the nature of *li* as it functioned in Ancient China, which Michael Puett has described as follows:

...the opening assumption was not that human ritual was normatively based upon divine or natural guidelines but rather the opposite: that the world was one of discontinuity, fragmented and fractured, without an inherent foundation or basis to guide ethical and political behavior. (2006, p. 24)

This means that in contrast to views of ancient Chinese ritual being somehow transcendental in origin, the Confucians viewed at least portions of *li* as a cultivation of association towards mutual improvement. This does not mean that Confucian ritual had no religious or spiritual ties, however, but rather that these connections could be more strongly made as one mastered the conventions and patterns of proper human interaction even as they maintained a proper level of respect towards spiritual beings.
There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Western distinctions between religious and secular simply did not exist in the ancient Chinese psyche. *Li* was both socially and spiritually salient; a blending of intention, action and speech in ethically appropriate ways with spiritual significance and educative impact. In essence, what was needed was an ongoing ritualization or formalization of relational learning practices within a society where conflict and error were rampant and that experienced considerable relational discontinuity. The intriguing aspect of this time period from a historical and philosophical standpoint is that it was a time of such uncertainty and experimentation. Continuing on the administrative and military legacy of Kings Wen and Wu, and particularly basking in the scholarly patronage of the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong), the Confucians worked to blend a diversity of people, principles, purposes and practices into one congruent, albeit complicated, whole. It is in this light (and from within this context) that we choose to explore how the Confucian push towards ritual learning functioned as a key part, and the key process, of the Confucian relational learning path.

The relational practices of Confucian learning are interpreted as a corollary to or extension of *li*, often translated as ritual propriety, but more broadly defined as an incomplete package of socio-spiritual traditions, conventions, and/or customs with spirito-political and moro-religious significance. For the ancient Confucian, relational harmony and human interaction was meaningful because it was developed by and for people in relational contexts and from within relational choices and desires. Enlightened and guided by sincerity, these choices and desires could flow outward and upwards through right actions, words, desires and habits. *Li*'s functioning on an explicitly
interpersonal level altogether constitutes the primary distinction between the Confucian and the Daoist projects toward harmonization. Confucian ritual, properly conceived, was believed to be best practiced between one living on a higher plane and one living on a lower, with both sides benefiting; in other words, *li* was a bilateral process of improvement, a practice of reciprocal harmonization between people. Hence the predominant focus on the failures and weaknesses of himself and his contemporaries in contrast to the virtues of the ancient worthies and sage-kings. Confucius firmly believed that even the greatest and most virtuous could not be so without the impact and influence of even greater others. Much of Confucius's work was in understanding and emulating those who had gone before him. He once expressed his remorse; “Extreme indeed is my decline. It is a long time since I dreamed that I saw the Duke of Chou” (7.5, 8.11, quoted in Creel, 1970, p. 77). Ever a moderate, Confucius placed himself (and the authentic teacher-learner) firmly within the nexus of existing cultural ideals and relationships.\(^\text{36}\)

In the spirit of moderation and balance, Confucius believed in a very basic or fundamental practice of relational ritual, one that could guide the way forward and upward for all, but that would also remain very personal and versatile. There was a unique and challenging communicative aspect to learning ritualization that could not be wisely ignored or denied by the Confucians; one needed to act in proper accordance to and with others. This stands somewhat in contrast to themes found in Classical Daoism, wherein natural harmony and spontaneity tended to surround and encapsulate the

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\(^{36}\) The Daoists saw nature and the universe itself as the best companion and teacher, and were ultimately ‘anti-governists.’ The Mohists emphasized the strong top-down rule of Government. Yang encouraged profligacy and totalitarianism by preaching a doctrine of self-aggrandizement.
individual in isolation; attainment of the Way was contingent on an abandonment of both desire and effort (wuwei), a path of 'unlearning' destined to support the individual on his/her return to the Way as the ineffable origin of all things (see Smith, 1970, pp. 198, 210). As we have seen in chapter three, the Confucians rooted their learning path in the common and fundamental relationship between a child and their parents, as well as within the more lofty yet complicated relationship between Heaven and Earth. The learning project for the Confucians, then, was predominantly to set things (and people) in their proper place and order. In short, the goal was to reestablish a lost order in the world, involving the proper ordering of people, rituals, ideas and relationships. In this light, relational learning habits, patterns, behaviors, and practices evoked from within, across and from without the microcosm of individual learners choices, of necessity, invoked wisdom from social, moral, spiritual, religious, intellectual, emotional, psychological, and/or political domains to transform (presumably) the individual into a better being. Because learning was at once uncertain, chosen, synergistic, and passed on to an individual in time and in context with others, being exposed to and choosing the right learning goals and relationships in the ritual path constituted the most crucial learning practice of the Confucians (See 1.8 commentary, Slingerland, 2003, p. 4).

A wonderfully symbolic example of how Confucius conceptualized this practice of ritual learning springs up in his reference to the sport of shooting arrows. Confucius

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37 I should note that my sporadic tendency to contrast classical Daoism and Confucianism is based on my goal to tease out the particularities of Confucian learning – not to downplay the substantial cooperation and overlap which can be observed between them. Of course any contrasts between these two dominant philosophical 'schools' of classical Chinese thought can be more or less assimilated based on the specific point being made, the historical context, as well as the individual thinkers being explored – any philosophical exaggeration or misreading is unintentional.
believed in the value of a ritual game of archery as instructive towards the positive and cordial associations which could and should exist between rivals; political, military or otherwise. By properly and sincerely “...letting go one's intention and purpose,” not in the sense of absolution, but in the sense of putting intention and purpose into proper play, one could hit the target successfully as a result of “...a composed mind and an upright posture” (Chin, 2014, p. 35). By honestly and sincerely engaging with a rival in this respectful manner, arrows flying like words, not at each other, but to fill the air and hit their respective marks, an individual learned to appreciate and understand their counterpart even while successfully putting their own point across. Archery was not to be a contest of brute strength or chance, but a contest of accuracy, honor, focus and civility determined by individual skill, preparation and choices. One could approximate the Way only by individually choosing to practice, study and live in proper relation to their target and with others, even their presumed enemies.

In this context, Confucian learning is understood as an ongoing, relational, morally complex, demanding and even speculative practice beneficial (sometimes only) because it can support the harmonization of otherwise disparate individuals, ideals and factions. To the Confucians, the practice of li generally entailed an enrichment and refinement of motivations, careful learning through congeniality, functionality and observation, and was often deemed an effective social and moral vehicle for individuals, families, communities and nations even if it was not always capable of pushing Chinese society forward on a steady course of mutual improvement.

In our time, conceptions of learning have predominantly congealed around the
acquisition of individual skills and knowledge. In the Classical Confucian mindset, learning was the act or process of acquiring relational virtues, or virtues practiced in relation to other people. Hence, in the Confucian tradition, learning acts were meant to be self-actualized yet socially oriented, politically salient but also implicitly spiritual, beautifully yet imperfectly realized on both internal and external levels. In practicing and promoting *li* as a key mode of relational learning, Confucius sought to check, balance and equalize the insights gained through contemporaneous experience and observation with the views and values of others. Despite the personal mechanisms of learning, then, the Confucians learned (and taught) by interacting with others (including those who did not possess the Way and those who had already passed on). This tendency to try to work in all directions; backward and outward *looking*, yet forward and inward *working*, has often planted Confucian learning firmly in the middle ground between progressive and conservative cultural tendencies, mitigating the impact of the escapist tendencies espoused by Daoists, challenging the egocentricity of Yangism, thwarting the imposed universality of Mohism, and questioning the strict behaviorism of the legalists; Confucian learning was and will remain a cultural moderator. This cast Confucius and his followers not as pure restorationists or transmitters of the Way, but more as moderators, cultural renovators, collaborators and innovators working towards the Way.

**What is *Li*: Defining Confucian Learning Ritual**

According to an Ancient Chinese Dictionary (*Gudai Hanyu Zidian*, 2005, p. 464), the original Chinese character for 禮(*li*) was written without the left-side component, the right side depicting simply a piece of jade over an elevated dish or plate and presumably
representing some kind of service or sacrifice. The notion of something of value being offered on a dish, or perhaps even a dish composed of jade, defines on a very fundamental level the notion of Confucian learning ritual. There is simplicity and concreteness coupled with deep metaphorical import. The inclusion of the spirit radical on the left side of the graph, which came perhaps even later than Confucius, added or clarified the notion that li involved some kind of service or sacrifice to the gods, ancestors or spirits. Modern usages of the graph are found in the compound words for gift (liwu), rightness (liyi), politeness (limao), and wedding ceremony (hunli) (Oxford Beginner's Chinese Dictionary, 2006; Cihai: Biaozhun Guoyu Zhuyin Cidian, 1987).

While the Analects deals predominantly with some of the most basic and foundational of learning rituals, such as asking and answering questions, it is also helpful to consider the master learner's statements about ritual in general. It is important to note that in his own time, ritual was not always well established or rooted in principles Confucius could agree with. He was also not one to blindly accept something just because it was what others did. In fact, he not only did not understand the basis of some sacrifices, there were at least a few he openly did not want to participate in (see 3.10, 3.11). Still other rituals, however, Confucius insisted he did not want to part with (see 3.19). For example, with regards to burial ritual, he appears to have been a general proponent of sincerity, moderation, modesty and frugality (see 9.12 and 11.11), even if in mourning the death of his friend Yan Hui, Confucius went on to express what was considered by his close associates an excess or overflow of emotions (11.10). On the
other hand, contemplating the impending burial, perhaps the most somber of rituals, Confucius showed his capacity for stringency, sincerity as well as forbearance in his own relational learning: “After Yan Yuan [Yan Hui] died, the disciples wanted to give him a lavish burial. The Master said, 'That would not be appropriate.' The disciples gave him a lavish burial anyway” (Chin, 2014, p. 165). Here we see a healthy distancing between Confucius and his associates. Confucius's response to his companions decision depicts the relational tension involved in learning ritual; “Hui looked upon me as a father. But in this matter I could not treat him like a son. This was not my doing – it was on account of you, my young friends” (11.11, Chin, 2014, p. 165). While most scholars see Confucius's remark as a mournful or critical one towards those who provided the lavish burial, there is the possibility of another interpretation. We can understand that the choice to provide a lavish burial, while most probably not originally deemed as a positive decision by Confucius, was eventually met with a healthy respect and recognition of others responsibility and capacity to act on their own. Even if he was clear to point out “...it is not I that do this. It is these disciples” (11.11, Soothill, 1995, p. 61), nothing in the original language indicates whether this was directly in praise of their choice, or else to their condemnation. What is clear, and important for my argument, is that even in matters as important as ritual, he makes a distinction between himself and his fellow students of the Way and allows for space and agency to prevail while at the same time reaffirming his actions as being determined by the right thing in relation to someone else.

In the case of the details and financing of the burial, even if he did disagree, Confucius did not exert force, and this is the crucial point and requirement of *li*. This was the 'weak'
way of the *Ru* and the generally courteous and civil way he pursued his path of teaching and learning.

What surfaces from an extensive reading of the Analects is a somewhat passive and reluctant moral hero, one who is striving to do what is right relationally, but does not always understand what is right or best for others. It is his reverence for the other; this relational humility yet persistent focus which separates Confucian ritual learning from many other traditions and which epitomizes the way most Confucians have come to view an enlightened or exceptional student. Even with competing views and tendencies to exalt or vilify Confucius, the Confucian ritualization of learning expands learning discourse with some of the richest of meanings and relational intersections.

**Redefining Relational Learning: How *Li* Contributes to my Argument**

Let me revisit briefly the definition of relational learning I presented in chapter three, with association to the virtue of *xiào* and the concept of *tian*. Relational virtue in this context was the active cultivation of a healthy respect of the unknown; a mixture of chosen continuity with living parents and a complicated reverence for Heaven. After the death and mourning period for parents was over, one was free to change their ways and determine their own path. A dynamic impulse was also found in one's relation to *tian* – fearful veneration gradually giving way to a more intimate yet challenging relationship and understanding. *Li*, or polite ritual, was the main vehicle whereby one could better cope with and learn to relate to the unknown. It dictated how, if necessary, to disassociate with the false traditions of one's parents without being terribly disruptive to the overall health of the sociopolitical or moro-religious order. Likewise, ritual had a terrestrializing
and socializing influence; pulling one's attention back to the basics of polite social custom and the importance of society, even when the foundations and goals of relational learning remained in question.

With such a broad range of feeling and regard towards ritual in general, in conjunction with the variation and change which has taken place over time, we must be careful how we conceptualize this aspect of Confucian ideation and practice. It becomes both necessary and insightful to explore specific instances where Confucius interacted with various learning practices, patterns, purposes and people and to tease out of these interactions a composite view of the key ritual learning practices we can authentically label as Confucian.

I should begin by explaining that for many years the prevailing view of \( li \), or ritual, has been similar to that expressed by Lim:

Ritual, in the Confucian sense, refer \([sic]\) to the set of traditional and religious practices revealed to the Zhou Kings by Heaven that include sacrificial offerings to the spirits and daily behavioral conventions. It is through ritual that people acquire virtue, restraining their lesser inborn tendencies in order to find their purpose and place (\( li \) 立) in the world, for it is only when everyone is in their right place that harmony can be achieved in society. (2010, p. 14)

While Lim (2010) provides a key insight as to the function and purposes of ritual in the overall process of attaining virtue, his description is not entirely cogent with ritual as it may have functioned within early Confucian China. Michael Ing has made a compelling
argument based on his reading of the *Liji* concerning the substance of early Confucian
ritual, suggesting that for Confucius and the *Ru*

... coping with anxiety, rather than resolving it, is not only required by the
limitations of being human, but can also serve as a 'productive disorientation' – a
situation where one's experience in the world is dissonant with one's
understanding of how the world should work, but also an opportunity valued for
its creative and therapeutic power (Ing, 2012, p. 182)

Thus, even if originally revealed to the early Zhou leadership by Heaven, it is important
to remember that Confucian ritual may have functioned more as a coping and repair
strategy rather than an abridgment or total appeasement of personal and cultural tensions
(see Ing, 2012).

Indeed, one of the primary tasks Confucius took on was the difficult task of
restoration, in terms of ritual definitions, purposes and practices. Looking at the Analects
holistically, *li* is portrayed as having not fully retained its purity or its intent, and as at
least somewhat disparate and dysfunctional in its facilitation of key interpersonal
relations. Perhaps this is why Confucius sought so diligently to engage and restore the
ancient patterns of learning. Emphasizing formalized and purposeful learning through
polite ritual was a key practice in Confucius' efforts to renew the path of the ancient sage-
kings, a path which involved moral, temporal, spiritual and sociopolitical action.

**The Analects as a Ritual Learning Text**

Confucius seemed to understand early on that his path was only a part of the
answer needed; as long as there were people on the earth, there would always be a need for differences to cohabit the same space. A determination to influence and to engage could not override the weight or value of other human choices and/or contributions. History attests the tenacity of these 'weak' ideals. The Analects itself, which was of course not written by Confucius is an argument for the intrinsic worth of dialogue. It is the writers, readers, interpreters and disseminators of the Analects who ultimately breathe life or death into its pages and who have cultivated a Confucian society more or less dissolute. While this tradition does much to put weight on the current generation to rise up and do good, this detachment may also be why the Confucian tradition has often meandered in the muddy waters of class and gender inequalities, elitism, corruption, etc., without these developments being entirely unattributable to Confucius.

As Wang (2007) reports, the Analects itself is primarily a series of questions and answers just as intent on cultivating future learning as it is in reaping the rewards of historical lessons. More specifically, the Analects are filled with examples and sayings from Confucius about what, how or why one could (or should) learn, but all this from someone who had admittedly not yet arrived at the end of his own life or learning journey. Rather than an outcomes centered focus to ritualized learning, Confucius maintained a process-focused, or ritualizing, orientation. Indeed, the very first passage in the text insists that constant application (and reapplication) of what one learns is a source of great joy or pleasure (1.1) – it is in the very act of learning with, about and from others
that joy can be achieved.\footnote{The Master said, “Is it not a pleasure to learn [\textit{xue}] and, when it is timely, to practice what you have learned? Is it not a joy to have friends coming from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to become resentful if no one takes notice of your learning?” (Chin, 2014, p. 1).}

For many readers of Confucius, the strong social component or thrust to Confucian learning has placed it at the forefront of efforts to promote and protect human diversity. But Confucius was much more than a social philosopher. The conversational nature of the Analects (in contrast to the solitary and didactic voice of the \textit{Dao De Jing}) reflects Confucius’s view of life and learning as an interactive affair; a necessary progression through various layers and levels of understanding borne of various origins, desires, habits, as well as choices of actions, thoughts, and associations (see Analects 2.4). Confucius believed in an education where one could only advance by asking, answering and applying the right questions (see Analects 3.15) and where the decision to continue on or to stop the work of relational learning was the most pivotal decision one could make.

**Confucius on the Practice of Learning**

Wu and Hu (2010) write that:

Education in the Chinese ritual culture means nothing of receiving knowledge and information. The participants do not necessarily have a conscious knowledge of their developing social roles, rather they encounter through ritual practice a deeply personal, experiential and transformative form of hermeneutical experience. As a result, they embodied a situated action oriented understanding without knowing it consciously. In this sense, the bodily understanding through
ritual practice becomes as transformative power rather than propositional indoctrination (p. 108).

A central goal of Chinese Confucian learning is the transformation and transmission of man into a virtuous society – even if this was never truly completed – the transformative and constructive experience of becoming virtuous was purposeful and compelling if not altogether conscious or comforting.

One gets the impression early on that there are both predetermined as well as open/spontaneous aspects to the mode of ritual learning promoted by Confucius, and at least a part of these predilections were inherited from the ancients.

Related to the perceived need for sincerity in ritual practice are the hints in early Zhou texts of a religious ideal that will come to be known as 'wu-wei'. Meaning literally 'no-doing' or 'non-doing,' wu-wei might be best translated as 'effortless action,' because it refers not to what is or is not being done, but to the manner in which something is done. An action is wu-wei if it is spontaneous, unselfconscious, and perfectly efficacious. Wu-wei action represents a perfect harmony between one's inner dispositions and external movements, and is perceived by the subject to be 'effortless' and free of strain. (Slingerland, 2003, p. xix)

While this perfect harmonization of inner person and external (in)action may be more safely labeled as Daoist, li attempts through action to obtain a similar goal, or at least to cope with its non-realization. Li is a Confucian ideal, even if he doesn't view this
harmonization of disposition and action as easy or 'effortless.' His own tireless efforts appear as an amalgamated path to be reached through self-willed, learned proximity to the will of Heaven – which is generally in accordance with the temporal context, moral agency, and social objectives – refuting anything but one's most elevated cultural imaginings, spiritual affinity and personal values. It was understood and accepted by himself, and others, that despite its being “...a very long while since the Way prevailed in the world..” (3.24, Waley, 1938, p. 100), Heaven had a purpose for Confucius, one that would use him as a sounding instrument of warning in a time of danger and decay (see Waley, 1938, p. 100; Slingerland, 2003, p. 28).

