ASCETICS AND AESTHETICS IN THE ANALECTS

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Summary

The ancient Confucian Analects (Lunyu) often has been interpreted as nothing more than the “pure” ethical teachings of a humanistic Chinese sage, “Confucius” (Kongzi or Kong Qiu). A careful and historically-sensitive interpretation of the Lunyu reveals that the text is capable of resisting this reading, providing clues to an altogether different Confucius — not the storied pedant who dispenses common-sense wisdom to office-seeking disciples, but a spiritual teacher who guides his pupils toward sagehood through a combination of ascetic and aesthetic disciplines. Key references in the text to material privation, music and dance, and the exemplary disciple Yan Hui reveal how one fifth-century BCE Confucian (Ru) sect sought to preserve and construct a memory of the “historical Confucius” as a Master who instructed his disciples in ascetic disciplines, linking them to aesthetic techniques of ecstasy, and celebrated one disciple in particular, Yan Hui, as the living embodiment of his esoteric Way. Instead of proposing either a traditional, harmonizing hermeneutic of the text, or a demythologization which might reveal the “real” or “historical” Confucius and his followers, this essay argues for the toleration of multiple, even mutually-contradicting voices in this classic of ancient Chinese spirituality. A primary goal for future research on the text should be the examination of conflicts of interpretation among early Confucian sects competing to safeguard the Master’s legacy.

Introduction: readings and resistances

In the study of early Chinese thought and practice, to remark on the prosaic and pragmatic character of the Lunyu, or Confucian Analects, is commonplace. Herbert Fingarette introduces his groundbreaking study of the text with the confession: “When I began to read Confucius, I found him to be a prosaic and parochial moralizer; his collected sayings, the Analects, seemed to me an archaic irrelevance.”¹ Perhaps it is due to this perceived blandness of the text that Western

commentators since Pierre Bayle (1646-1706) and Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) have identified it as a repository of pure ethical teaching, wholly free of religious sensibilities or motivations or at the very most, a landmark in the literature of “natural theology.” In this century, Chinese and other East Asian exegetes of the text have often followed suit, leading to the widespread dismissal of the possibility that the *Lunyu* might, in some way, function as a religious text.

Yet a careful and historically-sensitive interpretation of the *Lunyu* reveals that the text is capable of resisting this reading, providing clues to an altogether different Confucius — not the storied pedant who dispenses common-sense wisdom to careerist disciples, but a spiritual teacher who guides his pupils toward sagehood through a combination of ascetic and aesthetic disciplines. Moreover, the Confucius who emerges from the sort of reading proposed here is not the magisterial “perfectly holy teacher of antiquity, Master Kong” (*zhi sheng xianshi Kongzi*) memorialized in Confucian temples from the medieval period onward, but an unapotheosized Master whose remembered words point not only to his failure to win government office, but also to his failure to equal the spiritual achievement of one of his own students. To incarnate such a reading, so vastly different from most previous interpretations of the text and its “hero,” one must turn to three key sets of references in the text: allusions to material privation, to music and dance, and to the disciple Yan Hui.

*Asceticism and privation*

Allusions to material privation in the *Lunyu* are mostly concentrated in what is now chapter 7 of the received text, or *Zhang Hou Lun* (Marquis Zhang *Analects*, collated by the Western Han compiler Zhang Yu from several different regional sources, sometime before his death in

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5 BCE). 4 Although an earlier version of the text — discovered in what is known as Tomb 40 at the Dingxian (or Dingzhou) archaeological site, not far from Beijing, in 1973, and dated to sometime before the tomb’s initial sealing in 55 BCE — is now available, it seems to be both too fragmentary and too similar to the received text to upset previous interpretations of the Lunyu’s textual history.

