Disputing Asceticism in the *Analects*

Jeffrey L. Richey, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy and Religion
Berea College
E-mail: Jeffrey_Richey@berea.edu

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Introduction: Images of Confucius

[T]hose who think they know Confucius from the biographical details supplied in one or more of the works connected with him, from hagiographical accounts… or from the slightly nonsensical aphorisms attributed to him by Hollywood screenwriters, are at best only right in a partial sense…. What makes the enterprise of “knowing” Confucius so puzzling is that unambiguous standards according to which one can definitively cull out his authentic words disappeared long ago…. [E]ach era has its own Confucius.¹

In his lucid contribution to Bryan Van Norden’s splendid edited volume, *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, Mark Csikszentmihalyi notes that he “is concerned with the historical evolution of the mythic Confucius and not the recovery of the biography of the man named Kong Qiu [? ? ].”² His renunciation of “the quest for the historical Confucius” contrasts with the ambition of Bruce and Taeko Brooks, who claim that they are “taking away the fictive Confucius, the emblematic Confucius, the

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² Ibid., 135.
fortune cookie Confucius, and giving you back the real one,” on the one hand, and with the postmodern suspicion of tradition represented by Lionel Jensen, for whom Confucius is a “semifictional invention” of “dubious historicity.” Instead, Csikszentmihalyi (quoting Gu Jiegang [1883-1980]) merely asserts that “[e]ach era has its own Confucius” – meaning, I think, that presentations of Confucius (Kongzi) tell us more about their presenters than about Kongzi as an historical individual, and thus, we cannot expect to extract “the biography of the man named Kong Qiu” from such sources, including the Analects (Lunyu) itself. Moreover, he points out that, even if it were possible to perform such a clean extraction of the Warring States teacher from the later textual and historical strata in which he has become embedded, there is no reason to suppose that only one image of Confucius prevailed across different social groups within the same period.

As an intellectual historian and historian of religions, my interest in the Analects primarily is in how this variegated, composite text can shed light on the intellectual and spiritual orientations of those whose many authorial and editorial hands touched it during the process of its formation. Csikszentmihalyi documents the popularity of various images of Kongzi during the Han (221 BCE-206 CE), in which Kongzi appears not only as a sage, but also as a dragon- or unicorn-like freak of nature, a celestial mystic, an

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3 Supplement to The Original Analects – Rejoinders (accessed 30 January 2003); available from http://www.umass.edu/wsp/publications/books/original/supplement/apparatus/rejoinders.html#taking; Internet.
5 Csikszentmihalyi, 153.
“uncrowned king” and would-be emperor, and an esoteric prophet. Not only are almost all of these images absent from late imperial and modern presentations of Kongzi, most of them are at odds with the prevailing conception of Kongzi as “a prosaic and parochial moralizer,” to quote Herbert Fingarette. It is easy, of course, to dismiss these colorful and seemingly unphilosophical images as fictive, fantastic, and fallacious. After all, they postdate the “historical Confucius,” belonging instead to what many regard as the highly fabricated Confucianism of the Han. But Csikszentmihalyi makes it clear that the Lunyu as we know it also belongs to the Han – that it emerged during the first century BCE “as a result of the advocacy of the text by court officials with a specific agenda.” Nonetheless, it is true that Csikszentmihalyi draws his examples not from the Lunyu, but from various “apocryphal” texts, Han historiography and bibliography, and other “non-canonical” sources. But what if equally astonishing images of Kongzi were to emerge from a careful reading of the Lunyu itself?

Hypothesizing Asceticism

In his essay “Whose Confucius? Which Analects?”, Philip J. Ivanhoe reminds us that “before we begin to read a text like the Analects we would do well to ask ourselves, Which Analects and Whose Confucius are we trying to understand?" In this case, I

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6 See Csikszentmihalyi, 137-144.
8 Wing-tsit Chan, for instance, introduces the Han Confucian thinkers Dong Zhongshu and Yang Xiong by describing the former as being “of only minor philosophical interest” and the latter as having done “no more than repeat Taoism.” See Wing-tsit Chan, ed., A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 271, 289.
9 Csikszentmihalyi, 149.
answer: I am trying to understand the *Analects* as shaped by Han *Ru* who both advocated and disdained ascetic practices, and I am trying to do so by understanding the Confucius that each party presents in disparate strands of the *Analects*. Building on the work of Csikszentmihalyi and Ivanhoe, I would like to advance a fivefold hypothesis:

1. The received text of the *Lunyu* contains diverse and, in some cases, mutually exclusive presentations of Kongzi, his teachings, and his practices;¹¹
2. These presentations of Kongzi within the *Lunyu* include contradictory material related to privation and fasting;
3. *Lunyu* passages that praise privation and valorize fasting are evidence of an ascetic agenda among at least some Han *Ru* and their Warring States predecessors;
4. *Lunyu* passages that condemn or devalue privation and fasting are evidence of an anti-ascetic agenda on the part of other Han *Ru* and their Warring States predecessors;
5. Dissonance within the *Lunyu* on the theme of asceticism is evidence of disputation among early *Ru* from the Warring States to the Han about the role of asceticism in *Ru* self-cultivation.