**How Does One Learn Through Li?**

Confucius reportedly said, “The people may be made to follow a course of action, but they may not be made to understand it” (Swainson, 2000, p. 225). We learned in the previous chapter the importance of desire and sincere commitment to learning. Becoming *xiao* was, in essence, becoming committed to the relational learning process – the demands of being a filial son not out-weighing the demands of being a father, but the basic commitment to learning within each role being comparable. The entire journey had to begin with setting one's heart on learning because “Men's natures are alike; it is their habits that carry them far apart” (Swainson, 2000, p. 225). So while actions and habits would be crucial, actions, like desires, could not be forced. Even ritual had to be sincere if it was to bring forth the good fruits of understanding and virtue Confucius hoped for.

There is a stunning record of an exchange between *Zigong* and *Kong Fuzi* which further suggests a depth of ritualization in Confucian learning, rich in symbolism, yet also
more difficult to decode. It begins with the presentation of a quote or contemporary saying, in this case “Poor without being obsequious, wealthy without being arrogant” and the inquiry as to what Confucius thinks of the saying (1.15, Lau, 1979, p. 61). Confucius responds with something he suggests is better than the maxim: “Poor yet delighting in the Way, wealthy yet observant of the rites” (1.15, Lau, 1979, p. 61). Zigong proves his capacity to learn by corresponding Confucius's comment with a quotation and concept from the ancient and respected Book of Songs; a passage about the command and beautification of raw materials (“Like bone cut, like horn polished, like jade carved, like stone ground”) drawing an allusion to ritual that Confucius is not only pleased with, but seems also to learn something from (see Zhang, 2011, p. 9-10). According to James Legge, Zigong succeeded because while Confucius “told him one point... he knew its proper sequence” (1.15, Legge, 1893, p. 145). For Waley, however, Confucius is pleased because Zigong was ready to make connections between past, present, and future; “... for when I allude to sayings of the past, you see what bearing they have on what was to come after” (1.15, Waley, 1938, p. 87). Ames & Rosemont as well as Lau agree that the effective learner is ready to not only discuss the critical cultural developments and discourse of his time with a respectable teacher, but to take something new he has learned in the conversation and thereby come to establish through his analysis of ancient wisdom “...what is yet to come” (1.15, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 75).

Scholarship on Confucius provides a nuanced and complicated view of how one could learn through the practice of polite ritual, telling us not only that he believed “It is rare ... to miss the mark through holding on to the essentials” (4.23, Lau, 1979, p. 75), but
also that “It is rare indeed for someone to go wrong due to personal restraint” (4.23, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 94).\textsuperscript{39} If it is true that the “Cautious seldom err” (see Legge, 1893, p. 171), we must consider also that Confucius did not perceive caution and personal restraint as common elements of the culture(s) of his time. Learning as an avoidance of error rather than an assumption of accuracy was rooted in Confucius' belief that the Way of Heaven was scattered among the common, the coarse, and the refined. As an individual learned to take hold of all the good he could find, the goal to \textit{not do} unto others what he did not want them to do to him because increasingly important and challenging.

Ironically for Confucius, a 'weaker' yet arguably more tenable human relationship always exists between the means and ends of learning. As complicated means of learning could not be fully separated from complex ends, and complicated ends cannot be fully separated from complex means, so Confucius anticipated continuous layered learning and growth through right action, observation, introspection, and insight. By laying primary emphasis on the context, direction, root, and quality of right action within the context of learning relationships, just as much as he did on the learning content itself, Confucius established a sufficiently pliant yet steady learning framework that has impacted literally thousands of years of East Asian history and billions of lives.

While we may fail in our attempts to recast Confucius through a positivist or linear-rationalist lens, current trends in scholarship demand that we remember and

\textsuperscript{39} Waley translates this passage as follows: “Those who err on the side of strictness are few indeed” (Waley, 1938, p. 106).
recognize how, in the Confucian tradition, *how* and *what* one learns remains forever intertwined with *why* one learns. Confucius once said, “When you meet a worthy person, think how you could become his equal. When you meet an unworthy person, turn inward and examine your own conduct” (4.17, Chin, 2014, p. 53). The basic concept of ritual learning introduced in this passage is that a gentleman should be prepared to learn from anyone - both good and poor examples - suggesting not only the essential equality of humankind, but also the potential for each individual to influence for good or ill. This open access to learning by and for every person, allows for the human relational virtue (*ren*) to guide an individual forward in their path towards improvement.

The two main downsides of this approach is that it can encourage social absolution or fearful self-absorption, the former being a convenient way to avoid personal responsibility, and the latter being an inconvenient way to deny oneself the very essence of relational virtue. Whether one tries to work from the inside out, or from the outside in, Confucius sought through ritualization to bring the relational learning focus back to making proper choices in a given context. If one never lost focus or gave up on its acquisition, one could ultimately fulfill their obligations to improve and to balance relationships in order to establish a broader and deeper harmony. This was not intended to be a revolutionary learning approach which would threaten the status quo. Instead, Confucius nudged learning trends towards a gradual elevation of community and a quiet protection of character.

Considering this thoughtful and ponderous approach one must take in social learning contexts, it is more understandable why “The gentleman desires to be halting in
speech but quick in action” (4.24, Lau, 1979, p. 75). As the depth of learning increases, so also does the orientation towards wrong or right actions and wrong or right motivations increase, diminishing the weight of isolated words and notions in contrast to chosen and acquired expressions, patterns and principles. While most educational cultures arguably emphasize the importance of seeking the greater good, the Confucian learning approach is saturated with an avoidance of the wrong, what many have called the Silver Rule, a defensive effort to not do wrong which requires a learner to constantly stand in judgment of both self and others - judgment which must be based on limited perspective as well as limited facts about the actions and motives involved.

In the Confucian mindset, the ritualization of learning probably meant coming to better understand what was appropriate within the context of a relationship with Heaven. For example, in Analects 3.13 we read how

Wang-sun Chia said, “Better to be obsequious to the kitchen stove than to the south-west corner of the house”, when asked “What does that mean?” The Master said, “The saying has got it wrong. When you have offended against Heaven, there is nowhere you can turn to in your prayers.” (3.13, Lau, 1979, p. 69)

Whatever the meaning of the question, Confucius's answer rings out clear: “When you have offended Heaven, there is no spirit you can pray to” (3.13, Chin, 2014, p. 33). In another instance, when Confucius expressed his desire not to speak, Zigong questioned; “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?” (17.19, Legge). Confucius's reply seemed to point his pupils into deeper (albeit more troubled)
spiritual and intellectual waters. He replied; “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?” (17.19, Legge, 1893, p. 326). Note how Confucius alludes to Heaven as a powerful natural force in the world – but not as one that communicates directly to humankind. In a very small way, the act of ritual may have allowed Confucius to better understand the Way of Heaven, even if only in the opportunity to learn and understand the world more clearly by doing the right things in the right context for the right reasons and seeing how this influenced the world around him. In another passage Confucius comments on how his learning worked from the ground up: When Zigong asked why Confucius believed that no one understood him, Confucius replied it was because he did not blame Heaven or humanity. “I begin my learning on the ground and travel up to reach a higher knowledge. It is, I believe, only Heaven that understands me” (14.35, Chin, 2014, p. 239). By not blaming Heaven or humanity Confucius showed his reverence and respect for the unknown. Although there are other passages which strongly suggest Confucius saw Heaven as a powerful protective force with a direct concern and influence over him and the affairs of men (see 7.23, 9.5, 9.6), the overall content of passages referring to Heaven, such as that made in reference to Confucius's mourning over the loss of Yan Hui (11.9), still suggests elements of a troubled, cool or distant relationship.

By actively choosing the right relational activities, the blessing of Heaven in the form of knowledge, wisdom, virtue, protection and happiness (assuming these were forthcoming) could be acquired as part of one syncretic whole (see 6.28). If one did not come to understand and choose what was best in a specific context, they could not
understand and act appropriately in a multiplicity of contexts. Hence, learning and leadership were contingent on an individual's capacity to govern themselves properly in an ever-expanding sphere of interaction, influence and diminishing oversight. In the absence of a personal and knowable deity, ritualization of learning was the scaffolding that would lead the way upward and onward.

**Polite Ritual as the Core Practice of Learning**

In the tenth chapter (or book) of the Analects we find documented examples of the teacher's adherence to polite ritual. These are noteworthy not only because of their contrast with the verbal exchanges found in other portions of the text, but also due to their emphasis on the relational context and quality of interaction or disposition Confucius exhibited towards his ancestors or towards the ruling class. For example,

When speaking at court with counselors of the lower rank, he was relaxed and affable. When speaking with counselors of high rank, he was frank but respectful. And in the ruler's presence, though he was filled with reverence and awe, he was perfectly composed. (10.2, Chin, 2014, p. 146-147)

Each one of these dispositions shows Confucius's sensitivity to the comfort and rank of others.

When he was ill and the ruler paid him a visit, he lay with his head to the east, and with his court robe draped over him and his grand sash placed across his waist and hanging down [the side of the bed]. (10.19, Chin, 2014, p. 156)

and “When the ruler's order came to summon him to court, he would set off on foot,
without waiting for the carriage to be harnessed” (10.20, Chin, 2014, p. 156). Both of these examples show Confucius's absolute deference toward his ruler – important virtues for a Confucian – and Confucius is depicted as one whose respect and obedience was both complete and prompt.

But book ten also gives us some sense of the ancestral connections ritual served to strengthen. For example, “During periods of purification [before a sacrifice], he always wore a clean undergarment [mingyi] made of linen. During periods of purification, he always altered his diet, and he also changed his dwelling place” (10.7, Chin, 2014, p. 150). These observations of Confucius's behavior suggest that such rites were probably not universal, and that Confucius had established some particular habits which were noteworthy. Chin observes that these three measures of keeping personal and intimate clothing clean, not eating meat, and changing one's dwelling place so as to avoid private or intimate contact with the opposite gender, were all “meant to get a person ready to meet his ancestors with keen perception” (2014, p. 151). From other passages we see that Confucius's respect for his ancestors was constant and influential: “Even when the meal was just coarse grain and vegetable broth, he always set aside a portion as an offering, and he did so with solemnity and respect” (10.11, Chin, 2014, p. 153) and “When he entered the Temple of the Great Ancestor, he asked questions about everything” (10.21, Chin, 2014, p. 157). When Confucius heard that someone subsequently doubted his knowledge of the rites because of this choice to question he explained that; “The asking of questions is in itself the correct rite” (3.15, Lau, 1979, p. 69). While Confucius did not

40 See also Analects 10.18, 10.23 and 10.25 for other examples of how Confucius reverenced those who had gone on before him.
view questioning in a hollow manner, he does seem to have viewed the ancestral temple
space as a 'center of learning'; a place where no matter how familiar one was with the
associated customs, practices, and/or rituals, one still had the obligation to take a position
of humility, to learn afresh, or at least to review in one's mind those things which they
had already learned. The practice of learning was a deep and imbedded process of
becoming something better than before, and Confucius himself was to be praised most,
not for his intellectual, literary, or political attainments, but for his “inner qualities” (see
Creel, 1949; Waley, 1938, p. 191).

Confucius presumably learned about the governance of a foreign state not by
inquiring directly, as he had in the Grand Temple, and not even by the information
proffered to him voluntarily. According to Analects 1.10, Confucius acquired the needed
understanding of a foreign state simply by being “cordial, proper, deferential, frugal, and
unassuming” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 73), or according to Waley; “cordial, frank,
courteous, temperate, [and] deferential” (1938, p. 86). This mode of learning approached
a mode of being and becoming through ritualized or ritualizing relational action. With
such spiritual and observational power infused within it, it is little wonder why the
practice of *li* came to compose the core learning apparatus of Confucius and his fellow
pupils of the Way.

**Asking Questions**

Confucius and the Confucians clearly believed that one could learn (and teach) by
asking questions and by implementing that which was taught (2.5-2.9). Throughout the
Analects the reader is overwhelmed with evidence that good questions are a key to
Fan Ch'ih rambling with the Master under the trees about the rain altars, said, “I venture to ask how to exalt virtue, to correct cherished evil, and to discover delusions.” The Master said, “Truly a good question! If doing what is to be done be made the first business, and success a secondary consideration;-- is not this the way to exalt virtue? To assail one's own wickedness and not assail that of others;-- is not this the way to correct cherished evil? For a morning's anger to disregard one's own life, and involve that of his parents;-- is not this a case of delusion?” (12.21, Legge, 1893, p. 260)

Note how the reward for a good question is a prompt response with additional insights and reasoning to aid the learner on his way. The master teacher's type of questioning functions as a rhetorical device to drive home his arguments. Confucius reasons with and challenges his interlocutor to think more carefully. For example in 3.9, he asks, “How can we talk about the ritual of the Hsia?” (3.9, Waley, 1938, p. 96), observing immediately afterward that the lack “…of documents and of learned men…” had prevented them from obtaining “…adequate evidence” (Waley, 1938, p. 96).

41 Waley's translation of the same passage reads as follows: “May I venture to ask about 'piling up moral force', 'repairing shortcomings' and 'deciding when in two minds'?” Confucius replied; “An excellent question. 'The work first; the reward afterwards'; is not that piling up moral force? 'Attack the evil that is within yourself; do not attack the evil that is in others.'Is not this 'repairing shortcomings'? Because of a morning's blind rage to forget one's own safety and even endanger one's kith and kin' is that not a case of a divided mind?” (12.21, Waley, 1938, p. 169).

42 The importance of making good associations being a preeminent focus, on one occasion Confucius taught that one must simply look, observe and examine to understand the character of a man; 'Look at the means a man employs, observe the path he takes and examine where he feels at home. In what way is a man's true character hidden from view? In what way is a man's true character hidden from view?” (2.10, Lau, 1979, p. 64). In this passage questions function in quite a different way; inviting the learner...
The Analects is full of examples of learners who did not quite understand the right questions to ask. Rather than refusing to teach, Confucius would engage these kinds of questions in a constructive manner – seeking further clarification and providing corrective instruction as needed. For example, in Analects 12.20, Zizhang asks Confucius:

“What must the officer be, who may be said to be distinguished?” The Master said, “What is it you call being distinguished?” Tsze-chang replied, “It is to be heard of through the State, to be heard of throughout his clan.” The Master said, “That is notoriety, not distinction. Now the man of distinction is solid and straightforward, and loves righteousness. He examines people's words, and looks at their countenances. He is anxious to humble himself to others. Such a man will be distinguished in the country; he will be distinguished in his clan. As to the man of notoriety, he assumes the appearance of virtue, but his actions are opposed to it, and he rests in this character without any doubts about himself. Such a man will be heard of in the country; he will be heard of in the clan.” (12.20, Legge, 1898, p.259-260)

Note how the original question lead Zizhang to learning he probably had not anticipated. This pattern is repeated elsewhere in the text, but did not always develop in a positive sense. Sometimes Confucius' reply to a question provided slightly less than was asked to ponder on the strength of Confucius's rhetorical argument. Other examples of Confucius asking rhetorical questions are quite rampant in the text. For example, in 6.17, Confucius asks “Who can leave a room without using the door? How is it, then, that no one uses this way [when conducting his life]?” (Chin, 2014, p. 88), contrasting this simple practical reality with how rare it was for someone to follow the correct path.
for. For example, the Duke Ting asked whether there was a single sentence which could
make a country prosperous. Confucius replied,

“Such an effect cannot be expected from one sentence. There is a saying,
however, which people have-- 'To be a prince is difficult; to be a minister is not
easy.' "If a ruler knows this,-- the difficulty of being a prince,-- may there not be
expected from this one sentence the prosperity of his country?" The duke then
said, "Is there a single sentence which can ruin a country?" Confucius replied,
"Such an effect as that cannot be expected from one sentence. There is, however,
the saying which people have-- 'I have no pleasure in being a prince, but only in
that no one can offer any opposition to what I say!'" (13.15, Legge)

Here Confucius offers a not-so-gentle rebuke in reply to what he is asked – encouraging
the Duke to keep pushing himself to serve and to keep close to him those that will be
willing to disagree. One final example worth noting is found in Analects 13.4, simply
because it shows the failure of some learners to understand and relate to Confucius
properly.

Fan Ch'ih requested to be taught husbandry. The Master said, "I am not so good
for that as an old husbandman." He requested also to be taught gardening, and
was answered, "I am not so good for that as an old gardener." Fan Ch'ih having
gone out, the Master said, "A small man, indeed, is Fan Hsu! If a superior love
propriety, the people will not dare not to be reverent. If he love righteousness, the
people will not dare not to submit to his example. If he love good faith, the
people will not dare not to be sincere. Now, when these things obtain, the people from all quarters will come to him, bearing their children on their backs;-- what need has he of a knowledge of husbandry?” (13.4, Legge)

While the exchange is certainly instructive, the requests made are met with little more than politeness. One gets the notion that those closer to Confucius, those still in his presence after the exchange, benefit far more from it. This is relational learning to be sure, a polite protocol that did not prohibit discrete criticism.

**Learning as a Communal Rite**

Other parts of the Analects reveal that learning often requires a series of questions and answers, time to ponder, as well as further audience with others from whom one can learn (see Analects 12.20). Despite the obvious admiration placed on him, those who wrote the Analects clearly did not view Confucius as the sole instructor. He was a great teacher, but in the quest for the Way, all good teachers could be honorably sought out, Confucius's best pupils in particular.

A large part of this reliance on a host of teachers was rooted in the practice of ritual learning; within which there was an intense need for relational interpretation and application. Confucius was not a man of many words and favored the short, precise, and simple answers that would affect the positive results or action needed in an individual's life. For example, when Zilu asked him about governance, Confucius said simply, “Lead them; encourage them” (13.1, Waley, 1938, p. 171). When Zilu asked for more, Confucius added simply, “Untiringly” (13.1, Waley, 1938, p. 171).
The Confucians learned by asking questions and making further connections:

Tzu-hsia asked, “Her entrancing smile dimpling, Her beautiful eyes glancing, Patterns of colour upon plain silk. What is the meaning of these lines?” The Master said, “The colours are put in after the white.” “Does the practice of the rites likewise come afterwards?” The Master said, “It is you, Shang, who have thrown light on the text for me. Only with a man like you can one discuss the Odes.” (3.8, Lau, 1979, p. 68)

Chin (2014, p. 30) believes that Confucius was pleased with Zixia, pointing to another passage in the Analects where Confucius praises Zigong openly for not only seeing the importance or relevance of a passage to a new topic, but also for his use of another passage from the Book of Poetry to illuminate this connection to his older mentor. While not frequently seen in the Analects, Slingerland (2003, p. 20) states that this is “...the sort of conceptual leap Confucius required of his students.” Here we are reminded that a good learner listens carefully, and then makes connections to the Way from within the accepted discourse and learning context.

One of the reasons why questions were so valued is they reflected some of the fractured and fragmented foundations of ritual learning, and at least part of Confucius's reticence appears to have been tied to his own insecurities and imperfections. This is why a superior student, in his mind, focuses on learning and applying before teaching others; a good student “... acts before he speaks...” (2.13, Legge, 1893, p. 150); putting “...his words into action before allowing his words to follow his action” (2.13, Lau, p.
The demand that this places on the learner is considerable, not to mention the teacher, and this especially when relational learning practices typically required appropriate communicative exchanges in context as well as the proper interpretation of meaning in order to know how one should act. The Confucians alleviated this problem somewhat by discussing the meaning of ancient worthy texts and examples, asking good follow-up questions, and observing and listening to all the teachers around them.