Chapter 7 mentions material privation in a string of nearly-sequential passages, beginning with 7.13, which describes the Master’s “caution” (shen) regarding fasting, warfare, and illness (qi zhan bing). E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks see these three items as intrinsically related to state cult activities, but given the prominence of fasting and other forms of material privation in the passages which follow (which do not reference state cult in any way), their view hardly seems conclusive. 5 Subsequent references to abstinence from, or indifference to, food and/or drink, are as follows: after hearing a performance of the Shao court music, the Master “didn’t know the taste of meat” (bu zhi rou wei) (7.14); the Master is quoted as saying that there is “pleasure” (or perhaps “music” — le/yue) 6 in subsisting on a diet of coarse food and plain water (7.16); and the Master is said to have included “forgetting to eat” (wang shi) in his self-description (7.19). What can this series of references to material privation tell us about the practices taught


5 The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 124. The Brookses also insist that this passage is an interpolation which does not properly belong with the others in this semi-sequence, but as with many of their arguments along these lines, they do not marshal convincing support in their favor.

6 The difficulty of translating these homographic characters will be remarked upon in the section on music and dance in the text below.
by the Master — or, at least, about teachings reconstructed in the collective memory of his students?

It is, of course, possible to interpret these passages in tandem with others (4.9, 9.27, 10.7, 15.32) which seem to denote little more than high-minded tolerance of poverty in the pursuit of learning and/or moral excellence. Additionally, there are other passages — such as 15.31, in which the Master appears to denigrate fasting as a contemplative technique — which deplore food avoidance for the sake of contemplation (bu shi... yi si) and oppose it to learning (bu ru xue ye). However, it is certainly true that the noble endurance of privation may coincide with the deliberate avoidance of, or studied indifference to, food and other material necessities. Early Ru (“Confucians”) may have practiced both. Moreover, when considering the mutual interpretive relationship between passages in the Lunyu, it is important to problematize the notion of the text as a coherent whole. Even the most conservative of modern commentators do not deny that the text assumed its present shape only over a period of time, while more radical opinions suggest that the text required over two hundred years of accretion before taking the form known today. Finally, John Makeham has pointed out that pre-Qin (c. 221 BCE) thinkers understood the term Ru to be a heterogeneous concept denoting many different traditions, all of which regarded themselves as heirs to the “historical Confucius,” and each of which may have contributed to the formation of various layers of the received Lunyu text.

Thus, at least one stratum of the Lunyu as we now have it devotes significant attention (nearly ten percent of its entire content) to the theme of food avoidance or indifference to material sustenance. If it is true that a particular community of Ru interpreters are responsible for that portion of the text, we must ask the crucial historical and sociolog-

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ical question which any study of early Chinese thought and practice demands: what is the character of the community of practitioners to which this text belongs? Arguments for the historical location of chapter 7 in the overall compositional sequence are either vague or unpersuasive; the best that we can say, it seems, is that this chapter may be related to chapter 8, at least in part, and that it may belong to an earlier rather than a later stratum of the *Lunyu* as a whole. Building on the premise that this chapter was produced by a group of disciples still within living memory of the historical Master (c. 400s BCE), it can be assumed that this disciple group found particular value in the sayings of the Master which pertained to ascetic practices undertaken in pursuit of the Ru path. Even though later sayings (such as 15.31) exist which seem to counter this ascetic tendency in chapter 7, this may mean only that a different (and almost certainly later, historically speaking) disciple group disagreed with the remembered/reconstructed teaching recorded by the chapter 7 group, and found it expedient to voice its disapproval through the mouth of “Confucius,” as did many Warring States (c. 403-221 BCE) authors. The argument advanced thus far here is only that one (perhaps marginal) sect of fifth-century BCE Ru acted to preserve a memory of the historical Confucius as a Master who instructed his disciples in ascetic techniques. This presentation of chapter 7 is quite consistent with other passages in the chap-

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10 Lau advances no distinct argument for the dating of chapter 7, asserting only that it — like the other chapters of the received text — was edited by disciples who survived the historical Confucius; see Lau, *ibid. As* for the Brookses, they admit that “there are no direct indications” of the chapter’s date, relying instead on conjecture to produce their date of 450 BCE; see Brooks, p. 124.