My interest is in “the historical Confucians,” rather than “the historical Confucius” -- or, to be more precise, some historical Confucians: Ru whose various portraits of Kongzi and his disciples represent acts of selective, perhaps fictive, memory, on the one hand (the “Confucius” of Ru dreams), as well as constructions of disciple lineages, on the other hand (the “Confucians” they wished to be or become). Thus, I do not wish to recover the biography of Kong Qiu from the Analects, nor do I think such a project possible. Instead, I wish to recover one of the diverse wings of the early Ru movement, along with an understanding of its critics: the ascetic Ru and their opponents.

**Defining Asceticism**

Any discussion of ascetic themes in the Lunyu ought to begin with a definition of terms. For my purposes here, I will define “asceticism” as the discipline of voluntary self-denial undertaken for the sake of moral and/or spiritual self-cultivation.\(^{12}\) It is proper to distinguish between asceticism as “discipline of the body for some ultimate purpose,” on the one hand, and asceticism as “the destroying of the body or the negation of its importance.”\(^{13}\) In this case, the evidence from the Lunyu suggests that whatever the motivation or goals of asceticism practiced by early Ru, it was an asceticism of the former type -- “exercises undertaken as training of the moral life, and carried through not


\(^{13}\) T. C. Hall, “Asceticism – Introduction,” in James Hastings, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner, 1910-1934), II: 63. The latter type of asceticism distinguished by Hall is characteristic of Greek, Indian (especially Hindu and Jain), and Christian asceticism, in which dualistic concepts of the self predominate; see also Kaelber, 444. Kaelber also notes that “it would be wrong to conclude that asceticism necessarily involves a denigration of this world, the material realm, or the body. Although some ascetic traditions are otherworldly, many others are not.” (ibid.)
for the sake of the exercise but for the effect produced upon the person using it.”

Furthermore, one ought to distinguish carefully between noble privation, on the one hand (bearing up well when denied adequate nourishment), and active asceticism, on the other hand (a discipline of voluntary self-denial).

Pro-Ascetic Passages in the Lunyu

At first glance, several passages appear to uphold noble privation as a laudable virtue among Ru. Kongzi mocks the shi (minor official) who “is ashamed of bad food and bad clothes” (chi eyi eshi) (4.9). Kongzi’s ideal – the junzi or “noble person” – seeks the Way and does not seek food (mou Dao bumou shi) (15.32). He worries about the Way and does not worry about poverty (you Dao buyou pin) (15.32). Kongzi first praises the disciple Zilu (You) for his lack of shame in the midst of privation, then reprimands him for demonstrating pride in his accomplishment (9.27).

All of these passages suggest that food security, like material security in general, is not to be regarded as the goal of Ru self-cultivation, and that poor fare or no fare are to be endured without complaint, although not with undue pride. In other words, there is no compelling evidence in any of these passages for a Ru commitment to asceticism as defined above.

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14 Hall, 64.
15 I am grateful to Ted Slingerland for reminding me of this important distinction.
16 The ABCAD parallelism in these two sayings suggest their origin as oral aphorisms memorized for recitation, as well as (perhaps) for meditational use as mantra-like phrases.

In these passages, I find strong support for unadulterated asceticism. Voluntary self-denial is described as an ecstatic, even aesthetic, pleasure. It is both bliss and hard

17 Is it mere coincidence that Qi ? – in this passage, usually read as a reference to a Warring States dominion – is used in other Lunyu passages (cf. 10.7) to signify a period of ritual fasting? Perhaps the sagely music that Kongzi hears comes to him in a trance state induced by fasting.

18 See note 12 regarding Qi/qi ?.

19 While kong ? , in this passage, usually is glossed as “poverty,” its root meaning is “emptiness” or “vacancy,” suggesting the quietude of advanced meditative discipline. See Michael LaFargue, Tao and Method: A Reasoned Approach to the Tao Te Ching (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 210-211.
work. It is plainly part of customary religious observances and, less plainly, linked with esoteric contemplative practices. No one who has read the Christian Desert Fathers or early Indian Buddhist monastic tracts can fail to recognize the telltale signs of an infatuation with self-denial in these early Confucian texts. And yet the dissonant strains of a rival tune also can be heard within the passages of the *Lunyu*.

**Anti-Ascetic Passages in the Lunyu**

15.31, in which Kongzi condemns prolonged fasting (*zhongri bushi*) and contrasts the uselessness (*wuyi*) of fasting with the value of study (*xue*), introduces a shift in tone. On a less dismissive note, elsewhere Kongzi is said to have expressed caution (*shen*) about fasting (*qi*), along with war and illness (7.13). Regardless, the message of these passages is clear: Ru should not fetishize fasting and, in fact, should approach it with reverent caution – perhaps in the same way in which Kongzi advises his disciple Fan Chi to “revere demons and spirits and keep them

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20 Again, it is crucial to distinguish between superficial similarities among ascetic practices and deeper commonalities of motivation or justification; on this point, see Hall, 63. Christian and Buddhist monastic disciplines of asceticism presuppose a radically different self than early Confucian texts; for a cogent analysis of the absence of the “mind/body problem” in early Chinese thought, see A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 25-27.