Confucius counseled,

“If you listen broadly, set aside what you are unsure of, and speak cautiously on the rest, you will make few errors; if you look broadly, set aside what is perilous, and act cautiously on the rest, you will have few regrets. To speak with few errors and to act with few regrets is the substance of taking office.” (2.18, Ames & Rosemont, p. 80)

Notice how Confucius sought to hone and rein in the ambitions and desires of men into a path of coping and caution. He urged his students onto an achievement that would not leave behind their moral or social sensibilities.

**An Example of Proper Learning**

In conjunction with the communal aspects of learning and even more important than questions, there was a dialogic dynamic within Confucian learning. Note the spiritual and a socially egalitarian method of learning reflected in the following passage:

The Master said, “Zeng, my friend! My way (dao) is bound together with one continuous strand.” Master Zeng replied, “Indeed.” When the Master had left, the
disciples asked, “What was he referring to?” Master Zeng said, “The way of the Master is doing one's utmost (zhong) and putting oneself in the other's place (shu), nothing more.” (4.15, Ames & Rosemont, 1998).

How Zeng got to this answer is not clearly outlined, nor is his response ever corrected or clarified within the Analects. Zeng himself somehow remains the authority with regards to what Confucius meant. While Confucius does present some new information in this passage, the locus of control over learning is clearly placed outside of the teacher, and to some extent, even outside the immediate learner. By tacit acceptance of the text, the Confucians show that as a learner, Zeng exemplifies that he did his utmost to understand the way and to transmit that understanding to others. The ultimate acceptance of Zeng's answer is shown by the transmission of the accepted text. We can suppose that Zeng's answer somehow corresponded with the prior understanding of Confucius (as it is not contested) and we have no record of immediate disagreement with his interpretation.

**Sincerity as a Learning Practice**

Confucius believed in the need for spontaneous and consistent love for learning. He taught that one should “Make an earnest commitment to the love of learning (haoxue) and be steadfast to the death in service to the efficacious way (shandao)” (8.13, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 123). While Zhang interprets this passage as hopefulness, diligent

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43 James Legge described zhong as “...the 'centre heart' = I, the ego; and [shu] the 'as heart' = the I in sympathy with others” (1893, p. 170). Combining his expertise in philosophical analysis and the broader history of Confucian thought, David Nivison argues that while zhong is a practice accompanying the inferior social position, shu is a foundational practice of superiors, reassuring both parties involved in a given interaction of their shared humanity (1996, pp. 73-76). Nivison further explains the many actions of Li as corollary signals, invoking response “… in such a way that reassures both of us that you and I are ‘we’” (1996, p. 76).
study and the reception of truth (8.13, 2011, p. 111), Huang states simply that one must “Firmly believe in it, diligently learn it, and adhere to the good Way until death” (8.13, 1997, p. 98). “Liu Baonan puts the first two ideas together in this way: When a person knows beyond any doubt that what he wants most is to pursue the moral way, he will love learning for as long as his life permits” (Chin, 2014, p. 123).

The Analects suggests several qualities that Confucius felt an affinity with, not the least of which was being what he called straightforward, honest and truthful (see 8.16, Huang, 1997, p. 98). According to Ames & Rosemont, he said, “I cannot understand people who are impetuous yet lacking in discipline, who are slow yet lacking in caution, and who are simple yet lacking in honesty” (8.16, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 124). It was not necessarily that being simple, spirited and childlike were so bad (Chin, 2014, p. 125), but that the lack of virtue in conjunction with these characteristics made one very difficult for Confucius to understand.

There are also passages that suggest fear and/or hopelessness as a motivating force for learning; “Learn as if you will never catch up, as though you are afraid of losing whatever you have understood” (8.17, Chin, p. 125). “Study as though you cannot catch up to it and as though you fear you are going to lose it” (8.16, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 124). Perhaps one of the most substantial limitations of the Confucian path of ritual learning is the effort to keep one just outside of their comfort zone; it is anticipated that an abiding anxiety or concern will persist alongside an eagerness to learn anew those things necessary for progress. The negative aspect of this, in light of much of the cognitive research concerning the impact of affective filters, is that if a learner remains in
a state of constant anxiety, it becomes very difficult for them to determine complex, or highly nuanced, solutions to their problems - potentially shutting down the acquisition of knowledge. The benefit of this anxiety is that the Confucian rarely assumes they are done learning.

Perhaps this was why it was not knowledge that Confucius claimed to possess; only a desire to learn. He asked on one occasion, “Do I regard myself as a possessor of wisdom? Far from it. But if even a simple peasant comes in all sincerity and asks me a question, I am ready to thrash it out, with all its pros and cons, to the very end” (9.7, Waley, 1938, p. 140). Note how Confucius is virtually addicted to the collaborative problem-solving process. “Do I have knowledge? No. I have no knowledge. When a country fellow asked something of me, I felt empty-like. I queried him on both ends and exhausted the issue with him” (Huang, 1997, p. 102). Confucius is determined to “…attack the question from both ends”, not only until the question is understood, but until he or they have “…gotten to the bottom of it” (9.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 128).

Hence, we can see that the Confucian mode of ritual learning entails an odd combination of realistic humility and optimistic diligence. So, while a problem is at least initially viewed as complicated and difficult and beyond one's current capability to understand or resolve, it is also believed that faithful and diligent polite exertion rooted in sincerity will ultimately bring a positive conclusion.

“As in piling up earth to erect a mountain, if, only one basketful short of completion, I stop, I have stopped. As in filling a ditch to level the ground, if,
having dumped in only one basketful, I continue, I am progressing.” (9.19, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 130)

As a similarly repetitive and challenging lifestyle, learning ritual encourages one to have patience and perseverance in their learning, and even to accomplish something great, one basketful at a time.

What was most important to Confucius was not the prior accumulation of knowledge or wisdom, but the current direction and application of one's learning. Right action, rightly motivated in the present superseded the importance of right or wrong behavior of the past: a simultaneously fruitful and frustrating vantage point. Confucius stood by a stream and observed; “Could one but go on and on like this, never ceasing day or night!” (9.16, Waley, 1938, p. 142). This was not to say that Confucius did not value anxiety and effort, knowledge or wisdom, but that he emphasized the crux of wisdom as the constant need for progress.

Navigating the Difficult Path of Confucian Learning

A good part of the harmonization required by the Confucian Way of learning functioned to preserve and protect vital relationships. It was critically important that education function in a way that could connect past, present and future together and this was one of the primary roles of *li*. For example,

Confucius maintained that in order to have a harmonious society and effective government, the primary relationship of parent and child must be in order. The obligations of filial piety – the honor, respect, love, and service owed between
parent and child – is a theme which is paralleled in other relationships in society. Good government, for example, consists of a similar process of care and obligation between ruler and subject. (Oldstone-Moore, 2005, p. 324)

As it would come to be interpreted, Confucian learning was rooted in filial piety; if one learned how to relate properly with their parents, they planted the seed for later learning as how to relate to their government. If one could learn to be a good parent, they could learn to be a good governor. Learning to relate to older and younger siblings set the stage for understanding how to relate to other members of society, and so on. The greater number of relationships that were conducted properly, the greater the virtue and preparation of the individual and the better off society could become.

In order to obtain or to seek out this type of virtuous state, a Confucian ruler must learn first to be virtuous himself. With this virtue would come a capacity to be discerning of his people, to see the strengths and weaknesses of those who surrounded him, and confident in those he should promote due to their good leadership characteristics; “Raise up the true and place them over the crooked, and the allegiance of the people will be yours; raise up the crooked and place them over the true, and the people will not be yours” (2.19, Ames & Rosemont, p. 80). While the approach stopped short of becoming an art of political arithmetic, it did much to formulate and inspire the Chinese political mind and psyche on matters of leadership and education.

“If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril” (2.14, Lau, p.
The key to learning effectively, then, was to obtain the proper harmonization between internal and external understandings, or theoretical knowledge and implicit knowledge based on effective habits; a combination of careful living combined with a capacity to think from the outside. To think from the outside entailed what we might well consider a base level social-empathy/critical thinking capacity. Learning from others entailed an aptitude for social learning and observation; a willingness and eagerness to set aside one's own ideas or ideals at least long enough to understand and benefit from the experiences and perspectives of others. The encouragement to learn to think for oneself in conjunction with the encouragement to learn from others enabled the Confucians to establish a pattern of learning that was co-created, chosen, disseminated and (hopefully) in harmony with the Way of the ancients.

Confucius believed that one could learn best when their heart was set on learning, when they would actually desire to apply and do the right thing. This sincerely active component of learning (through li) would or could support one on to ultimately know the decrees of heaven, and then they could further train their hearts through obedience to Heaven's will (2.4). One of the keys of ritual learning, according to Confucius, is to be patient in the process, always recognizing that there are contextual, spontaneous and developmental aspects of learning that cannot be easily displaced or denied.

**Learning as Proper Avoidance**

It is important to note that Confucius did not find all subject matter useful or helpful. While learning consisted interaction with many and of a very broad range of events and ideas, he also clearly warned his pupils to stay away from specific issues. For
example, it is reported that he did not talk of *guai, li, luan, shen*, or in other words, “...extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, [or] spiritual beings” (7.20, Legge, 1893, p. 201). According to Waley's translation of the same passage, Confucius “...never talked of prodigies, feats of strength, disorders [of nature] or spirits” (Waley, 1938, p. 127). Ames & Rosemont depict *li*, or feats of strength, with the phrase “the use of force”, and *guai* as “strange happenings” (7.21, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 115).

In Analects 2.16, Confucius is reported to have said “*To become accomplished* in some heterodox doctrine will bring nothing but harm” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 79, emphasis added), or, based on Legge's translation; “The study of strange doctrines is injurious indeed” (p. 150, emphasis added). Is the danger in mere 'study' or in 'becoming accomplished' in these ideas? Lau suggests yet another possibility; that the problem lies in attacking “... a task from the wrong end...” (2.16, 1979, p. 65), or that it is the direction one takes to complete a learning task that is of greatest concern. This interpretation requires that the learner understand the proper direction of learning. Slingerland (2.16, 2003, p. 13) argues that what is to be avoided is “working from the wrong starting point...”, making one's beginnings the issue at hand. Zhang's (2011) modern Mandarin translation alternately cautions against what we might call 'polemic' thinking, a mode of thinking which establishes two theories as a contradictory and competing set, along the lines of a counterfeit yin and yang, but which does not yield the effects of equilibrium or harmony. Waley portrays the manner one should not learn in yet another way; “He who sets to work upon a different strand destroys the whole fabric” (p. 91), believing that the “metaphor is one of weaving or netting...” with the proper string, and bringing our minds
back to that concept of one united thread which Confucius presumably claimed ran through the canopy of his teachings. While translators differ, they seem to all agree there is something harmful that needs to be avoided. We can at least begin to understand that Confucius viewed certain types of knowledge or activity as particularly dangerous or harmful to the learner, even if we cannot agree on the particular details involved.

That we cannot find a tremendous amount of detail as to what was truly injurious comes as no great surprise because polite learning ritual demanded these not be discussed or explored. We can safely surmise that injurious dogmas or doctrines pertained not only to the individual, but also to the family, the society, the state and/or a combination of several of these. The range of scholarly and literary interpretations hints at the breadth (or pervasive nature) of those things which were to be avoided. Peril (rooted as it was in strange doctrines) was rooted within the home culture of Confucius to the extent that the Confucian Way attempted the tremendous task of assault, avoidance, preservation and restoration of knowledge all at the same time. Within this matrix, uncovering what is specifically harmful surrounding the tradition is a recursive cycle forcing us to turn from one passage to yet another. Likewise the attempt to apply the Analects to our own current understanding and efforts of avoidance (if our goal is application), results in perpetual confusion. Instead, Confucius seems to gently nudge us in the direction of discernment, just enough to understand how one might or should avoid corrupt and/or harmful associations or information. But this avoidance is only possible if that is what one truly desires. Confucius laid the foundation for a lofty challenge indeed; an interminable socio intellectual and moral puzzle, a path of learning designed to avoid the perils and pitfalls
of tradition, to curb reckless abandonment, and to cultivate a broader moral ethic for the future without dictating the details.

Those focused on contemporary application will wonder then; how does one avoid being harmed by strange or heterodox doctrines when it is not clear what these are, let alone how these will be avoided? Perhaps the answer lies in the notions of Confucian consistency, moderation and perseverance; that which one does and says persistently is of the utmost importance. “The moral Way as opposed to the opportunist Way of the World must be followed consistently. It is no use working at it in disconnected patches” (Waley, 1938, p. 91). To attempt to carry out goodness by periodically and actively choosing something bad is inconsistent with the Way. To teach something that one could not live up to was also inconsistent. This layered and developmental approach appears to coincide with Confucius's emphasis on the virtue of endurance; if a man stops just short of his goal, even after a lifetime of effort, he still stops short of his goal.

The Confucian learning practice required one to “... not impose on others what you yourself do not want” (15.24, Ames & Rosemont, p. 189). In this context his silence or reticence on some subjects becomes more understandable. In his own time, as in ours, the quest for polite learning requires breadth, depth and discernment. In many cases, Confucius seemed to piece together insights and aspects of the past, while also avoiding present perils. For example, when

Yan Hui asked about a viable state. The Master replied, “Introduce the calendar of the Xia dynasty, ride on the large yet plain chariot of the Yin, wear the
ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and as for music, play the shao and wu. Abolish the 'music' from the state of Zheng and keep glib talkers at a distance, for the Zheng music is lewd and glib talkers are dangerous.” (15.10, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 187)\(^4\)

In making his recommendations, Confucius did not promote or condone mindless copying of the past. He instead urged discretion, seeking to avoid harmful transmission of negative cultural components found within antiquity while also putting forward specific aspects of ritual. The ritualization of learning required proper discernment of both major and minor traditions.

The deliberate and novel nature of learning ritual rested in the notion that it was progressively more challenging as one's social responsibilities increased. In 3.19 we are reminded that it is the ruler or sovereign who must govern in exact accordance to the rites, and the officials or ministers who must be found only “...doing their best” (Chin, 2014, p. 36). This meant that rulers were held to a higher standard than their servants. It also meant that, for the average person, effort superseded concern over outcomes. Because there were an infinite number of situations and contexts that could be encountered, Confucius insisted on an openness in learning. He taught that “A gentleman, in his dealings with the world, is not predisposed to what he is for or against.

\(^4\) Chin (2014, p. 254) makes the following comments about this difficult passage: “Confucius thought that the Xia calendar suited the annual rhythm of farming communities, and so, he said, that was the one the government should use.” Shang carriages or chariots were simple and made of wood without adornment, “...and given the fact that Confucius preferred frugality in matters that had a ritual significance and were part of a public performance, this was what he favored.” Zhou caps were “elegant but not extravagant” and should thus be worn, and finally, “The music of Zheng is like the voice of a glib man: one is lustful and the other treacherous, and both have the power to lead one's judgment astray.”
He sides only with what is right” (4.10, Chin, 2014, p. 48). Hence, the function of li in Chinese society was to serve as a process of exploration, refinement and moral definition.

The habit-forming qualities of an invigorating challenge such as described by Yan Hui remain at the core of li:

Yan Hui, with a deep sigh, said, “The more I look up at it, the higher it soars; the more I penetrate into it, the harder it becomes. I am looking at it in front of me, and suddenly it is behind me. The Master is good at drawing me forward a step at a time; he broadens me with culture (wen) and disciplines my behavior through the observance of ritual propriety (li). Even if I wanted to quit, I could not. And when I have exhausted my abilities, it is as though something rises up right in front of me, and even though I want to follow it, there is no road to take.” (9.11, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 128-129)

Of course, the ritualized path of learning Confucius advocated is intriguing in large part because it was so ill-defined. As pupils reflect their own substantial lack of knowledge and understanding of the way of Heaven, one gets the notion that the Confucians excelled primarily at coping with the unknown; at pressing forward in learning even when the destination was unclear. Confucius further remarked concerning Yan Hui, “Such a pity! I only saw his progress; I never saw where he got to” (9.21, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 131).

The Qing dynasty scholar Liu Baonan observed that considerable discussion about the rites contained encoded political messages (See Chin, 2014, p. 38). Confucius
is seen here as tapping the power and complexity of social and ritual analogy to prevent all but the most keen and informed minds from correlating messages and information. This seems to coincide with broader interpretations about his political disfavor at times, as well as the personal risk and danger his views interposed.

In Analects 3.18, we learn that those who were faithful to the rites, especially in relation to their ruler, were often viewed as obsequious. Good habits and social protocol could elevate the individual and thereby enrich society, but ritual could also become easily ossified and closely associated with the power-mongering of a vitiated government. This political salience or characteristic of *li* required of the Confucians a quest for moral discipleship focused on a rather ambiguous relational-ascension (called *ren*) the core of which involved careful consideration of social, ideological, political and moral relationships within the community in order to avoid deleterious collusion.

**Examples of Failure in Learning: The Problems of Ritualization**

The challenges and complexities of the Confucian Way led to more than one frustration for his students. On one occasion Ran Qiu said: “It is not that I don't like your sayings, it's that I don't have the power to follow them. Confucius replied: Those who don't have the strength expire half-way along the path, you are setting your limits before you begin.” Confucius expected an individual to put his whole heart and soul into the learning process, to be fully committed, and then when they failed, to not hold back or to shy away from the path due to their fears or inadequacies. He further believed one should not limit their capacities prematurely, or give up too soon. Failure came when a love for trivial knowledge crowded out the capacity to “…take on large responsibilities”
At the same time, Confucius frequently acknowledged what he saw as limitations of learning in context. He viewed his own culture as one populated with a complex range of characters; the exceptional, the average and the below average (see 6.21, Lau, 1979, p. 84) and avowed that only “To men who have risen at all above the midling sort, one may talk of things higher yet. But to men who are at all below the middling sort it is useless to talk of things that are above them” (6.19, Waley, 1938, p. 119). Based on this perspective, the majority of learners were unlikely to come to understand the higher things. It seemed that social constraints and social knowledge played a key role in the transmission of the Way. Because studying the ritualized path of the junzi did not guarantee an understanding of the best (or higher) things, although it would give fruitful pause to many, it would also discourage many individuals from advancing and has probably contributed to substantial divisions and factions within Chinese society.45

The upshot of this recognition of the diverse character and composition of humanity was the capacity and tendency to find the middle path in company with others: “In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly” (7.22, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 116). Ames and Rosemont's translation of another passage suggest that for Confucius, “Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person....”

45 “The Master said, With those who follow a different Way it is useless to take counsel” (15.39, Waley, 1938, p. 101).
and “Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves” (6.30, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 110). One key limitation of ritual learning, however, is the constant demand of discerning other people's actions and motivations accurately, even when not in their company, not to mention while retaining the purity of one's inclinations in relation to one's own actions in constant association with others. Indeed, Confucius believed that individuals could not contribute, learn or progress without purifying personal intentions by interacting with other individuals. One cannot become established without the establishment of others. Ritual provides the impetus for such learning, then, a learning which is not only contingent on the prior learning of others, but on personal understanding and appreciation of how that learning assimilated can elevate and lift self and/or others beyond their previous attainments.