11 Although the argument is made for the existence of an early sect of “ascetic Confucians,” one cannot make the claim that this body of practices represents some sort of “pure” or “core” Ru tradition. Indeed, given the highly heterogeneous nature
ter, which make references to other, possibly allied techniques of self-cultivation: contact with spiritual authorities such as the Duke of Zhou (Zhou Gong) through dreams, or oneiric communion (7.5); a sequence of prescribed practice which progresses from fixing one’s thoughts on the Way (zhi yu Dao) to the culminating point of “losing oneself in the arts” (yu yu ‘yi) (7.6); and the curious combination of aesthetic rapture which leads to ascetic practice cited in 7.14.

Losing and completing oneself through music/dance

The possibility of links between ascetic and aesthetic practices in this particular tradition of early Ruism, however, prompts attention to other passages in the text in which the perplexing characters le or yue appear. Several translators have commented upon the difficulty of rendering this graph with certainty into Western languages. During the early Zhou (c. 1050-770 BCE), this character had at least three distinct pronunciations and semantic sets: yue (“music”), le (“joy/to enjoy”), and liao (“to cure”). According to A.C. Graham, this early phonetic differentiation masks a common fund of meaning, in which the concept of “music” (which includes what we now call “dance”) is conflated with the concept of “joy,” and possibly the notion of curative or beneficent efficacy, as well. Thus, although the character’s particular meaning certainly shifts between textual contexts, it conveys a general sense of aesthetic ardor and satisfaction. Edward L. Shaughnessy has discussed how the genre of early Zhou court song changed from communal liturgical hymn to singular artistic performance as players and audiences became more and more distant from the original historical context of collective ancestral cult. Just

of the text as we have it now, it seems impossible to articulate any such claim for any discrete strand of the Lunyu.


14 See Graham, ibid.
as ritual became the purview of individual specialists (of whom the historical Confucius may have been one) by the end of the early Zhou, music/dance gradually became a spectator, rather than a participatory, activity.\(^\text{15}\) The early Ru who helped to form the text of chapter 7 as we now know it may have been among those who took on the esoteric responsibility of performing — and evaluating — music/dance.

A great many passages in the Lunyu seem to support this hypothesis. At various points (doubtless corresponding to various Ru sects, or various generations of the same sect), the text makes pronouncements on the importance of performing the correct music/dance (9.15, 13.3, 15.11, 17.16), the inseparability of music/dance and virtues like ren = ("cohumanity") (3.3), a circular model for musical/dance performance which moves from chaos to order and back to chaos again, "in order to complete" (yi cheng) (3.23), the "completing" function of music/dance (cheng yu yue) (8.8), and the general rapture inspired by virtuoso musical/dance performance (8.15). The most striking instance of the priority assigned to the aesthetic faculty within human beings may be 2.4, in which the Master’s moral ontology nears its apex when “at sixty [years of age] the ears then become attuned” (liu shi er er shun).\(^\text{16}\) This achievement is the last crucial step to be taken before, at seventy years of age, one can “follow the desire of one’s heart-and-mind without transgressing the correct pattern” (cong xin suo yu bu yu ju). Like many other “craft” metaphors in the Lunyu, the use of the graph ju ("carpenter’s square, patterning device") suggests that self-cultivation is concerned with attuning oneself to a preordained pattern of being and perception — in this case, not only in order to actualize Ru perfection, but also to make a place for oneself as a ritual specialist.