22 Kaelber remarks on the tendency on nontheistic asceticism – such as the type identified in this essay – to contrast “mere” ascetic practice with the greater value of asceticism combined with knowledge, realization, or study. See Kaelber, 443.

23 “Despite the fact that all religions condemn extreme forms of asceticism, pathological excesses have appeared in every tradition.” (Kaelber, 445)
distant” (jing guishen er yuan zhi ? ? ? ? ? ? ) in 6.22, although this passage itself is not entirely unambiguous, as Csikszentmihalyi has demonstrated.  

Even more ambiguous is the apparent insertion of anti-ascetic sentiments in the middle of 15.32, quoted earlier in part, and below as a whole (excluding the prefatory ziyue ? ? , “The Master said”):

The noble person seeks the Way and does not seek food.
As for tilling, there is hunger in it; as for study, there is salary in it.
The noble person worries about the Way and does not worry about poverty.


The second line is dissonant with the first and third, both in terms of poetic structure – the ABCD/ABCE parallelism of junzi mou Dao bumou shi / junzi you Dao buyou pin is interrupted by the ABC/DEC parallelism of gengye, nei zai qizhong yi / xueye, lu zai qizhong yi – and in terms of basic meaning. The first and third lines convey a clear sense of the junzi’s priorities – the Way over food or fear of poverty. The second line contrasts the farmer, who can expect to suffer hunger (? nei) because of his vocation, with the junzi, who can expect to be paid well for his efforts.

Another reading of 15.32 is possible, of course. Perhaps the passage merely suggests that, just as farming invites risk and study beckons with possible reward, the

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24 Csikszentmihalyi documents how Han commentators on this passage stressed the reverence of one’s response to demons and spirits, while Song ? (960-1279 CE) commentators emphasized the importance of keeping demons and spirits distant. See Csikszentmihalyi, 150-152.
path of the noble person also entails risk and reward, and thus a single-minded focus on the goal – the Way – is necessary. This reading strikes me as weaker and unnecessarily complex, however, and I prefer the interpretation advanced above. Having staked my interpretive claim, then, what are we to make of such an apparent interpolation?

In reference to Song interpretations of Lunyu 6.22, in which Kongzi appears to disassociate himself, albeit reverently, from demons and spirits, Csikszentmihalyi quotes the late Qing scholar Kang Youwei (1858-1937): “It is not that [he did not speak of] life, death, demons and spirits…. But rather that those who came after him censored it out on account of Buddhist doctrine.” In other words, Kang is suggesting that the posture of the historical Confucius vis-à-vis popular religiosity was distorted and “corrected” by Lunyu redactors who were wary of creating Buddhist, as well as perhaps “Daoist,” associations with the Master. Whether or not this is true, it is suggestive of reasons why some redactor of the Lunyu, during the Han or earlier, may have inserted anti-ascetic sentiments into a passage that begins and ends with commendations of privation as befitting the junzi. Whether such an effort at censoring the emerging Confucian tradition was successful may be judged by whether asceticism has played a prominent role in Confucian self-cultivation since the Han. It would seem that the anti-ascetic Ru won the war, if not every battle. The text of the Lunyu, however, is still littered with the corpses of their fallen foes and not a few escaped veterans, as we can see from a careful examination of passages in books four, nine, eleven, fifteen, and above all, seven.

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25 Csikszentmihalyi, 150.
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Like other so-called “paradigmatic individuals” – Socrates, Shakyamuni Buddha, Jesus – Confucius has left us with nothing from his own hand and, increasingly, a great deal of suspicion about what may (or may not) have come from his own mouth. H. G. Creel once noted that “once a man has become, as Confucius became, the hero of a culture, his name is used in countless stories that are based far more upon the beliefs and aspirations of those who tell them than upon any actual events of his life.” Thus, on the one hand, there is little that one can say about Kongzi, because so little reliable evidence seems available, while on the other hand, what little we have speaks multivocally about him, his teachings, and his practices.

In this paper, I have attempted to show how not only the Lunyu, but the early Ru tradition as a whole, functions as a composite phenomenon (both textual and meta-textual), an arena of contestation, and a product of social and political (as well as philosophical and religious) factors and forces. I have left unanswered the questions of early Ru motivations to, justifications for, and expectations of asceticism -- questions which shift my inquiry from the history of religions to intellectual history and philosophy proper. I hope to engage these questions in a forthcoming study. In the meantime, I am grateful to Mark Csikszentmihalyi because his work helps mine to be possible, both in the present and in the future.

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26 The phrase was coined by Karl Jaspers. See his Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus (New York: Harvest Books, 1966).
28 “Asceticism proper belongs to an age of reflexion. Men in the process of moralization, looking out on life, revert to simple habits in the hope of restoring a morality that seems to them endangered.” (Hall, 64)