**Limitations of Learning: The Realities of Relational Ritual**

In Confucius's mind, this kind of learning came with a price, however. “Exemplary persons understand what is appropriate... petty persons understand what is of personal advantage...” (4.16, Ames & Rosemont, 1998). As knowledge of relational power increased, so also did the challenges and potential for abuse within the context of human relationships. Confucius speaks to us as one who has confronted these challenges and learned to navigate them more effectively; the conflict between the harder right and

46 The classical Chinese original of this passage suggests a slightly different nuance than Ames and Rosemont are able to convey in a solitary English translation. It is very unlikely that Confucius set as his primary goal self-promotion as we generally think of this in modern terms, but that Confucius was pursuing a practical approach that recognized ren (authoritativeness or relational virtue) as difficult enough to attain; “A humane person wishes to steady himself, and so he helps others to steady themselves” (6.30, Chin, 2014, p. 96).
the easier wrong had presumably become more clear in his mind, but this knowledge often left him feeling isolated. As an example of this dynamic he once taught that, “Good people can stand alone without fear and can leave society without distress” (Cleary, 1992, p.70), and further, that “There is no point in seeking the views of a Gentleman who, though he sets his heart on the Way, is ashamed of poor food and poor clothes” (4.9, Lau, 1979, p. 73).\textsuperscript{47} In other words, a virtuous person had to care more about the right thing to do in relation to others than they cared about pride, remuneration or popularity.

For Confucius, the belief that the right intentions for learning were integral to becoming a better person often went hand-in-hand with a turning away from personal advantage and comfort. It appears from the record that Confucius lived out his life in significant peril, poverty, and obscurity. A good student would seek out wisdom from good teachers and would not depend on temporal security, material benefits or social acceptance; seeking first and foremost to become 'someone worth talking to.'

We have seen how for Confucius the love for learning was not a passing whim or desire – it was a lifelong pursuit. Alignment between the Way, individual agency, and moral habits or traditions were requisite in order for growth and development to occur. While a gentleman (junzi) understood well how to choose the right, a 'small person' (xiao ren) understood only how to benefit (4.16, Zhang, 2011, p. 47), or while “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain” (4.16, Legge, 1893, p. 170). So how does one develop the right degree of

\textsuperscript{47} “Confucius said, 'A man who aspires to the Way yet is ashamed of poor clothing and poor food is not worth talking to’” (4.9, Cleary, 1992, p. 71).
sincerity and harmony without falling into the trap of wrong actions or wrong thinking?

One of the key ways a learner can harmonize their desires with right action is to study, innovate, and apply the rules of *li*; correct traditions, habits and customs that in many cases had to be rediscovered or created afresh in order to set sociomoral and spiritopolitical patterns of behavior which would ennoble and safeguard society.

When Zizhang asked, “How does one take virtue to a higher level, and how does one know that one's judgment is clouded?” Confucius replied, “If you hold on to doing your best and being trustworthy [in words] as your principle and try always to direct your intent and action to what is right, you will be taking virtue to a higher level” (12.10, Chin, 2014, p. 185-186). This is indeed a very apt description of Confucian ritualized learning – or learning in practice. As for clouded judgment, this part of Confucius's answer seems to refer to a passage from the ancient Book of Poetry; “...a woman decrying the fickleness of her husband, saying that it was not the wealth of the other woman but the novelty of a fling that made him unfaithful.” (Chin, 2014, p. 186). The fact that clouded judgment is associated with infidelity should intrigue us. Huang's (1997, p. 128) commentary suggests that there is something in the shift from a pure wish of life - the sordid change of one's heart or affections for their spouse towards a desire for death - that shatters the psyche, mind and emotions of men. It may very well be that in the time of Confucius, this kind of confusion and delusion was widespread enough to evidence an exorbitant price being paid by society.

Learning ritual placed important checks and balances on innovation. For
example, to learn to limit or control one's own speech was a key learning ritual: “The exemplary person (junzi) wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act” (4.24, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 94). This required a certain degree of humility, as “When the ancients did not speak out, it was because they were ashamed to say what they could not live up to themselves” (4.22, Cleary, 1992, p. 73). By pushing for a harmonization between one's own words and actions, Confucius put forward a practice of learning with a specific, measurable, and arguably more realistic moral goal; “…to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct” (4.24, Legge, 1893, p. 172), or as Chin interprets it, “…to be hesitant about speaking but quick to act” (4.24, Chin, 2014, p. 56). This quickness and earnestness to act recognized the crux of moral learning; you learn by doing, not only by hearing.

While the Confucian way of learning always involved a teaching component, teachers were expected first to practice and exemplify a principle before assuming understanding or attempting to guide others. In Analects 2.13, another philosopher is quoted as saying,

“When agreements are made according to what is right, what is spoken can be made good. When respect is shown according to what is proper, one keeps far from shame and disgrace. When the parties upon whom a man leans are proper persons to be intimate with, he can make them his guides and masters.” (Legge, 1893)

While learning can take place in virtually any social context, another threshold
remains; notice how the ritualization of learning was not able to put forward a merely
egalitarian or hierarchical dyadic learning relationship. Overwhelmingly, the Confucians
valued the benefits of both dyadic interaction and layered interpretation, which allowed
not only a greater range of representation and broader engagement, but encouraged also a
more complicated learning to emerge. This in many ways runs counter to the common
conceptions of Confucian ritual learning as that being simply orchestrated top-down or as
stemming from a master teacher toward his pupil. Confucian ritual learning entailed
instead a great deal of interaction, collaboration, corroboration and muddling through. In
many ways it ran counter-stream to the authoritarian approach to education one would
expect from a ruling class figure.48

Confucius once commented, “There are indeed seedlings that do not flower, and
there are flowers that do not fruit” (9.22, Waley, 1938, p. 131). There was never any
guarantee that pursuing the path of learning actualization would bring the desired results.
What was critical to the Confucians was that the relational aspects of ritual learning not
be lost or forgotten. Perhaps in part pointing fun at those who sought to spread doctrines
of escape and control, Confucius once remarked that while he had heard and seen
individuals who went after the goodness they observed in others as if they could not
obtain it, he had yet to see a person who could seek the way of the ancient kings in
seclusion or to sincerely promulgate the way by seeking office (see Huang, 1997, p. 163).
He concludes; “I have heard such words, but I have yet to see such persons” (16.11,

48 Eberhard (1971, p. 41-42) observes that “Confucius was fully conscious of his membership of a social
class whose existence was tied to that of the feudal lords. With their disappearance, his type of scholar
would become superfluous. The common people, the lower class, was in his view in an entirely
subordinate position. Thus his moral teaching is a code for the ruling class.”
Confucius said, “A man should say, I am not concerned that I have no place, I am concerned how I may fit myself for one. I am not concerned that I am not known, I seek to be worthy to be known” (4.14, Legge, 1893, p. 169). It seems one further limitation of the Confucian learning style is that they often saw the world through a simple binary lens: “I am either worthy or not.” “I can either do this or not.” This means that while a Confucian learner is constantly humbling themselves in order to learn better or more, the downside is that a Confucian may live and die without measurable impact or success.

Part of this propensity was due to the extremely challenging nature of the path: “Take doing your utmost (zhong) and making good on your word (xin) as your mainstay. Do not befriend anyone who is not as good as you are. And where you have gone astray, do not hesitate to mend your ways” (9.25, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 131-132). The ritualization of learning consisted in large part in the repeated practice of mending ways. But Confucius went further, proffering inculpatory language towards those who would not follow the Way. “He who does not tread in the tracks (of the Ancients) cannot expect to find his way to the inner room” (11.19, Waley, 1938, p. 157). Suffice it to say that this inner space had a positive, salient quality that was deemed desirable. More importantly in terms of our question as to how one can or should learn, we must ask whether the path of ritual learning is more backward looking (towards the ancients), pioneering (towards the future), or more social and cognizant of one's contemporaries? Or could it have moderated as a combination of all three? Zhang's (2011, p. 162) modern Mandarin translation utilizes the word qianren, meaning predecessor, to reflect the key noun of the
passage and to attribute a perhaps more mainstream insider cultural view of the learning path. In light of the cultural context and prevailing value-system, it seems that the Way of the Ru placed heavy importance on remembering one's predecessors (both living and dead), and hence the importance of observation, record-keeping, introspection, and the study and preservation of historical or biographical documents.

Other passages emphasize the interpersonal nature of learning. When someone asked about a discrepancy between the expediency of application for two separate individuals, Confucius revealed that some individuals need to be urged on because they are “...retiring and slow”... others have their “...own share of energy.” (11.21, Legge, 1893). Despite the fact that Confucius recommended that some need the consultation or insight of fathers and brothers to press forward properly, how one should learn was based on an individual need and degree of impulsiveness. A third type of learner doesn't understand why different approaches are possible for different people.

Any potential conflict between the active social-progressive dimensions vs. the reflective intellectual dimensions of effective learning are resolved by Confucius himself in a passage wherein Zilu questions the value of becoming learned by reading books over one serving as governor of willing citizens and enjoying the fruits or approval (see Zhang, 2011, p. 164; Waley's additional notes, p. 246). It is not difficult to determine that Confucius saw greater value in the acquisition of the ancient ways over popular whim, agricultural prosperity, or even broad political approval. His reply to Zilu is simply; “It is for this reason that I hate those with a glib tongue” (11.25, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 148). Confucius was concerned that clever words and ambition would crowd out the
efficacy of the Way of Heaven.

**Li as a Safeguard to Learning**

We have seen how, for Confucius, learning was channeled in its path by continual practice and effort. Polite ritual, or ritual propriety, fit into the overall learning process as follows: One should “Learn broadly of culture (*wen*), discipline this learning through observing ritual propriety (*li*), and moreover, in so doing, remain on course without straying from it” (12.15, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 157).\(^49\) It is toward this last leg of the journey, this not straying from the path, that we now return our attention.

Not at any time in the Analects did Confucius presume his knowledge was complete or his memory perfect (see 15.3) – instead we must consider the interpretation at hand; that “Action is inseparable from knowledge in Confucius' teaching..” (Chin, 2014, p. 249), and that in practicing polite ritual Confucius was comparable to a moral archer; having taken his aim, releasing and hoping to witness the implantation of his own shaft of learning within the target zone. Ritual was the 'letting go' process. He pressed his own way forward by seeking “...a unity all-pervading..” (15.3, Legge) and strung his life together through careful learning and observation, right motivations, as well as deliberate actions, silence and speech. Confucius said,

“A gentleman never contends in anything he does – except perhaps in archery. Even then, he bows to his rival and yields him the way as they ascend the pavilion; in like manner he descends and offers him the penalty cup – in his

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\(^{49}\) “Confucius said, 'By extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, one may thus likewise not err from what is right.'” (12.15, Legge, 1893, p.257).
contentions he is still a gentleman.” (3.7, Soothill, 1995, p.12)\textsuperscript{50}

He understood that while the strength of individuals varied, all could learn to do well enough to hit the mark (3.16, Lau, 1979, p. 70). He wisely commented; “Having a sense of appropriate conduct (yi) as one's basic disposition (zhi), developing it in observing ritual propriety (li), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one's word (xin): this then is an exemplary person (junzi)” (15.18, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 188). Inasmuch as they supported him in learning to navigate the imperfections of the family and society in which he found himself, the learning concepts of Xiao and Li set Confucius on the path of progress, virtue and felicitousness. But even these were not enough.

**Ritualization (Li) as a Preparation for the Music of Compassion (Ren)**

Li, or what Ames & Rosemont translate as 'ritual propriety', was something Confucius loved and hoped to perpetuate, not to excess or to the forgetting of deeper purposes or limitations, but because of its tendency to bring relationships to bear and to engender a proper level of moderation and balance within those relationships (see 3.8, 3.12, 3.16, 3.17, 3.20). Without individuals intent on learning to appreciate and moderate their choices in relation to others, society would fall into the trap of explaining, remonstrating and condemning the actors and events of the present and the past (3.21). Confucius preferred to be more down-to-earth, responsible and forward looking. The

\textsuperscript{50} One may prefer the translation provided by Slingerland: “The Master said: ‘Surely archery can serve as an illustration of the fact that the gentleman does not compete! Before mounting the stairs to the archery hall, gentlemen bow and defer to one another, and after descending from the hall they mutually offer up toasts. This is how a gentleman 'competes.'” (3.7, 2003, p. 19).
perpetuation of ritual, or more accurately, the quest for ritual in its purest and truest form, was not intended so much as to restrain the hearts of the people in the service of their seniors and masters, but to develop a form of relational self-mastery which could ultimately elevate society and leadership on the path forward and fall off as scaffolding as a more beautiful and solid civilization emerged (see Ames & Rosemont 3.19, Waley 3.22).

Confucius praises “The Melodious Chirping of the Fish Hawks, the first poem of The Book of Poetry, Ballads of the Various States, and its music for abiding by the constant mean in the expression of feelings” (3.20, Huang, 1997, p. 64). The song is praised for its expression of “...joy without becoming licentious...”, its expression of sorrow “...without falling into excessive pathos” (3.20, Slingerland, 2003, p. 25). Chin (2014, p. 37) explains further:

The voice in the poem is that of a young man, probably a prince, yearning for the woman he desires: 'Wanting, sought her, had her not,/ Waking, sleeping, thought of her.' Yet the yearning does not leave the young man wretched, and his thoughts never stray. He does not make an obvious display of his feelings but instead enlists the help of the men and women in his community. 'With harps we bring her company,' the poem reads. 'With bells and drums do her delight.' It is only as true gentlemanly leadership is exhibited through proper social ritual that the heart of the woman is won.

This point coincides with Confucius's views on the music of the ancients, which he
described as follows: “Their music in so far as one can find out about it began with a strict unison. Soon the musicians were given more liberty (to improvise); but the tone remained harmonious, brilliant, consistent, right on till the close” (3.23, Waley, 1938, p. 100). This consistency, harmony and clarity was pleasing to Confucius, who on another occasion remarked; “I find inspiration by intoning the songs, I learn where to stand from observing ritual propriety (li), and I find fulfillment in playing music” (8.8, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 122).

Ritual in the form of dance, music, politics; these things all represented deeper aspects of relational learning and meaning for Confucius. In the case of dance and music we can quickly remind ourselves of the performative nature of the arts requiring commitment, practice and craftsmanship; the involvement of individuals in a group or communal activity, the potentially ceremonial dimension, etc. Rather than spelling out to the reader these deeper meanings, Confucius and his pupils leave the task of discovery and understanding to those who seek it.

“The Master spoke of the Succession Dance as being perfect beauty and at the same time perfect goodness; but of the War Dance as being perfect beauty, but not of perfect goodness” (3.25, Waley, 1938, p. 101). Lau reports that the “music of Shun who came to the throne through the abdication [resignation or surrender] of Yao” was being contrasted here with the “music of King Wu who came to the throne through the Yin by military force” (Lau, 1979, p. 71). Zhang and Legge's commentaries clarify that although king

51 “Much can be realized with music if one begins by playing in unison, and then goes on to improvise with purity of tone and distinctness and flow, thereby bringing all to completion” (3.23, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 88).
Wu's cause was a just one, it was not “perfectly good” because of its “breathing the martial air” (Legge, 1893, p. 164). The ideal triumph morally, politically, spiritually and socially was one of mutual agreement, ritual mastery and ultimate surrender to the will and mandate of Heaven, but none of this could be attained without facing the challenging cultivation of relational benevolence, or ren, covered in chapter six.

**Conclusions: Li as the Practice of Relational Learning**

In this chapter I have described how li (as composed of ritualizing relational tasks and practices) was integral to the establishment of Confucian learning virtues and relationships. Here, I followed the trajectory of recent scholarship on the nature of li as it functioned in Ancient China, which Michael Puett has described as follows:

...the opening assumption was not that human ritual was normatively based upon divine or natural guidelines but rather the opposite: that the world was one of discontinuity, fragmented and fractured, without an inherent foundation or basis to guide ethical and political behavior. (2006, p. 24)

This means that in contrast to views of ancient Chinese ritual being somehow rooted in social and transcendental in origin, the Confucians viewed at least portions of li as a cultivation of association towards mutual improvement. This does not mean that Confucian ritual had no religious or social ties, of course, but rather that these connections could be made stronger and more efficacious as one mastered the conventions and patterns of proper human interaction. This was to be a path of cross-generational social learning. There is considerable evidence that the Western distinctions
between religious and secular simply did not exist in the ancient Chinese psyche. We find Li was both socially and spiritually salient; a blending of intention, action and speech in what were supposed to be ethically appropriate ways. In essence, Confucius acted on the belief that what was needed was an ongoing ritualization or formalization of relational learning practices within a society where conflict and error were rampant and that experienced considerable relational discontinuity.

The intriguing aspect of this time period from a historical and philosophical standpoint is that it was a time of such uncertainty and experimentation. Continuing on the administrative and military legacy of Kings Wen and Wu, and particularly basking in the scholarly patronage of the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong), the Confucians worked to blend a diversity of people, principles, purposes and practices into one congruent, albeit complicated, whole. It is in this light (and from within this context) that we choose to explore how the Confucian push towards ritual learning functioned as a key part, and the key process, of the Confucian relational learning path.

A wonderfully symbolic example of how Confucius conceptualized this practice of ritual learning springs up in his reference to the sport of shooting arrows. Confucius believed in the value of a ritual game of archery as instructive towards the positive and cordial associations which could and should exist between rivals; political, military or otherwise. By properly and sincerely “...letting go one's intention and purpose,” one could hit the target successfully as a result of “...a composed mind and an upright posture” (Chin, 2014, p. 35). By honestly and sincerely engaging with a rival in this respectful manner, arrows flying like words, not at each other, but to fill the air and hit
their respective marks, an individual learned to appreciate and understand their counterpart even while successfully putting their own point across. Archery was not to be a contest of brute strength or chance, but a contest of accuracy, focus and civility determined by individual skill, preparation and choices. One could approximate the Way only by individually choosing to practice, study and live in proper relation to their target and towards others, even their presumed enemies.