\(^{16}\) Until the discovery of the Dingzhou Lunyu, many commentators felt that the character er ("ear") in this passage must have been a textual corruption, but the character appears clearly in the Dingzhou text. See Ames and Rosemont, p. 232, n. 24.
Certainly, this corresponds to the portrait of the early Ru presented by Robert Eno, who argues that

Ruism was not primarily a political movement, but was first and foremost groups of men meeting to practice and discuss ritual ceremonies and music, immediately motivated by the ideal expectation of attaining transcendent wisdom and the practical expectation of employment as a ritual Master.\textsuperscript{17}

The testimony of art historians and archaeologists adds force to this suggestion. In a discussion of the fabulous set of musical bells discovered in the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng (d. 433 BCE) at Sui Xian in 1978, Robert W. Bagley has suggested that the extraordinary precision of the bells’ design — all the more extraordinary for the apparent absence of complex mathematical models in early China — prompts the speculation that “bell masters” transmitted their highly refined art very carefully to disciples.\textsuperscript{18} Benjamin I. Schwartz has also speculated that the paired disciplines of poetry (\textit{shi}) and music/dance (\textit{yue}) in early China represented forms of contemplative practice, which required careful instruction, practice, performance, and appreciation.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, in his own study of Marquis Yi’s magnificent bell orchestra, Lothar von Falkenhausen puts forth the idea that, as the sense of the extraordinary importance of ritual music and dance inherited from the early Zhou met with the increasing political irrelevance of court aesthetics and musical technologies during the Warring States, Chinese thinkers developed discursive spaces for the theoretical discussion of music/dance and its correlative connections with the greater cosmos.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{18} “Bells, Scales, and Pitch Standards: The Archaeology of Music in Ancient China” (lecture, University of California at Berkeley, 23 April 1998). Excellent photographic images of the Yi tomb bells, along with a brief archaeological essay by Feng Guangsheng, can be found in \textit{Zenghouyimu Wenwuyishu} (Hubei: Hubei Meishu Chubanshe, 1996), plates 1-57 (pp. 8-34) and pp. 158-162.


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Suspended Music: Chime-Bells in the Culture of Bronze Age China} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 3-4 and 310-324.
By the third century BCE, disenfranchised Ru aestheticians were writing about how “all musical tones are born in the hearts-and-minds of human beings” (fan yin zhi qi you ren xin sheng ye), even though there is little evidence of the sort of large-scale political investment in music/dance that made bell orchestras like Marquis Yi’s possible some two hundred years earlier.\(^{21}\)

Although we can surmise that there was a group of early Ru who made it their business to master song and ceremonial even as they used ascetic practices to further their self-cultivation, thus far this general speculation has only been supported by nonspecific statements, many pseudepigraphically inserted into the mouth of the historical Confucius. There is, however, an individual life, narrated in the Lunyu across its many layers of history and authorship, in which this dialectic of asceticism and aestheticism takes on flesh as well as spirit: the biographical statements about the disciple, Yan Hui.

\textit{The embodiment of the early Ru ideal}

Biographical — not to mention hagiographical — fragments about Yan Hui are scattered across the text, but by far the largest concentration of Yan Hui material is in what is now chapter 11. The Brookses suggest that Yan Hui may have been a near relation of the Master; based on this possible kinship tie, they explain the lavish treatment of Yan Hui in chapter 11 as the work of a Kong family member who was interested in upholding the standard of kinship-based discipleship (as opposed to those disciples who were from outside of the family, such as Zilu).\(^{22}\) If this is so, then a careful reading of chapter 11 goes far in helping us to understand the values upheld by at least one group of Kong family Ru in the century or so after the death of the Master.