In this light, the relational practices of Confucian learning are interpreted as a corollary to or extension of *li*, often translated as ritual propriety, but more broadly defined as an incomplete package of co-constructed socio-spiritual traditions, conventions, and/or customs with spirito-political and moro-religious significance. For the ancient Confucian, relational harmony and human interaction was meaningful because it was developed by and for people in relational contexts and from within relational choices and desires. Enlightened and guided by sincerity, these choices and desires could flow outward and upwards through right actions, words, desires and habits. *Li* functioning on an explicitly interpersonal level altogether constitutes the primary distinction between the Confucian and the Daoist projects toward harmonization. Confucian ritual, properly conceived, was believed to be best practiced between one living on a higher plane and one living on a lower, with both sides presumably benefiting; in other words, *li* was a bilateral process of improvement, a practice of reciprocal harmonization between people. Hence the predominant focus on the failures and weaknesses of himself and his contemporaries in contrast to the virtues of the ancient worthies and sage-kings. Confucius firmly believed that even the greatest and most
virtuous could not be so without the impact and influence of even greater others. Much of Confucius's work was in understanding and emulating those who had gone before him: “How seriously I have declined! It has been so long since I last dreamt of meeting the Duke of Zhou” (7.5, Slingerland, 2003, p. 65). Ever a moderate, Confucius placed himself (and the authentic teacher-learner) firmly within the nexus of existing cultural ideals and relationships. In the spirit of moderation and balance, Confucius believed in a very basic or fundamental practice of ritual, one that could guide the way forward and upward for many, but that would also remain very personal and versatile.
CHAPTER VI
THE PURPOSE OF LEARNING

Don't only practice your art, but force your way into its secrets.
For it and knowledge can raise men to the Divine.
- Ludwig Van Beethoven

“The role of relationships and community in a person’s moral development is a crucial element in Confucianism that focuses on practice over theory. The ideal jun zi is not a sage meditating alone in a cave to reach perfection but is rather one who exerts an influence in the lives of the people in his or her community. A moral person has ren (仁), roughly translated as ‘humaneness’ or ‘virtue’, which in early texts was the all-encompassing virtuous quality that the aspiring jun zi strived for.”

(Lim, 2010)
The Core Virtue of Learning According to Confucius

The first section here will attempt to describe or map out the core objective of Confucian learning, a state of being/potentiality commonly glossed in romanized characters as ren or jen (仁) (see Chong, 1999). The basic etymology of the character will be described and examples of its usage depicted. It will be shown how scholars are not in full agreement as to the meaning of this term, nor how to best translate it into English.

At least one passage shows a potentially humorous and playful approach in deliberations over the meaning of the graph. In a classic play of words, it is reported that when

Ssu-ma Niu asked about Goodness [仁]. The Master said, The Good (jen) man is chary (jen) of speech. Ssu-ma Niu said, so that is what is meant by Goodness – to be chary [cautious, or wary] of speech? The Master said, Seeing that the doing of it is so difficult, how can one be otherwise than chary of talking about it? (12.3, Waley, 1938, p. 163).

Despite his attempt at reticence, the character appears no less than 100 times in the text itself.

Defining Ren

A great introduction to the diversity of interpretations of ren is showcased in Analects 4.3. Many influential scholars; perhaps most notably, Edward Slingerland, Annping Chin, D.C. Lau, James Legge, and Thomas Cleary have represented the term as an ethical, emotional, and/or relational virtue. For example, Cleary translates the passage
as follows: “Confucius said, 'Only the humane can like people and can dislike people’” (p. 17, emphasis added). This corresponds fairly well with James Legge's rendering: “It is only the (truly) virtuous man, who can love, or who can hate, others.” Ames & Rosemont (p. 237) choose to avoid problematic polarization by stating simply that someone who is ren can discern between good and bad people, and this correlates somewhat with Slingerland's summation of Jiao Xun's and Kong Anguo's commentaries: “Only the Good person is an accurate and impartial judge of character, able to love virtue in others without envy and despise vice in others without malice” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 30). In this light ren has more to do with discernment and logic than with emotional love or hatred towards others. Arthur Waley's discussion intimates further a potentially layered (or tiered) interpretation of the concept: “Only the Good man is considered capable of loving (ai) men, capable of hating them” (102), or in other words, it is only the ren who can do good to others found doing bad to others. Both the classical Chinese text and Waley's translation hint at the possibility that becoming ren implied loving or caring for others that are hating and doing bad to them or others (Zi yue wei ren zhe neng hao ren neng e ren: 子曰惟仁者能好人能惡人). A second glance at the original text in Classical Chinese hints at three more viable readings of the passage: first, “Only someone who is ren is capable of becoming a truly good or a truly bad person” or second, “Only someone who is ren is able to both please and offend others”. One final interpretation, also hinted at by Waley, stems from the commentary provided in the Guo Yu, which states in Waley's English, “Only a good man is safe to like, safe to dislike... For if you like him, he will not

52 “The Master said, 'The authoritative person (ren) alone has the wherewithal to properly discriminate the good person from the bad” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 89).
take undue advantage of it, and if you dislike him, he will not resent it” (103).
Unfortunately we don't find the simplicity we would so much rather experience. Was the concept of ren, as a learning construct or objective, that which merely allowed individuals to discern between the good and the bad within the hearts or lives of men? Was it an influence that inspired love and/or hatred in the hearts of self or others? Or was it more a relational force that lead one to greater intensities of emotion, allowing, for example, one to both love and to hate other human beings? Did ren truly lead one to enhanced ethical understanding, or could it (also) have lead one to moral bigotry and blindness? Was the goal of becoming ren directly related to the attainment of a higher plane of ethical or spiritual living – or was it a farce? As we commence to unpack various instances of the graph in the Analects and explore usage of the term in Classical Chinese, modern Mandarin, as well as in English translation, we will find all these questions (and more) rise to the surface. Just how did Confucius conceive of the purposes of learning?

What the majority of scholars do agree on is that one way or another ren resides at the very core and apex of the Confucian learning enterprise. While on the one hand examples and instances of ren provided learners with a more lucid sense of hope and optimism, its episodic nature or realization also establish ren learning as a maddeningly complex, challenging, and perpetual process that promised to roll on, “...never ceasing day or night” (9.17, Ames & Rosemont, 130). Without this limitation and within the context of an imperfect world crowded as it was with imperfect people, to insist on relational happiness or spiritual enlightenment as the final objective may have seemed absurd, however.
Rather than solving and spelling it all out to his pupils, however, Confucius chose instead to work at relational learning himself, believing that the beauty and transmission of the Way could and would instruct or inspire others. Unlike the Daoist conception of learning which saw the abandonment of social ties and the abrogation of learning as the true path to peace and enlightenment, and dissimilar to the Buddhist conception of learning which saw its realization as a predominantly meditative or revelatory experience, Confucian learning demanded consistent individual effort and practice, along with social engagement, in order to learn how not to harm and hurt others.

*Ren as Higher Learning*

Because it dealt with two or more people and the virtue of their association, the process of learning associated with *Ren* was always both close at hand and very far away. The culmination of learning Confucius anticipated, however, was evidenced only in reference to those who had died, such as in his language of admiration for his friend *Hui* and the ancient sage-kings. In many ways, this 'process' and direction oriented conception of learning flies in the face of our conventional understanding of the accumulation of knowledge. He once commented that if one strives to build a mountain by piling up a mound of dirt but stops short “only one basketful short of completion”, then they have stopped progressing, but a person who has dumped in even just one basketful to fill a ditch, and then continues onward, is progressing (9.19, Ames & Rosemont, p. 130). Rather than viewing learning simply as a cumulative or evolutionary process, it is composed of simple action. In fact, Confucius sees as potentially useless and damaging the storing up of knowledge over years of study unless the right practices,
processes and motivations are implemented. Confucius also saw learning as a question of commitment; a beginner student could obtain and practice wisdom just as readily as the seasoned learner, insomuch that neither party lost their zeal for learning. While this could be interpreted as placing greater demand on the more experienced student (or recipient) of ren, would one rather be the fool who gets worn down and stops learning just one bucketful short of their goal, or the fool who doesn't even begin to build until the end of their lives? Either way there was failure.

To further complicate matters, life and learning were best brought to a fruitful completion when individuals began with a solid foundation. Because of xiao, interpreted as the honoring and acceptance of parents desires, the family upbringing made a tremendous difference in one’s life because a harmonization of individuals (particularly those organized as a family unit) could set the pattern for moral development for generations to come not only within the social context of a family, but also to spread out and influence the community or nation-state through the practice of li and cultivation of ren. Ren as a concept was an objective of compassionate duality, reciprocal goodness, or dual-mindedness that was not only an individual virtue learned in relational context, but a relational attainment contingent on the nurturing agency of others also. Where ren points the learner, then, but does not arrive at permanently, is as important as what it accomplishes. This is not double-mindedness, in the pejorative sense (although in its failed realizations it was certainly capable of becoming this), but dual-mindedness; being and acting cognizant of both the self and the other. In other words, for the socially minded Confucius, interpersonal virtue and dual-minded excellence are anticipated in the
mind/heart as the highest and most elegant forms of virtue but also the most simple; in theory attainable, albeit rarely achieved. Because dual-minded virtue is rarely achieved or realized, let alone desired, Confucius spurs his pupils on in the challenge. While most people are not working hard enough or long enough, or else not beginning their learning process with the proper motivation which would allow them to ultimately reach the culmination of their desires; learning for reformation, for relational meaning - all become a part of the process just as much as they remain the main reasons ren is seldom understood or realized.

Confucius put the learning conundrum in this way:

How could one but comply with what the model sayings have to say? But the real value lies in reforming one's ways. How could one but find pleasure in polite language? But the real value lies in drawing out its meaning. What can possibly be done with people who find pleasure in polite language but do not draw out its meaning, or who comply with model sayings but do not reform their ways. (9.24; Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 131)

In other words, pleasure in learning could be a gateway to deeper understanding and reformation or it could remain superficial. For Confucius, the complex interweaving of the need for sincere motivations, appropriate interactions and positive associations, attached a degree of exclusivity to the art of learning he espoused as well as demanded for himself. Learning was not so much about obtaining something, but about becoming and being someone in relation to others (Leys, 2014, p. xix). This meant that, while very
simple and fundamental to life, not everyone could or would attain the full realization of this goal, at least not permanently.\textsuperscript{53} Because all learning was to be rooted in proper sociopolitical understanding, aimed in the right direction, and endowed with moral relational progress, it is no less remarkable that Confucius's educational message would prove so enduring. Perhaps the socially redeeming quality of his learning approach was that he actively sought to engage the people even when his basic message did all but entirely disavow them. Indeed, Confucius said he would never stop teaching those who kept trying to learn, and the love of learning was his own admitted strength. Hence, while Confucius encouraged an approach which may have discouraged the 'common' or lower class from seeking to learn or to be taught 'the higher ways,' he also made it difficult to determine who the common class was. This blurring of boundaries encouraged the acceptance of meaning beyond the mere acceptance of particular social rituals and expanded the political salience of personal/individual desire. In many ways, Confucius placed the common man, even the man of poverty, at the center of the learning enterprise, so long as they could remain focused and cheerful. For himself and for others, the ancient sage-kings whispered hope and the potential of human relationships hinted optimism. Confucius could work with most people, if they could navigate the complexities inherent in his advice. “Take doing your utmost (zhong) and making good on your word (xin) as your mainstay. Do not befriend anyone who is not as good as you are. And where you have gone astray, do not hesitate to mend your ways” (9.25, Ames &

\textsuperscript{53} Consider for example the inquisition against Confucian thought which initiated Emperor Qin Shihuang's rule and Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, or the more mild reconfigurations and expansions of his ideas at the beginning of the Han, Tang and Song dynasties. When the desire for control and aggrandizement over education override the desire for its natural outcomes, the learning ideals of Confucius are absconded, altered, amended or abolished.
Rosemont, 1998, p. 132). Each one of these ideals hinged and hung on the individual’s commitment, context and capacity for dual-mindedness (ren). “He who knows the truth is not equal to him who loves it, and he who loves it is not equal to him who delights in it” (6.18, Soothill, 1995, p. 30). Being xiao, or filial, enabled one to begin to learn. Practicing li, or polite ritual, extended lessons from youth into a more mature and seasoned view as well as cultivated a sincere love for learning. Knowing ren, or becoming dual-minded, allowed one to delight in learning.

Whether this meant aspects of moral rigidity and fortitude or an emphasis on spontaneity and sincerity; the dual-mindedness of Confucian learning envisioned and contemplated a path of joy. Simple joy in relational learning gave momentum to the growth of Confucianism, which would, of course, not always blend successfully, let alone go along with the chosen course of the Chinese individual and society. What Confucius created was a rare form of learning which could only beget future posterity if it became somehow rooted in a sincere, structured and continuous consideration of both self and others. Xiao, Li and Ren composed three steps in a cyclical learning process that could go on indefinitely; moving the learner towards a more balanced, dual-minded society and governance which promised to quell the tide of license, corruption and oppression. So what is it about dual-mindedness that could counter these social ills?

54 Slingerland explains this passage as one focused on the Confucian Way: “There are several slightly different ways to take this passage, but what is being referred to is the increasing level of unselfconsciousness and ease that characterizes the true Confucian gentleman” (2003, p. 59).

55 Consider for example the inquisition against Confucian thought which initiated Emperor Qin Shihuang's rule and Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, or the more mild reconfigurations and expansions of his ideas at the beginning of the Han, Tang and Song dynasties. When the desire for control and aggrandizement over education override the desire for its natural outcomes, the learning ideals of Confucius are absconded, altered, amended or abolished.
Ren seems to convey an idea of sacrificial extension and reciprocal relation; an extension of self and reception of others towards a disposition of love, interest, or consideration, even to the laying down of one's life (see 15.9). But ren is not a total self-abrogation as an individual – it doesn't necessarily stop short of what Christianity calls charity, or what has been described as the pure love of Christ, it simply finds its root in the core and fundamental human relationships rather than in individual space. It is the distinct capacity of ren to act in the best interest of two (or more) parties. Whereas the absence of ren seems to connote a state of detachment or dangerous behavior towards others, the presence or attainment of ren means that two or more parties are seeking out and willing to give, to teach, and to learn. This is why the social and cultural context matters, because one relies on the other. When reciprocity is not forthcoming, one is left in a quandary as to how to act.

It is the attainment of this kind of relational bond with someone else that allows one to love, and when helpful or necessary, to detest, specific behaviors, habits or ideas while not hating the individuals that perpetuate these. This is the more challenging side of ren, namely, the capacity to take one's stand against or in opposition to another in the right manner. This can (and should) be done civilly, but it is also a principle in stark contrast to the vacillating weakness of political, moral, and social irresolution. In its full political casting, this is ren – to never deny the interconnectedness of self and other and the reliance of the individual on the influence and impact of association. This high degree of demand and the push to become trusting/trusted/trustworthy is at the heart of Confucian learning, encompassing its underlying principle, commanding its overall
purpose, and composing its overall practice. Yet Confucian teachings were also meant to be joyful, non-systematic and spontaneous – they were to be performed via the right words, thoughts, actions, and desires of individuals in relation to others. Unfortunately, the concept did not thrive fully in relation to the bedrock relationship of Chinese culture. Rather than becoming embedded within the masculine psyche as the root of marriage and family relations, ren took on a decidedly political orientation. Like the proverbial carrot set dangling before the donkey's mouth, ren was set before to urge and inspire the student of the Way forward. This was both the strength and the weakness of the Way of the Ancients – their core objective was a symbiotic relational propensity which was rarely, if ever, realized at a basic social level, even if it likewise could not be altogether uprooted, shaken or denied.

**Living Up to One’s Potential and Privileges**

From the midst of this ideological, cultural and textual milieu, the very beginning sentences of the Analects ring out with a simplicity, freshness, and optimism about learning and human relations;

“Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters? Is he not a man of complete virtue, who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?” (1.1, Legge, 1893, p. 137)

From the very outset, the prime motivation established for learning by Confucius (and the Confucians) is le, meaning joy, pleasure, or happiness. But this is not necessarily the
mere outward quest or pursuit of happiness and pleasure. This is finding internal
happiness and enjoyment in the simple things that happen to you, the small choice one
has to learn and make things better from any context or given situation. Learning is
further shown to be inseparably wrapped up in properly ordered relationships; not in
professional conquest, financial prosperity, social recognition, or political success but in
authentic and sincere good will towards someone else (1.1). An individual who can feel
truly content when unnoticed has attained a degree of relational harmonization that
supersedes conventional social supports – their joy comes from authentic and
authoritative association – not from mere contrivances. It appears reflective and
significant also that the character le is the same character for yue, meaning music; a
sincere, structured, spontaneous, and often communally expansive endeavor, and one
which Confucius payed significant homage and attention to. While the Book of Music
did not survive China's own periods of inquisition, it is music, both then and now, which
proves a great mover and mirror of the people, both molding and shedding light on the
prevailing values and vision of a given culture or society. As we shall see, the moral,
structured, adaptive, eclectic, and tacitly syncretic approach to dialogue-based learning
was viewed by Confucius much like music could be, not only as natural and spontaneous,
but also as being governed by persistent rules and patterns that often required careful
study, patient adherence and appropriate application. Good learning, like good music,
could never be fully realized in total isolation, abandonment, or rigidity – but it was the
retraction and restraint of the heart, the authentic love and acceptance of the good in self
and other, that allowed love of learning to continue. It is the love for learning which
powered the Confucian project forward (Tan, 2007); a joyful 'constant perseverance and application' in living what one has learned in relation to others (see Legge, 1893, p. 137), even when this means pressing on in isolation, or standing up to lead others in the right direction.

The psychological state of *ren*, which we could define as the most central, culminating and challenging virtue within the Confucian learning paradigm, was more (or less) than an individual habit or skill to be acquired, but the designation of a particular mental state or phenomenon which may or may not be exhibited by a person, or type of person(s) in their relationship to others. While in some passages it seems a uniquely individual virtue, in others *ren* appears as the outcome of a unique phenomenon or process across two (or more) persons. This relational purpose and process of living for more than oneself, and being in correspondence with at least one other, taking the literal meaning of the graph, not only coincides with the other virtues we have explored in thus far, but also raises the bar of expectation as the pinnacle relational 'virtue' of Confucianism. Beyond this morally engaged and socially fruitful posturing, however, the details of *ren* and why people should acquire this name or virtue are difficult to determine. Happiness appears to be the basic objective, but we must construct and test our understanding of the relationship between *ren* and happiness one example, one passage at a time. The reality is that, within the Analects, learning to become *ren* is left more open and tenuous (see 14.1) than most readers are willing to accept, and it is readily apparent that becoming *ren* was a lofty goal indeed (14.4, 14.6). The frequent elitist allusions made in the Analects with association to *ren* suggest either that substantial
loose-ends remained or that Confucius chose to speak modestly due to a general lack of preparation and understanding (see 14.3).

If ren follows the same trajectory of other Confucian virtues; in other words, it is social and relationally rooted and oriented, one has to wonder which relationship (or relationships) did this concept cling to. Confucius himself, his very name and title, (fuzi), actually connotes the married father of a legitimate child, or the child of a legitimately married father. If ren was associated with the relationship between husband and wife, there may be more to the designation fuzi (perpetuated by his admirers and pupils) than we have previously understood. As we have learned in the preceding chapters exploring xiao and li, an imperfect upbringing and an imperfect society required the active determination to learn, and the active practice of polite ritual. But while xiao and li provided the impetus and scaffolding for a better world and individual, they did not provide the scaffolding for a better life in temporal or worldly terms. This was very clearly not the purpose of ren: Confucius was not terribly concerned about success or gain. He did not focus on obtaining power or influence, and it has been noted that, despite his hopeful aspirations, Confucius lived quite an austere and challenging life. There is abundant evidence to suggest his goal was simple happiness and enjoyment in good association with others, at least when possible. But happiness was understood as coming from the establishment of an honorable life in relation to other people, the enjoyment of refined leisure activities with virtuous associates, and as being contingent on right motivations and right actions in relation to other people. It was, unfortunately, more a state of mind and a psychological objective, than it was a social reality. The
enjoyment of virtuous association, like the enjoyment of good music, was rare as much as it was closely associated with the refinement and perfection of one's learning art. Virtuous association, like good music, could, at its best, inspire one to greater good, grant peace, greater moral and intellectual refinement, greater rejuvenation of spirits as well as greater relaxation, revelation and recreation for the learner/listener – but virtuous association was not something that one could attain to without the concerted effort, determination and attainment of others. If nothing more it offered hope to a world plunging into darkness.

Confucius was focused on building a community of virtue; a synergy that would lift and elevate the nation-states and people so desperately in need during his lifetime. The difficulty with all this was that it required the cultivation of individual learners who who could not only understand whether a given state or system of government was just or unjust, but also have the willpower and the know-how to seek that which was right in the given context above that which would simply amass power, reputation, and/or wealth (either for themselves or the state in question). Acting presumably without the clear light of religious revelation (see Analects 17.19), it seems that Confucius navigated this difficulty by emphasizing the simple importance and joy of learning association along with the central nature/challenge of humanity (ren). Whereas for Confucius we could argue that learning always took place in a social or relational context, social attitudes toward relational learning and virtuous association determined a great deal of the beginning and end of the learning project.

For this reason, the Confucian project could never truly stand on its own, but
worked always in tandem or association with the acceptance, ideas and ideals of other people, psychological dispositions or even cultural movements. While the goal of Confucius was clearly not to preach the Way, in the sense of a Truth which could override all other truths, he and others did clearly seek to obtain the Way whereby the best qualities and features of various associations and relationships could be brought to the forefront in order to maximize cultural progress and achievement/enjoyment. His belief seemed to be that the more relational goodness that could be tolerated and accepted within the circles of leadership, the more this relational goodness could be disseminated and passed down among the common and lower classes (see Slingerland, 2003, p. 238).

To his lasting credit, Confucian learning and teachings did ultimately provide a substantially improved mode of social stability and mobility (particularly during the Han and Tang dynasties), not to mention the capacity to frequently stem the tides of war and conquest. On the other hand, there is perhaps no other tradition, other than Christianity and Islam, which has suffered from such a range and variety of interpretations and applications. While no religious wars or political conquests have been carried out purely in the name of China's famous teacher, Chinese 'Confucian' culture has been one threaded together by themes of intense intrigue, corruption, conflict and domination made cogent only by the Confucian notions of family, reciprocity, and Heaven's mandate.

**The Potency of Ren as an Ideal**

But Confucius never promised success, he only hinted at happiness. Delight was to be found in the principles, purposes and practices of relational virtue, even if this delight was only imagined or dreamed about in isolation. Whether it could truly be
attained or not, this was a joy that could not be bought, sold, borrowed or contrived. It had to be sought and obtained naturally through and by the reciprocity of relational believers and actors. This people-centered and contingent quality of Confucianism - resting as it did upon the right words, right motives, right thinking, and right action enacted by the right individuals - could, and often did, run counter to many popular Chinese and East Asian cultural notions – just as much as it fell short of its lofty goals due to human error and foible. This was both the strength and the weakness of the Confucians, whose necessary acceptance and contingency approach to learning often lost sight of its noblest intentions and settled for the more immediate (and practical) demands of civil society. Basking in the 'glory' of Confucianism meant allowing for, even if openly criticizing, the rise of Daoism, Legalism, Buddhism, etc. If Confucianism had not been so rooted in the conservative support of government, the conservation of the family as the basic unit of society, and conservation of social learning across and outside of the five relationships, it would never have become so influential in molding and channeling Chinese social norms, the importance of the family, or East Asia's great tradition of centrally governed, clannish entities. As it remained after the Qin dynasty, Confucianism further realized its potency through its involvement in cultural ritual or custom; the very fabric and promulgation of society could thus be understood and acquired without becoming wittingly caught up in religious, financial, political, social or moral contentions or extremes. This moderating influence was both fueled and tempered by the Confucian learning apparatus.

Learning was purposed not only to benefit oneself, but to inspire, encourage, and
benefit the self in relation to others. An individual could not lift others any higher than they were;  

“... a benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence.” (6.30, Lau, 1979, p. 85) 

Confucius taught that “As for the good man: what he wishes to achieve for himself, he helps others to achieve; what he wishes to obtain for himself, he enables others to obtain...” (6.30, Leys, 2014, p. 17). 

“Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves; this may be called the art of virtue.” (6.28, Legge, 1893, p. 194) 

“Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person” (6.30, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 110). In order to make sound judgment of others and to appreciate and put forward their own strengths or virtues, one has to develop a consistent sense of those virtues within themselves. 

Perhaps this is why Confucius taught that
“When natural substance prevails over ornamentation, you get the boorishness of the rustic. When ornamentation prevails over natural substance, you get the pedantry of the scribe. Only when ornament and substance are duly blended do you get the true gentleman.” (6.16, Waley, 1938, p. 119)

“It is only when one's basic disposition and refinement are in appropriate balance that you have the exemplary person (junzi)” (6.18, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 107-108).

Again, Confucius sets a lofty goal for learning, as one pursuing to become a junzi is expected to learn how to balance and blend both substance and style in just the right manner.

As the exemplary learner featured in the Analects, Confucius is described as seeking to be “...free from major errors.” (7.17, Lau, 1979, p. 88), focused on how to “cultivate virtue” in his own life, and to consistently “go more deeply into what I have learned” (7.3, Lau, 1979, p. 86). He encouraged others to “set your sights on the way (dao),” (7.6, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 112), to be earnest in their quest for knowledge (7.20), and to learn how to strengthen, improve, and to reform themselves in the company of others (7.22, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 116).

**Ren as a Principle of Personal Morality**

We must consider also the famous passage mapping out the psychological and moral development of the master teacher and learner. In Analects 2.4, Confucius claimed an ultimate attainment of virtuous spontaneity that required passage through varies levels and layers of practice. The full breakdown of this learning process is portrayed by Huang
in this manner;

“At fifteen, I bent my mind on learning; at thirty I was established; at forty, I was free from delusion; at fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven; at sixty, my ears became subtly perceptive; at seventy, I was able to follow my heart's desire without overstepping the rules of propriety.” (Huang, 1997, p. 52)

Slingerland's review of related commentary portrays this as a predominantly cultural or relational process of development occurring in three basic phases: First, the learner makes a commitment and submits to a path of study and practice. Second, through social action and perception, the learner obtains greater clarity and ease as they “…understand how the Confucian Way fits into the order of things and complies with the will of Heaven” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). The third phase involves the emergence of spontaneous accordance and harmonization; “…a point where training and inborn nature were perfectly meshed, 'like a raspberry vine growing among hemp, naturally standing upright without the need for support” (Slingerland, 2003, quoting Huang Kan, p. 9). By presenting his own development in this manner, Confucius could speak about the potential for a freely joyful and moral society – presumably because he had experienced it in his own life; “At seventy I follow all the desires of my heart without breaking any rule” (Leys, 2014, p. 5). In saying this, Confucius set the mark for those who would come after, that they might also ultimately give their “heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries” (2.4, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 77).

The path of mental elevation and mastery associated with ren did not come easy
however. This is why filial piety and social ritual were such important principles and practices to follow. Perhaps for this reason, the Confucian Golden Rule emphasized moral inaction and proper timing; the avoidance of “...harming another man's son” (11.25, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 148).

In stating that Confucian learning was focused on establishing relational virtue at its core, we must remember that it generally did so by directing individuals to honor their progenitors, become “upright” (Waley, 1938, p. 163), to improve themselves within the context of others (14.24), and to become “correct in their own person” even when others were not (Lau, 1979, p. 119). Confucius taught;

“The gentleman [junzi] seeks neither a full belly nor a comfortable home. He is quick in action but cautious in speech. He goes to men possessed of the Way to be put right. Such a man can be described as eager to learn.” (1.14, Lau, 1979, p. 61)

Note how eagerness to learn is defined as the culmination of desires, the authoritative capacity to avoid social folly, and the active pursuit of correction from the best mentors. Like the master archer aiming at the mark; by keeping the ideal ever present, excellent performance becomes almost assured. The ideal of learning is thus expressed also in Analects 4.4, wherein Confucius is reported to have said that “If indeed one's purposes are set on authoritative conduct (ren), one could do no wrong” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 89) or as Legge interprets this passage: “If the will be set on virtue, there will be no

56 Zhang's (2011) modern Mandarin translation doesn't limit this to the singular, nor to the male gender, suggesting that one simply avoid harming someone else's children.
practice of wickedness” (1893, p. 166). Reading 4.3 and 4.4 together, we must contemplate the notion that “only one who is ren is capable of loving someone who hates them; we can become free from ill will as we sincerely root ourselves in ren.” While Confucius himself may not have fully understood how or why, this rectification of the heart-and-mind set one on a course of relational joy and perfection.

But this also means the desire for virtue must both begin and end in a position of extreme humility and social understanding if it is to bear fruit. Confucius proclaims that it should not be of concern when other people do not understand you, it should only be worrisome when you do not understand or appreciate others: ‘Bu danxin bie ren bu liaojie ziji, danxin de shi ziji bu liaojie bieren’ (1.16, Zhang, 2006, p. 10). For Confucius, the main thrust of learning was forever pointed towards the understanding of others.

This compulsion towards understanding others was not limited to the living. In 2.2, Confucius sums up the basic purpose or meaning of learning by referencing the Book of Poetry, probably the key cultural and moral text of his own time, and which includes an encyclopedic array of human experience, emotion, and motive. Of this ancient text Confucius stated; “In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence – ‘Having no depraved thoughts.’” (2.2, Legge, 1893, p. 146). Lau's translation of the same words takes a more literary and less literal approach, bringing in the beautiful allegorical meaning of a related passage in the Book of Poetry itself: “The Odes are three hundred in number. They can be summed up in one phrase, Swerving not from the right path” (2.2, Lau, 1979, p. 63). Ames & Rosemont suggest that the embedded phrase within the passage, si wu xie, means in this context
nothing more than to “Go vigorously without swerving” (2.2, 1998, p. 76). Liu (2010), Zhang (2006) and Waley each take a more literal approach, interpreting the language at face value to mean something along the lines of “Let there be no evil in your thoughts” (2.2, Waley, 1938, p. 88). The challenge and simplicity of the Way involved the moral mastery of the mind into alignment with the wisdom of the ancients. Working from within the context of an eager yet imperfect persona, a presumably incomplete family life, a confused community, and government systems rife with ambition and corruption, to Confucius there appeared no other way forward but within the landscape of the mind. The mastery of the odes, or book of poetry, was to be an acquisition of virtue and wisdom that would prepare a man to teach and lead effectively;

The Master said, “Though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when entrusted with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?” (13.5, Legge, 1893, p. 265)

It is with regard to this practical application of a new mindset that Confucius teaches it is only the individual who can subdue or restrain themselves and decide to be moral (not the group for the individual), and this through the practice of ritual propriety (Li) in what one chooses to look at, think about, say and do: “The key to achieving Goodness lies within yourself – how could it come from others?” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 125).
**Ren as a Principle of Good Governance**

Analects 1.5 as well as a number of other passages in the Analects (e.g., 13.5, 13.13) strongly suggest that one of the primary reasons for learning was to engender and encourage the proper administration of government. According to Creel:

The doctrine of the Mandate of Heaven... has given every Chinese individual a role in the unfolding drama of the Chinese state. Because it is for the people, finally, that this state has been held to exist, and no rightful government has been able to persist in the face of continued public dissatisfaction. Thus we find Confucius stating that no government can stand if it lacks the confidence of the common people, and Mencius quoting with approval the saying that it is the common people who speak for Heaven. (Creel, 1970, p. 94)

Throughout many passages of the Analects individuals seek understanding from Confucius in matters of governance, and Confucius responds to most of their queries. We learn in Analects 2.18 that Zizhang “was studying in order to take office” (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 79) and that Confucius encouraged this by giving him advice as to how to do so. On another occasion Confucius tantalizes his pupils with the following platitude: “If you simply correct yourself, what difficulties could you encounter in government service...” but then challenges them with the inverse; “...If you cannot correct yourself, how can you expect to correct others?” (13.13, Slingerland, 2003, p. 144). In Analects 13.16 when Confucius was asked about governance by a man already in office, he replied simply that “When the people close to you are happy, those now distant will come” (See also 13.4). In 13.15, a duke inquired as to the power of a single saying to
bless or ruin a country (Slingerland, 2003, p. 145). In Analects 2.19, “Duke Ai asked, What can I do in order to get the support of the common people?” (Waley, 1934, p. 92), and Confucius answered this question also. We also have evidence that some of his pupils obtained government positions while he was still teaching them. For example, in 13.17 we learn that when Zixia was given the responsibility of warden in Jufu, he asked Confucius about politics (Leys, 2014, p. 38). In a number of passages we see direct connections being made between Confucian ethics and matters of governance. For example, in 12.22:

> When Fan Chi asked about humanity, the Master said, “Loving men.” When asked about wisdom, the Master said: “Knowing men.” Fan Chi did not quite understand. The Master said: “Promote the upright, place them above the crooked, and you shall make the crooked upright.” Fan Chi retired and, on meeting Zi-xia, said: “A moment ago, I went to see the Master and asked him about wisdom. The Master said: 'Promote the upright, place them above the crooked, and you shall make the crooked upright.' What does it mean?” Zi-xia said: “How rich is the statement! When Shun was in possession of the empire, he selected from the multitude and promoted Gao Yao. Thus, in humane men left him. When Tang was in possession of the empire, he selected from the multitude

57 The ambiguity of the meaning of the original text encourages disparate views of ancient Chinese governance (and hence the educational objectives involved). Ames & Rosemont translate the same question as “What does one do to gain the allegiance of the people?” (1998, p. 80). Lau as “What must I do before the common people will look up to me?” (1979, p. 65). James Legge interprets this passage as “What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?” (1893, p. 152) and this coincides with Zhang’s (2011, p. 20-21) modern Chinese interpretation, hinting that the Duke’s concern was what did he need to do to make the people obey him (fucong)? The Classical Chinese text utilizes the simple graph fu, meaning ‘to serve’ or ‘to obey.’
and promoted I in. Thus, inhumane men left him.” (12.22, Huang, 1999, p. 131)

Here we see a direct linkage being drawn between an individual leaders discernment and courage to promote good examples, and the importance of establishing those who are good and wise in closer proximity to the ruler than those who are not 'ren'. The primary interest in ren learning, then, is not to merely learn the strengths and weaknesses of others for the purpose of personal moral cultivation, as important as this is, but to learn further how to appreciate the abilities of others so as to put them to good use. Strong leaders would, by definition, learn to recognize the good qualities and merits of others (1.16), while also not losing sight of their limitations, and this dual-mindedness is most certainly an aspect of ren.58 To these ends Book 2 of the Analects contains not only sayings and exchanges on how to govern correctly, but also on teaching, learning, relational cultivation (Liu, 2015, p.14), and the practice of xiao (see Zhang, 2006, p.11), presumably because each of these were seen integral to one's preparation for government office. We learn in the first few passages of this book that Confucian learning had a powerful and demanding moral focus to it, based on the premise that good governance could only be achieved through right thinking and living. What remains of Confucius in the literary record suggests strongly that the major purposes of learning were inextricably linked with the development of good and virtuous governors.

This meant that the purposes of learning could never fully coalesce around only one domain or dimension of life; all aspects of life and living were interconnected. The

58 “It is not the failure of others to appreciate your abilities that should trouble you, but rather your failure to appreciate theirs” (1.16, Lau, 1979, p. 62).
boundaries between the self, the family, the community, and the state were all permeable and virtue or vice in one part of the body flowed freely into the rest: “High office filled by men of narrow views, ritual performed without reverence, the forms of mourning observed without grief – these are things I cannot bear to see!” (3.26, Waley, 1938, p. 101). By becoming a vocal critic of self-absorption, insincerity and ignorance, Confucius hoped and worked towards a more enlightened and magnanimous government. We have already explored how this development rested upon greater purity in the performance of *li*, as well as sincere valuation for human life, particularly concern for the key relationship between parent and child.

**The Life and Limitations of Ren**

Confucius said, “There are indeed seedlings that do not flower, and there are flowers that do not fruit” (9.22, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 131). The ideal of learning to become dual-minded, was constrained and limited in its capacity to convey or cultivate happiness, not only because learning would always be more than a mere social or mental exercise, but also because learning was of necessity a social and linguistic transmission. Because of its roots in filial piety and in the mandates of Heaven, its reliance on the sincere and proper practice of social ritual or custom, Confucian learning had from the outset to take on a real life (and risk) of its own; it could not live or perish based solely on its own merits, but had to wait patiently on the right cultural elements, social contexts, and relational choices to emerge. Ren as a concept was an objective of

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59 “What could I see in a person which in holding a position of influence is not tolerant, who in observing ritual propriety (*li*) is not respectful, and in overseeing the mourning rites does not grieve?” (3.26, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 88).
compassionate duality or dual-mindedness that was not only an individual virtue learned in relational context, but a relational attainment contingent on the nurturing agency of others also. Where ren points the learner, but does not often arrive at then, is as important as what it accomplishes. Again, this is not double-mindedness, in the pejorative sense, but dual-mindedness; being and acting cognizant of both the self and the other. Independent, flexible, capable of cultivating an authentic (albeit incomplete) unity, firmness and understanding in many of the best ways, Confucian ren also rested on correct transmission through other people.

Confucian learning was in essence an experiment in relational virtue, a path forward that eliminated, or illuminated, the core relational challenges perceived and experienced by most people in its time. Ren did not entail a completed state of being, but a deep and potentially transformative exercise in how one thought about the world and the people around him/her that directly impacted the way she/he dealt with others. In this sense, ren led the way forward and brought one back to the basics without resolving two major issues: ren was not a virtue that could be attained in isolation or for prolonged periods of time. This is why even Yan Hui, who was presumably the most successful at ren, was not known to exercise it for more than 3 months at a time. This is why Confucius insisted a student should not yield to one's teacher “...when encountering matters that involve the question of [ren]...” (15.36, Chin, 2014, p. 265). This is why Confucius acknowledged that “When your paths [dao] are different, there is no point in seeking advice from one another” (15.40, Chin, 2014, p. 267).

Ren was rooted in the idea of harmonious but not necessarily melodious or
homogeneous action. Individuals sought to learn how and why to treat others in a particular manner, and the entire litany of Confucian virtues could fit more or less within ren's authoritative fabric, but there was never a clear connection drawn with how this might fit together as a religious system, or why it must be contingent on a political relationship. While xiao allowed for the individual to alter their way of life from the way of their progenitors, this was only after the mourning period of their death. While li provided patterns for the individual who desired to work his way back towards more minor relational challenges and the spontaneous life of joy, only ren had the potential to tie everything together. Perhaps because ren represented such an enticing bundle of potentialities, Confucius became identified as the ideal teacher and role-model through small and simple means, namely he provided consistent momentum in the direction of profoundly emotional and spiritual relationships while also providing intriguing and episodic rational attainments which could be easily packaged, taught and passed on to others (see for example the account of Confucius's aid of a blind musician in 15.42). Ren, in this context, was a state of potentiality that avoided the recklessness, pride and foolishness of the past while not becoming totally disassociated from the culture, community and context of the present but at the same time a state of dual-minded being that allowed one to think critically of others examples even as it bound one to their relational heritage.