Chapter 11 establishes Yan Hui as an adept in three principal arenas of Ru practice: he is among those whose \textit{de} (magical-moral power)\(^ {23}\)

\(^{21}\) \textit{Liji}, “Yueji” (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 1987), p. 204.
\(^{22}\) See Brooks, p. 222, 292.
\(^{23}\) On the translation of \textit{de} as “magical-moral power,” see Vassili Kryukov, “Symbols of Power and Communication in Pre-Confucian China (On the Anthropology of
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is *xing* (put into practice) (11.3); he is unparalleled in his ability to endure privation (11.19); and he is said by the Master to have been the only disciple ever to have truly *hao xue* ("loved study," understanding "study" as a term for mental self-cultivation\(^24\)) (11.7, itself a repetition of the earlier 6.3). Of him, the Master says that "there is nothing I say that he doesn’t like" (*yu wu yan wu suo bu yue*) (11.4). This layer of the text also describes, in moving detail, the deep and abiding affection between Yan Hui and the Master: Yan Hui tells the Master that "while you live, how dare I die?" (*zi zai hui he gan si*) (11.23), while the Master’s outpouring of grief at Yan Hui’s early death is unprecedented (11.7, 11.9, 11.10, 11.11). Nearly twenty percent of the overall sayings in chapter 11 are devoted to narrating some detail related to the death of Yan Hui, although the Brookses doubt that this biographical feature consists of much more than pious legend.\(^25\) Whether or not Yan Hui actually predeceased or survived the historical Confucius, clearly the *Ru* who assembled the text which became chapter 11 found it valuable to celebrate him as a kind of *Ru* saint, martyred by fate at a young age. What can this tell us about the community of practice associated with the text?

Yan Hui emerges from the hagiographical treatment of chapter 11 as an exemplar skilled in the application of his *de*, ascetic endurance of privation, and mental self-cultivation (which may, or may not, have involved meditation techniques for fourth-century *Ru*). What the community of practice celebrates in its texts, it seeks to actualize in its own collective disciplines and aspirations. Thus, we can surmise that the fourth-century *Ru* who produced this concentrated Yan Hui hagiography were devoted to the application of *de*, asceticism related to

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\(^24\) On the meaning of *xue* as "mental self-cultivation" during the early periods of the *Ru* movement, see Brooks, p. 292.

\(^25\) See Brooks, p. 293.
food and poverty, and mental self-cultivation. The question is then: what were the ways in which these Ru sought to actualize their ideals, embodied in the figure of Yan Hui? An examination of hagiographical Yan Hui passages found outside of chapter 11 can help to establish links between the early Ru practices of asceticism and devotion to music/dance outlined above.

Apart from chapter 11, the next largest concentrations of hagiographical passages devoted to Yan Hui are found in chapters 6 and 9. It is not only in chapter 11 that we encounter Yan Hui as the adept whose practice unites ascetic and aesthetic disciplines and impulses, but also in these (probably earlier) chapters. 6.3 originates the saying about Yan Hui’s exemplary hao xue (“love of mental self-cultivation”) and premature death, while 6.7 celebrates the stamina of Yan Hui’s xin (“heart-and-mind”), which could “go for three months without departing from co-humanity” (qi xin san yue wei ren). 6.11 describes Yan Hui as a xian (“worthy, exemplar”) on whose yue/le (“music/dance” or “joy”) privation has no diminishing effect (bu gai qi yue/le), presumably due to his formidable powers of mental concentration. While chapter 6 celebrates Yan Hui, the adept among adepts, chapter 9 offers a portrait of the star student, still very much the learner from Confucius: 9.11 narrates a long testimonial by Yan Hui regarding the Master’s pedagogy, balanced by the Master’s own comments on his student’s abilities in 9.20-9.21. Thus, while it is probable that two different communities of Ru practice (either two separate communities which coincided historically, or the same community in earlier and later incarnations) produced what are now chapters 6 and 9, it is evident that these communities shared a common desire to preserve or invent the memory of Yan Hui as a superlative spiritual athlete, cut down in his prime.