Rather than claiming to understand and practice ren (as harmonization/dual-mindedness/humaneness/benevolent virtue) at all times, Confucius and his antecedents were compelled to think about, analyze and approximate ren principles. Some, like
Xunzi, assumed that Confucius's overall reticence concerning ren was rooted in deep mastery. But based on his own account, Confucius wished he could become capable of the silence of Heaven. Having not attained this degree of virtuosity or understanding, still he determined to do his best.

While many maintain that this degree of distance and uncertainty was rooted in the fact that the Confucians had many unresolved questions about their own purpose and identity, just as many insist that their epistemological reticence was rooted more in wisdom and deep knowledge than it was in confusion. How one views the tradition goes just as far as historical fact does to resolve the question. If they truly were on the right path, how would we know it? A subsequent love/hate relationship develops with the Confucian Way of Heaven and appears to be inevitable. After all, even Confucius and his antecedents struggled with an entire host of intellectual, psychological, social, moral, religious, political and historical detachments or disconnects.

The Confucian invitation to learn how to respect that which they could not understand involved the practice of dual-minded goodness or harmonious benevolelence. By honing their observation and engagement skills, the hope was one could become more personally committed to the course best to pursue. This was no immediate revelatory experience with a first and great commandment, but rather a naturally and relationally occurring first and last consideration. For example, in 4.6, Confucius reminds us that

60 “Heaven does not speak, yet men know that it is high. Earth does not speak, yet men know that it is substantial. The four seasons do not speak, yet the people know that they will arrive in time. When a ruler has perfected his virtue, though he is silent, others understand him; though he bestows not favor, others gravitate toward him; though he is not angry, he possesses an awe-inspiring dignity” (Chin, 2014, p. 126).
while he has never met someone who loves ren more than anything else, he has also
never met someone who doesn't have the capacity for ren.

The pursuit of ren was central and paradoxical at the same time. For example,
when Zizhang asked if Ziwen, a widely respected and thrice appointed prime minister,
was ren, Confucius said simply that he didn't know. At least part of this uncertainty may
have hinged on Ziwen's family life and background. Chin reports:

Ziwen … was born out of wedlock to a young woman who was the daughter of
the ruler of Yun.... Soon after his birth, his maternal grandmother abandoned him
in the marshes… until his grandfather, the ruler of Yun, found him and brought
him home…. Ziwen was first appointed to the position of chief counselor in 664
BC, at a time when the ruler of Chu had just died and the ruler's younger brother
was assassinated for his untoward conduct against the ruler's widow. And it was
in this context that Confucius gave his assessment of Ziwen…. (Chin, 2014, p. 71-
72).

When Confucius was asked if others had acquired the core virtue of ren, he
expressed his uncertainty that they had (see 5.5, 5.8, 5.19). It is only the beloved Yan Hui
who Confucius praises for consistent goodness or benevolence, but even this for only
about 3 months at a time (see 6.7). Perhaps due to frustration with the loftiness of this
principle, the man called Youzi, one of Confucius's younger students, taught that xiao
surpassed the importance of ren by arguing that “A gentleman looks after the roots. With
the roots firmly established, a moral way will grow. Is it not true then that being filial to
one's parents and being respectful to one's elders are the roots of one's humanity [ren]” (1.2, Chin, 2014, p. 2). I have already hinted at how the purposes of learning, or the mark for which Confucius aimed, was recognizably lofty and rare and entailed a level of moral attainment as well as benevolent concern and appreciation seldom attained, and yet, at the same time complete and integral to the success of the path Confucius pursued. Through the widespread practice of *li* and rooted in the foundation of a mutually reciprocal parent-child relationships (*xiao*), the dedicated community or culture could obtain considerable wisdom, understanding, and joy in their association with other people (*ren*). But cultures were to be won over not by military conquest or by individuals with sociopolitical/religious control. Relational cultivation could allow quiet, unassuming individuals, almost powerless on their own, to effect gradual, even seamless revolution via the path of self-restraint (see Analects 12.1).

**The Problems of Ren within Confucianism**

The problem was that cultural Confucianism consistently tried to take on more than it could carry (see 6.30). Rather than maintaining its focus on the appreciation of the basic unit of the family, for example, it became prematurely diffused by an extension toward the many and a retraction into the inner mind/heart of the individual. Wrapped as it was in a broad ecumenicism of sociopolitical ambitions, cultural Confucianism failed with regards to building the solid faith and trust needed within the married family circle. Part of this failure seems to have been rooted in Confucius's inescapable reliance upon and attachment to society. While contemporary fans of Confucius will insist the people were simply not ready for the wisdom Confucius could impart, the deeply embedded
conflict and paradoxical limitations of the Confucian mindset is reflected in the words of
Confucius himself, who stated; “It is all over! I have not seen one who loves virtue as he
loves beauty” (15.12, Legge, 1893, p. 298).

True to his form, Confucius pressed on regardless, enjoying authentic enjoyment
in good association and in the potential benefit towards the future. These seemed to be
enough to warrant his love for learning. He did not have to justify his approach with
quantifiable outcomes, but seemed to take pride in its weakness. He found his rest in
sincere, moral and spontaneous association with others, even though this relational
dynamic was frequently beset with limits, setbacks and challenges, and appears, at least
in light of existing documentation, to have inhibited close association with women as
well as members of the 'lower class'. The middle path was composed of both admirable
diligence and antagonizing ambivalence; it was a love-hate relationship with both the
roots and the branches of humanity - both seeing their necessity and respecting that - but
being wrapped up emotionally in more idealistic and chauvinistic concerns. Other
examples of the limitations of Confucius's capacity to relate to others are found in
passages like this one;

The Master said, “Hard is it to deal with him, who will stuff himself with food the
whole day, without applying his mind to anything good! Are there not gamesters
and chess players? To be one of these would still be better than doing nothing at
all.” (17.22, Legge)

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61 Confucius once remarked that “Women and people of low birth are very hard to deal with. If you are
friendly with them, they get out of hand, and if you keep your distance, they resent it (17.25)” (Schmidt
More than reflecting Confucius's esteem for those who worked over those who did not, we learn that he disliked, even despised, those he deemed slothful and gluttonous. Relational learning and appreciation of those more endearing and enduring virtues seemed also to inhibit Confucius from relaxation and appreciation of those 'lower' or 'smaller' individuals who may have found their own authentic joy in rest or in food. Hence the famous passage indicating that only a man of perfect virtue can both love and hate his fellow man (4.3), or as Soothill puts it, “Only the virtuous are competent [enough] to love or to hate men” (4.3, 1995, p. 17).

While frequently associated with humility and practicality, revenant acts of discrimination and differentiation trapped the Confucians in a loop of interminable learning and recursive distaste for other human beings. When society valued greater consistency, capacity, and equilibrium – Confucius could confuse, disturb, and disappoint. When there was a push for greater risk, flexibility, or action – Confucius's call for caution, balance and harmony was ready to be heard. A great deal of this counterpoint approach to cultural balance rested in the fact that relational learning was fraught with a host of threats that needed to be mitigated and avoided just as much as it was a source of moral development and wisdom to be relished. His one redeeming thread, according to himself, was that he never stopped delighting in the learning process. The love of learning was the one characteristic that could endure. On one occasion Confucius asked Zilu;

“...have you ever been told of the Six Sayings about the Six Degenerations? Tzu-lu replied, No, never.... Come, then; I will tell you. Love of Goodness without
love of learning degenerates into silliness. Love of wisdom without love of learning degenerates into utter lack of principle. Love of keeping promises without love of learning degenerates into villainy. Love of uprightness without love of learning degenerates into harshness.” (17.8, Waley, 1938, p. 211)

The primary distinction between those who followed the way and those who did not hinged on their willingness or capacity to love learning from others. In its highest form, Confucius's ideas encouraged a love of learning from and about others, enabling a transmission and attainment of compelling relational virtues along with an equally compelling relationship-centered lifestyle; one that did not totally deny self or others, but worked to elevate society one step, one person, one relationship at a time.

Conclusions: Ren as the Purpose of Relational Learning

This chapter attempted to describe or map out the core objective of Confucian learning, a state of relational being/potentiality commonly glossed in romanized characters as ren or jen (仁). As a source of powerful discernment and virtue, scholars are in general agreement that ren functions in one way or another at the very core and apex of the Confucian learning enterprise. Is ren better described as self-cultivation or relational learning? While on the one hand examples and instances of ren provided individual

62 James Legge translates the same passage as follows, using the word beclouding rather than degeneration: “The Master said, 'Yu, have you heard the six words to which are attached six becloudings?' Yu replied, 'I have not.' 'Sit down, and I will tell them to you. 'There is the love of being benevolent without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to a foolish simplicity. There is the love of knowing without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to dissipation of mind. There is the love of being sincere without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to an injurious disregard of consequences. There is the love of straightforwardness without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to rudeness. There is the love of boldness without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to insubordination. There is the love of firmness without the love of learning;-- the beclouding here leads to extravagant conduct’” (17.8, Legge, 1893).
learners with a more lucid sense of hope and optimism, its episodic nature and uncertain definition or realization also established ren learning as a maddeningly complex, challenging, and perpetual relational process that promised to roll on, “... never ceasing day or night” (9.17, Ames & Rosemont, p. 130). Classical Confucian learning demanded consistent engagement, effort and practice on the part of individuals in order to learn how not to harm or hurt others. It was in large part this desire to respect that which he could not understand that set Confucius apart in his own time. We can conclude that Confucius succeeded inasmuch as he convinced his learners that on a personal, familial, community and national level, the human striving for relational harmonization could never effectively cease.

Indeed, the culmination of learning Confucius anticipated was evidenced only in reference to those who had already died, such as in his language of admiration for his friend Hui and the ancient sage-kings. While some were judged as not working hard enough or long enough, others did not begin their learning process with the proper motivation. Confucius continued to assert the possibility of learning relational virtues – but the pursuit of these virtues did much more to lead one on in the circular process of learning as they did compose the main objectives; good reason why ren was seldom understood or realized. Indeed, Confucius admitted he would never stop teaching those who kept trying to learn, and that the love of learning was his own singular strength. Ren learning was constrained or limited in its capacity to convey or cultivate happiness, not only because learning had to be more than a mere social or mental exercise, but also because ren learning was of necessity a social and linguistic transmission. Whereas the
absence of *ren* in an individual seems to connote a state of detachment or dangerous behavior towards others, the presence or attainment of *ren* means that two or more parties are seeking out and willing to give, to teach, and to learn.

*Ren* as an objective was a concept of compassionate duality or dual-mindedness that was not seen only as an individual virtue learned in relational context, but a relational attainment contingent on the nurturing agency of others also. This iteration insists that Confucian learning was in essence a socio-spiritual experiment in relational learning, a contingent path forward that alleviated the core relational challenges perceived and experienced by most people in its time, but which never could attain universality or non-temporal benefits due to its limited ascension and ever-widening scope. Individuals seeking *ren* sought to learn how and why to treat others in a particular manner or context; thus the entire litany of Confucian virtues could fit more or less within *ren*'s authoritative fabric. While there was never a clear connection drawn with how this might fit together as a religious system, nor why *ren* seemed to gravitate predominantly towards political relationships, because *ren* represented such an enticing bundle of potentialities, many identified Confucius's notion of *ren* as the ideal learning objective. Despite its limitations, we find evidence in the textual tradition that Confucius's notion of *ren* did provide consistent relational momentum in the direction of profoundly emotional and spiritual insights, while also providing intriguing and episodic rational attainments which could be easily packaged, taught and passed on to others (see for example the account of Confucius's aid of a blind musician in 15.42).

A primary interest in *ren* learning, is shown as more than learning the strengths
and weaknesses of others for the purpose of personal moral cultivation, as important as this is, but also to learn how to appreciate the abilities of others so as to put them to good use. Strong leaders would, by definition, learn to recognize the good qualities and merits of others (1.16) as well as learn to truly hate the negative qualities of those who do not influence for good (8.16, 16.4). When Confucius was asked if others had acquired the core virtue of ren, he expressed his frequent uncertainty that they had (see 5.5, 5.8, 5.19).

Rather than claiming to understand and practice ren (as harmonization/dual-mindedness/humaneness/benevolent virtue) at all times, Confucius and his antecedents were more prone to think about, analyze and approximate ren principles sporadically in their learning and leadership efforts.

The deeply embedded conflict and paradoxical limitations of the ren learning mindset are reflected in the words of Confucius himself. Relational learning and appreciation of those more endearing and enduring virtues are shown also to have inhibited Confucius from relaxation and appreciation of those 'lower' or 'smaller' individuals – including women and 'those who couldn't learn'. The purposes of learning, or the mark for which Confucius aimed, then was recognizably lofty and rare and entailed a level of moral attainment as well as benevolent concern and appreciation for others which was seldom achieved, and which potentially underestimated up to half the human population. Perhaps only Confucius could convince us of the complete and integral importance of a path such as this!

In summary, then, ren as an objective was a cultivation of benevolent or respectful duality (or dual-mindedness) that was not seen only as an individual virtue learned in
relational context, but as a relational attainment contingent on the nurturing agency of others also. Luo argues something along these lines in first supporting my claim that “Confucian ethics is not a unified theory of morality” (2012, p. 39), and secondly, in her argument concerning ren as an “integral, higher order virtue” of respect (ibid, p. 40).

Thus, in terms of phraseology, it may be more accurate to use relational-cultivation (rather than self-cultivation) as a way to explain the core learning objective of Confucius (see Panza, 2008). In this way Confucian learning was a rather complicated socio-spiritual experiment in relational virtue, a contingent path forward that often alleviated the core relational challenges perceived and experienced by most people in its time, but which never could attain total absolution due to its limited ascension and ever-widening scope. Individuals seeking ren sought to learn how and why to treat others in a particular manner or context and to appreciate and honor all that was good around them; thus the entire litany of Confucian virtues could fit more or less within ren's authoritative fabric.

While there was never a clear or explicit connection drawn with how this might fit together as part of a religious framework, nor why ren seemed to gravitate predominantly towards political relationships, we are taught that Confucius started from beneath to work his way up to that which is above. Because ren represented such an enticing bundle of potentialities, many have identified Confucius's notion of ren as the ideal learning objective. Despite its limitations, we find evidence in the textual tradition that Confucius's notion of ren did provide consistent momentum in the direction of profoundly emotional and spiritual insights, while also providing intriguing and episodic rational, political and moral attainments which could be easily packaged, taught and
passed on to others.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

It is good to look to the past to gain appreciation for the present and perspective for the future. It is good to look upon the virtues of those who have gone before, to gain strength for whatever lies ahead. It is good to reflect upon the work of those who labored so hard and gained so little in this world, but out of whose dreams and early plans, so well nurtured, has come a great harvest of which we are the beneficiaries.

(Hinckley, 2001, p. 215).
Restating the Problem: From Self-Cultivation to Relational Learning

The problems that draw individuals to study early Confucian thought are probably as diverse as the people themselves. For me personally I was introduced to the Analects (Lau's 1979 English translation) in about the year 2000, in the context of a class on Chinese culture and as part of my requirements as a Chinese major. In 2001, I did a field study in Taiwan exploring contemporary Chinese moral reasoning in comparison with some of the ideas and conundrums presented in the Analects. After taking classes in Classical Chinese, I performed research and published a paper about how comparative study of multiple English language translations were integral for students learning to appreciate Classical Chinese poetry (Torgerson, 2005). As a language educator I have for a very long time found ideas and ideals within the pages of the Analects that have resonated with me both personally and professionally – sometimes as if they were written for me. I have been further intrigued by Confucius' complicated relationship with Heaven, and the passages where he refers to Heaven have given me pause as I have pondered my own relationship with God. The Confucian notions of ritual, depicted herein as sincere, practical, daily actions designed to bring one closer to a path of relational understanding have likewise transformed the way I view the daily decisions and actions of my own life. In essence, Confucius' teachings have been a source of inspiration, turmoil and introspection for me – I have been impressed by the basic moral message he conveys, confused by what appear to be incongruities in the text and/or in his thinking, as well as perplexed by what Confucius did not say and what his students did not record. As I have struggled with the ambiguity of the text, I have also wondered at its
unusual composition and the range and diversity of interpretation found in English language translations and in scholarly discourse. Being able to study the Analects in modern Mandarin translation as well as gain insights from the Classical Chinese has opened up new vistas of understanding but also new challenges and questions. For several years I was intent on making an argument about its sometimes maddening, sometimes enlightening complexity and how the way the Analects is put together might impact our own way of thinking, teaching and learning. Having finally overcome this hurdle, at least partially, I have come to where I am now with the text and its message: ready to condense and clarify as well expand my own understanding.

I have come to thoroughly appreciate the way this text encourages me to want to be there for my family, to be a better friend, to appreciate and respect my wife more for her differences as well as all we share in common, to be there more for my children to listen and care for them, but also to utilize my preparation to be able to better understand others outside of my family circle. I believe that the Analects of Confucius has given me much needed support and guidance in my life. I love how the teachings of Confucius keep me centered on the intersections between daily decisions, interactions and routines and the bigger matters of my life (e.g., education, morality, professional growth, faith and family governance). I am convinced that there is much work to be done both in my personal and professional life and I am grateful to have had the privilege to be able to dedicate so much time to learning, thinking and writing about some of the things I care about most.

I am both excited and concerned that the text and early Confucian ideas are being
so broadly explored and widely discussed in American classrooms. English language scholarship bringing in insights or issues from early Confucian thought has been increasing dramatically in areas of educational philosophy, East-West comparative philosophy, intercultural communication, social psychology, etc. While I am contented because I know that many of the ideas being presented and explored are enriching and enlightening, I am also concerned because I know that the burden of educators and students, already overwhelmed by the task of education, will soon face the daunting task I have faced; to charter, comprehend, condense and clarify an enormous body of knowledge into something ultimately beneficial to the lives and learning of others. I have experienced first-hand the difficult and demanding process of studying and appreciating the textual tradition enough to be able to warn others to stay away, but am also cognizant that there will be many with questions, many eager to invest themselves more fully than I have. As students choose to put forth the effort and sacrifice necessary to study Confucian philosophy, there is a very real mental, moral and psychological burden taken on (by both students and teachers) that can (and probably should) be lessened. As students strive to gain exposure to and make sense of this complex textual tradition, it is my hope that the simplicity and descriptive power of the term 'relational learning', in conjunction with other educational insights from this project will help guide them on their way.

**Future Direction & Research**

American educational engagement and interest in Confucius and China in general has experienced considerable uptake in recent years (see Eno, 2012; Mu, 2012; Dowling,
As we explore and innovate educational solutions for the 21st century student, it is my belief that education writ large will benefit from the history of the Confucian (and much broader Chinese) learning endeavor. Of course, the ideas and ideals presented by Confucius as recorded in the Analects are a good place to start. Because much of the research done thus far is on the level of theory (see Kwak, Kato & Hung, 2016) or is in its preliminary stages (e.g., Liu, 2015; Chen, Tolmie & Wang, 2017), researchers trying to inform educators and administrators will be hard-pressed to make sense of the challenge. Administrators and educators trying to inform students will likewise feel challenged and frustrated.

Feeling as if I have just begun this journey myself, I feel hesitant to point the way forward. Let me simply chart out a few areas where I still have questions, and which may be of interest to policy makers, administrators, educators and/or educational researchers.

First and foremost, I have raised a question about the descriptive and educative capacity of the expression 'self-cultivation' vs. 'relational learning.' Of course my findings are substantially limited in that they have remained only in the realms of reason and philosophy. It might be useful to do additional qualitative and quantitative studies, probably survey and interview-based research, concerning the efficacy and impact of these two terms. More formal and ultimately representational studies with regards to the connotations of each term in the minds of students before, during and after their exposure to Confucian thought and practices may help determine if there is a substantial difference in conception, process or outcome which can be linked to the terminology. It is difficult
to determine the educative impact of either term without any related sociological or descriptive research.

Secondly, I am interested in the emergence of literature suggesting that some of the key processes of learning as recorded in the Analects, processes like critical thinking (Chen, Tolmie & Wang, 2017), collaborative learning and the study of ethics (see Faridi, 2014); small group, peer-to-peer interaction and mentoring (see Chorba, 2013); real-world problem, action-orientated, question-based learning and individualized instruction (see Littky & Grabelle, 2004), etc., are becoming far more prevalent and important within contemporary education circles. While probably none of these scholars and practitioners would immediately draw connections between these learning processes and Confucius, it does give one pause when these developments coincide with processes documented as integral to Confucian learning. We see similar affinities in the description of restructured American schools in their “active in-depth learning”, “emphasis on authentic performance”, “attention to development”, “appreciation for diversity”, “opportunities for collaborative learning”, “a collective perspective across the school”, “structures for caring”, “support for democratic learning”, and “connections to family and community” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 331). Two key areas of interest going forward would be to further explore to what extent American learning trends can be associated with Confucian learning, as well as what additional research and policy measures might be needed to determine how, when, why and where students should engage Confucian learning directly.

A third, and final area of research pertains to the outcomes of learning. While the
benefits of learning Chinese language and culture can be evidenced circumstantially in international business, diplomacy, and other fields, are there demonstrable or measurable outcomes associated with the study of Classical Confucian ideas or philosophy? How might these outcomes depend on the nature and duration of instruction? Does study indeed lead to demonstrable or measurable academic, social, ethical, political, intellectual or other benefits?

**On the Love of Learning**

Based on his own descriptions, Confucius exhibited quite early in his life a sincere and consistent love for learning, a quality which permeated his entire life’s work and teaching approach. Ironically, this venerated teacher of China, a man later worshiped by Emperors and enshrined in the temples of foreign nations, seems to never have really intended to be the ‘Master’ of anyone. His largely private, yet unyielding commitment to *Tian* (天), or Heaven; his emphasis on sincerity in the fulfillment of family obligations; his polite practice of learning ritualization, his social and civic engagements and objectives; all seem to come to bear within the recursive context of East Asia's sociopolitical evolution and in small and simple ways within our global, contemporary educational environment. Despite his many efforts in the domain of civic affairs, the crowning event of his life appears to have been private and interpersonal: based on his own appraisal there was nothing more challenging or rewarding than learning how to follow the dictates of the heart/mind while not doing harm to others (Lau, 1979; Wattles, 1996).

Whether we call it a path of self-cultivation or relational learning, the love of
learning led Confucius through a life of challenge, poverty, political ostracism and even personal endangerment. While these difficulties and trials seemed to somehow endear him to his best pupils, the endgame of a life-long learning process for Confucius was to be able to follow the dictates of the heart without serious error or regret. This goal ultimately rested on correlating his own life with the worthy actions and intentions of not just the living, but also the ancient dead (Slingerland, 2003, p. 239). Studying the past, becoming observant and sincere in the present, and collaborating wisely with others towards a more harmonious and just future allowed for the cultivation of both self and other.

The relational substance and purpose of Confucius's educational message is perhaps best summarized in Analects 4.15, wherein;

The Master said, “Ts'an! There is one single thread binding my way together.”

Tseng Tzu assented. After the Master had gone out, the disciples asked, “What did he mean?” Tseng Tzu said, “The way of the Master consists in doing one's best and in using oneself as a measure to gauge others. That is all.” (Lau, 1979, p. 74)

It is important to note how Confucius did not define or describe this one single thread in any amount of detail, but left it to others to explore and determine for themselves (see also 12.22). The fact that the passage was recorded and that Tseng Tzu's response is not challenged uncovers the enervating and relational characteristic of the Confucian learning project established very early on and which has consistently resulted
in dialogue over how, why and what Confucius really taught. In light of such a wide range of equally viable interpretations, the Confucian message can be aptly described as an expansive path of personal conviction, moral learning, civil dialogue and public engagement. The Confucian message is that we can learn from our interaction and exposure to any member of society, no matter who they are, while still not neglecting the importance of making wise relational choices. This relational orientation has rooted Confucian political and moral education within a simultaneously social and spiritual context – an expansive educative association that welcomes all to participate but also retains considerable individual space for interpretation and agency.

Multiple translations and commentaries in comparison and in conjunction with classic discourse serve as excellent ground for introducing not only the complexity of Confucian moral and civic virtues, but also broadening and deepening contemporary discussions on education so as to include both intellectuals and itinerants, believers and infidels alike. The expansive nature of Confucian discourse allowed both Xunzi and Mengzi, both prominent Confucian thinkers in their own right, not to mention thousands of others, to root their respective arguments about education and the nature of humanity in the same basic teachings of Confucius.

I have argued that for the Confucians, all learning choices are relational choices - conceptualized as both productive and defensive measures; choices which rely upon

63 Both valued the importance of education, but for different reasons. While Mengzi argues that human nature is inherently good, and is thereafter molded by experience and education to bring either positive and negative results, Xunzi believes that human nature is inherently corrupt and must be corrected, guided, and nurtured by education into goodness. Kongzi, Mengzi and Xunzi all agree that it is the learning relationships one chooses and cultivates which determine the path forward.
making the right mental, emotional, social, and even political or spiritual associations, but also outcomes and understandings which are not entirely within the control of the individual to dictate or decipher. By seeking the right motivations, and by avoiding the wrong kinds of proximal friendships, Confucius followed a dutiful, civil and co-evolutionary learning path which could yield good fruit only if it mustered spontaneous acceptance and was found capable of linking past, present, and future exemplars together.

… today, as then, no better medicine could be prescribed for any people suffering from the disorder generated by an intellectualist education, a decadent moral code, and a weakened fibre of individual and national character, than the absorption of the Confucian philosophy by the nation's youth. But that philosophy could not be a complete nourishment in itself. It was well fitted to a nation struggling out of chaos and weakness into order and strength, but it would prove a shackle upon a country compelled by international competition to change and grow. The rules of propriety, destined to form character and social order, became a straitjacket forcing almost every vital action into a prescribed and unaltered mould. There was something prim and Puritan about Confucianism which checked too thoroughly the natural and vigorous impulses of mankind; its virtue was so complete as to bring sterility. No room was left in it for pleasure and adventure, and little for friendship and love. It helped to keep woman in supine debasement, and its cold perfection froze the nation into a conservatism as hostile to progress as it was favorable to peace. We must not blame all this upon Confucius; one cannot be expected to do the thinking of twenty centuries. We ask
of a thinker only that, as the result of a lifetime of thought, he shall in some way illuminate our path to understanding. Few men have done this more certainly than Confucius (Will Durant, 1954, p. 676).

It is this acceptance of the weakness of relational learning, both about and between lives, which has allowed it to function so fruitfully on a personal, familial, communal, national and now global level. This is also how Confucian thought can be viewed both as a threat to social, political, and educational progress even as it serves as a bulwark against the rise of corruption, excess, and ignorance.

While Confucius's composite view of the Supreme as functioning in accordance to universal principles never quite fully emerges in the text, and although he in some points holds views akin to natural laws, these are enunciated more as distancing principles that grant space both to himself and others in order to learn. This odd coupling of distance and benevolent concern resulted in a suggestive and challenging relational learning project. “By posing questions—many of them rhetorical—and presenting analogies, Confucius guides his students to the formation of the answers on their own” (Tran, 2015); hence, the single thread running through his teachings remains an openness and responsiveness to others colluded with an unforced invitation to discover greater relational happiness and wisdom.64 My argument is that it is due to this enduring and endearing relational learning capacity that Confucius is also able to provide his constructive criticism of a society overly invested in escapism and/or self-

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64 It is important to note that Confucius did not see happiness as an elusive future or primordial artifact. Happiness was to be found in the present context by learning and doing the right thing in relation to both self and others.
aggrandizement. Rather than pursuing a path of self-cultivation, Confucius hoped to learn how to build enduring relationships that could both enlighten and ennoble himself and others.

**Learning to Relate with Confucius: Beyond Self-Cultivation**

In broad strokes, one of the major distinctions drawn between Confucian and Western educational philosophy is summed up nicely as follows:

For Westerners, the purpose of education is to cultivate autonomous rationality and individuality. For Confucian educators, the aim of education is to foster good members of the society with a mind of self-perfection (Hung, 2015, p. 85).

But how does Confucius define or conceptualize this mind of 'self-perfection' and does this differ from the notion of self-cultivation so often expressed and explored in the writings of scholars? Charlene Tan has argued that Classical Confucian thought tended towards gradual evolutionary change and social innovation:

Confucius sees human beings not as individualistic, atomistic, or pre-social, but as social beings situated within a community (Tan, 2013b). It follows that it is impossible, according to Confucius, for one to cultivate oneself without performing one’s social roles and functioning as an active member of society (Tan, 2016, p. 82).

We see here a perfect example of how the Confucian notion of self-cultivation could be described more effectively and efficiently as relational learning. If self-cultivation is indeed impossible without the appropriate social context and performance, than self-
cultivation cannot be deemed *the* central concept or thread of Confucian learning. I have argued that self-cultivation is no longer sufficient in describing the nature, processes or outcomes of the Confucian learning paradigm. Within the Analects, and via Confucius' example, we see a healthy and complex notion of the self working on personal, relational and communal levels (see Andersen & Chen, 2002; Chan & Young, 2012; Kim, 2010; Yu, 2005) integrated and realized most typically through a relational learning focus.

According to Confucius, all worthwhile learning runs in tandem with what an individual has said, thought, desired or done in relation to specific others; a son in relation to his father, a husband in relation to his wife, a brother's relation to his brother, friend to friend, servant to ruler, and so on. Because the individual remains in control of at least certain aspects of learning, we still see usefulness in the term. Confucian self-cultivation has been consistently described as a relational path, not as a path of isolated learning or knowing, at least not in an abstract and individualistic sense. Confucianism, as much as it seemed to oppose alternate and individualistic modes of thinking and action, rested likewise on those disparate notions for its usefulness and vitality. While the Confucian learning project *did* focus on self (as opposed to others), this was in the sense that authentic learning from others (e.g., the building and cultivation of character through moral consideration and action in relation to others) could only be realized on a personal or individual level (Tu, 2013). In other words, within Confucian thought, the locus of

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65 While sharing in some ways a personally liberating quality, and certainly centered around questions and answers, Confucius was not concerned so much about *defining* the nature of man and the universe as he was in influencing others properly through his words, thoughts, deeds and desires. To this end, Confucius appears to have attacked myth and fallacy from the opposing ends of cultural conservation and appropriate social, ethical and political engagement.
education is never exclusive to the self or the other, but is considered in whether we learn in relation to someone better or greater, or the other way around. Confucius taught that he found learning possible in any social context. This means that while one could never force self or others to learn, one could invite and pursue learning through the practical engagement of relationality, the cultivation of key relationships, and the pursuit of core relational virtues. In this light, the Confucian learning project exemplifies an understanding still very much relevant, perhaps even revolutionary, to our time. Rather than conceptualizing learning as self or other oriented, we might consider any given learning moment as relationally or non-relationally oriented.

With regards to xiao, the virtue often glossed as filial piety, the focus appears to be on harmonizing relations and building a conceptual connection between relational strength in the family and relational strength in the community or nation. Unfortunately for the Confucians, however, the nature of this relational strength is depicted as a rather one sided (rather than reciprocal) parent-child relationship; a relationship where distance, power and reverence would remain steady themes rather than the closeness, love and mutual respect which could or should have been emphasized. Consider the difference between “A family member should be kind when at home and respectful when away...” and “A youngster should be filial to his parents when he is at home and respectful to his elders when is away from home...” (1.6, Chin, 2014, p. 4). “While your parents are alive, do not travel to distant places. And if you have to travel, you must tell them exactly where you are going to be” (4.19, Chin, 2014, p. 54). “Give your parents no cause for worry other than your illness” (2.6, Chin, 2014, p. 15). While in some cases,
textual ambiguity inhibits one from determining the full directionality or weight of the parent-child relational ethic, what remains is a predominant focus on the importance of children's subservience to their parents. In conjunction with this, first-hand discussion of Confucius's own parentage or progeny is found oddly missing in the Analects, and the only account given concerning his own children enhances a notion of relational distance rather than proximity. It is from this framework of a potentially broken or unhealthy family life that we must begin our journey through the world of Confucian learning. The basic social and relational reality experienced and dreamed of by Confucius is best explored through a close reading of the questions, conversations, platitudes and examples seen especially in books 1, 2 and 4. The relational gap between generations serves as an intellectual and philosophical wedge, pushing apart the Confucian capacity to relate and preventing us from obtaining a better understanding of what could, or should have been, at the heart of Confucian family values. In the end we must turn to reconsider the virtue of the parent-child relationships in our own time, to tap our own powers of moral rectitude, reflection and imagination that we might learn to observe and reflect: “When your father is alive, observe what he would like to do. After your father is dead, reflect on what he has done” (1.11, Chin, 2014, p. 8).

To its greatest extent, the Analects serves as a primer in how ritual social protocol (li) functions and serves within Confucian thought as the glue and substance of the learning process. Throughout the Analects Confucius teaches and learns by engaging others appropriately, and is represented as exemplary in matters of polite and religious social protocol, including such seemingly mundane matters as not sitting down “...unless
the mats were properly placed in accord with custom” (10.12, Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 138). It is through *li* that the master learner practices the art of social virtue; it is through the practice of virtue in social, relational and cultural context that one learns to obtain the Way. For example, note how the following passage depicts learning within an exchange between Confucius and a messenger; when

Qu Boyu sent a messenger to Confucius... Confucius sat down beside him and asked, “How are things with your Master?” The messenger replied, “My Master wishes to reduce his faults, but has not yet been able to do so.” After the messenger left, the Master said, “Now that is a messenger! That is a messenger!” (14.25, Slingerland, 2003, p. 164)

At first reading, we are left with several questions. Because the original document doesn't explain the meaning of the conversation, we are left dependent on intuition and/or outside interpretation. Slingerland explains:

There are probably at least two points to this passage. First of all, Confucius approves of Qu Boyu's noble intentions and realistic evaluation of himself, indications of both an unflagging commitment to further self-improvement... and a commendable degree of modesty.... The second point relates to the theme of knowing the character of others and properly employing people. Qu Boyu clearly knows how to find a messenger who can 'engage in repartee' (13.5) and accurately represent the intentions of his master.... (Slingerland, 2003, p. 165)

The fact that Confucius learns anything at all from this exchange is provided as evidence
Slingerland's helpful interpretation helps us to reconsider many more passages within the pages of the Analects, which are full of these kind of cryptic exchanges.

When properly conceived and practiced, *li* becomes the vehicle or apparatus whereby one can acquire the sublime governing virtue of *ren* (see Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 50), often translated as humaneness, humanity, goodness or benevolence. But one can never conform to *li* without first apprehending and understanding their place within the family unit (*xiao*) and, as Confucius' description of his own learning journey suggests, at least begin to experience a more intimate connection with Heaven. This layered, contingency approach to education is perhaps why Confucius encouraged others to “Learn as if you will never catch up, as though you are afraid of losing whatever you have already understood” (8.17, Chin, 2014, p. 125).

**Parting Thoughts**

The fact that Confucius did not claim to have all the answers himself did not ultimately hinder the power of his message, it transformed it. In correspondence to Chorba's (2013) and Allred's (1991, p. 57) descriptions of relational learning, we have seen how Confucius was not only concerned with understanding recurring patterns of moral and political history, but in working with others to pull out concepts and developments from this history to compare and contrast with the present time. Through

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66 Ames & Rosemont argue that “Observing ritual propriety (*li*) is, by definition, a process of internalization – 'making the tradition one's own' - requiring personalization of the roles and relationships that locate one within community” (1998, p. 50) and that “*Li* are those meaning-invested roles, relationships, and institutions which facilitate communication, and which foster a sense of community” (1998, p. 51).
observation and civil engagement, Confucius and his cluster of scholars sought diligently
to make deeper connections and better choices within their own relational contexts,
ultimately enabling them to learn and lead by example on a path cogent with greater
peace and happiness in a troubled world. A society and culture bent on finding or making
meaning could not quickly understand or easily reject such a degree of agency or
ambiguity – thus Confucius' 'weakness' often has a cathartic effect.

For these reasons, and more, Confucianism has emerged not only as the wisdom
of a ruling class mindful of its citizenry and a people cognizant of their cultural duties,
but also as a culture of individuals at least partially disengaged and distanced one from
another, each pressing forward on their respective paths, and each navigating their own
relationship with the divine. While the natural phenomenon of decay and obfuscation
served as a cultural bulwark against the extremes of altruism, egoism, escapism and
authoritarianism (see Durant 1954, p. 677-682), it also placed Confucius in a unique
position to speak both to the relativism and religious absolutism of his times. Even as he
appears to vacillate back and forth between relativity and the absolute, Confucius may
help us to evaluate the unique opportunities available in our own time of uncertainty,
even as we remember and reconstruct the contributions of our unique heritage(s). In all
these endeavors Confucius spurs the learner on, insisting that one must “Learn as if you
will never catch up, and as if you feared losing what you have already attained” (8.17,

As Braudel (1993, p. 172) has written; “The roots of China's religious life are far older than the three
great spiritual disciplines that were grafted onto it [Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism]. Many
lively strains were present in that hybrid, and they permeated all religious practices. China's religious
heritage dates back to before the first millennium BC, when the country itself was first taking shape.
Nothing thereafter fundamentally changed it.”
For Confucius, moral human engagement did not promise or entail earthly gain or power. Confucius appears to have resolved himself to the fact that his engagement with others could just as easily dissolve and that his efforts would disrupt relations just as often as they would build. His approach could not promise success because it was rooted in the idea of authentic relational growth and insisted on agency. By perceiving and choosing a moderate middle path contingent on the choices of himself and others, Confucius mapped out what relational virtue in a more harmonized world would, could, or should look like.

What we have discovered in the Analects is a fossilized learning philosophy; portions of which remain ready to be uncovered, unpacked and understood, but other portions of which we find missing, moulding in dust or decomposition. So how is it that so many readers of Confucius are able to masterfully guide their pupils towards that single thread running through his teachings? At least part of the answer to this question rests in how Confucius taught: “By posing questions—many of them rhetorical—and presenting analogies, Confucius guides his students to the formation of the answers on their own” (Tran, 2015). The great strength and tremendous downfall of the Confucian narrative is that the thread is both uncovered and supplied by those engaging in the learning process.
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