This representation of Yan Hui as the ascetic/aesthetic Ru practitioner par excellence is rounded out by the remaining references to him in the Lunyu, in which he is variously depicted as seemingly (but not actually) stupid and thus quite inferior to the Master (2.9, 12.1), every bit as talented and accomplished as the Master (7.11), and very much the superior of the Master (5.9). It is notable that the figure of Yan Hui is wholly absent from chapters 16-20 — those sections of the text
which are widely acknowledged to be its latest strata. If it is true that the tradition of Yan Hui’s kinship to the Master (whether imagined or remembered) was key to his beatification by early Ru within the Kong lineage, then perhaps Yan Hui’s disappearance during the final stages of the Lunyu’s accretional development can be explained as the waning of Kong family influence over the developing Ru sects. Meanwhile, Yan Hui makes a sudden appearance in Zhuangzi 6.7 (c. 320 BCE) as a meditational adept who — very much in the spirit of Lunyu 2.9 and 5.9 — startles the Master into reversing their student-teacher relationship with a display of his contemplative prowess. If the “Daoist” appropriation of Yan Hui as one of their own seems bizarre or improbable, one should keep in mind that no less orthodox a Confucian than Han Yu (762-828) believed that Master Zhuang himself was a follower of Confucius.

Conclusion: communities and conflicts of practice

We have seen how various layers of the Lunyu and other texts — distinguished from one another both by historical origins and sectarian authorship — stochastically (that is, randomly yet in an overlapping fashion) represent certain early Ru ideals of the fusion of ascetic and aesthetic practices in the service of self-cultivation. The marriage of apophatic asceticism and aesthetic rapture, conveyed to the initiated through a kind of Ru gnosis (possibly through Kong kinship networks of masters and disciples), is incarnated in the literature by the hagiographical figure of Yan Hui, and contextualized historically by the phenomenal sophistication and esoteric transmission of late Zhou and Warring States musical technologies and the increasing theoreti-

27 See Makeham, p. 75. Graham also envisions the author of Zhuangzi 6.7 as something of a maverick Ru; see his Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1986), pp. 18, 117.
Yet it is clear that the community (-ies) of Ru practice which venerated Yan Hui and sought to emulate his example did not, in the end, win out. The final layers of the Lunyu — approximately twenty-five percent of the total cumulative text as it existed by the first century BCE — pay no attention whatsoever to Yan Hui or the “Confucius” who honors him as the Master’s master student. Instead, these later layers — and others in between the Yan Hui hagiographical accounts in the earlier strata of the text — obey the impulses of the communities of Ru practice which created or collated them, concentrating on the corrupting influence of wealth and profit-seeking, the decline in the socio-political order, and the teaching of other disciples within the early Ru sects, who probably represent the leadership traditions within the various Ru sects responsible for these texts. The final result is a great mish-mash of competing, though sometimes complementary, traditions, each of which claims to be the authoritative record of the Master’s original teaching. In this sense, reading the Lunyu is less like having an argument with a single author and more like observing a cacophony of arguments between a plurality of authors.

In this light, it is unconvincing to read the Lunyu with a harmonizing hermeneutic, which would smooth out the many conflicts between the communities of Ru practice which brought the various layers of the text into being. Nor is it persuasive to read the text as a collection of disparate traditions about the historical Confucius, some of which represent the “real” Master’s authentic teaching and others of which are mere apocrypha, to be discarded by the enlightened reader. The former approach has characterized much of the commentary, both Chinese and Western, on the text in this century; the latter approach is embodied by the Brookses’ radical criticism of the text, which resembles nothing so much as Rudolf Bultmann’s famous “demythologization” of New Tes-
tament texts, begun during the 1930s and continued today by members of the “Jesus Seminar.”²⁸

Instead, what is called for by the evident plurality of traditions embedded and advocated within the text is a hermeneutic which can tolerate, even affirm, multiple voices for “the” early Confucian tradition. If the work of Xunzi (c. 200s BCE) is an attempt to address the conflicts of interpretation among various Ru sects, then we must seek for the roots of this fracture within the earliest Ru texts yet known to us — beginning with the Lunyu.²⁹


²⁹ On the pluralistic context of the Xunzi, see Graham, Disputers of the Tao, pp. 235-238.