

Introductory Remarks

The ancient philosophers conveyed most of their instruction in the form of dialogue.

—DAVID HUME, *NATURAL RELIGION*

Inert like a painting, a text cannot respond to questions. Only the spoken word communicates effectively. Being alive, speech is the medium of philosophically productive dialogue, though only between the right persons. Moreover, what is spoken exercises and strengthens memory; the written word weakens it.

—SOCRATES, *PHAEDRUS* (PARAPHRASED)

In a world that lacks humanity, be human.

—*PIRKEI AVOT*, CHAPTER 2, MISHNAH 5

Many people have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.

—HELEN KELLER, *JOURNAL*, DECEMBER 10, 1936

Every word pure gold and fine jade, the Lunyu, truly an imperishable, invaluable classic for all mankind.

—LIANG QICHAO, *DUSHU ZHINAN* (GUIDANCE FOR STUDY)

The Analects contains the humanist (*Ren*) teachings and ideals (*dao*) of Confucius, who lived some twenty-five hundred years ago, shortly before Socrates began his critical synthesis of Heraclitus and Parmenides as he reoriented philosophy from nature and cosmos to humanity. Confucius too kept his distance from nature and the supernatural and concentrated on the human realm.

For his trenchant axioms and strict judgments about political morality and social responsibility, Confucius (d. 479 BC) has been a dominant figure in the history and culture of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, the four nations that constitute the core of East Asia. His teachings and ideals have served as the philosophical architecture that gives cohesion, durability, and continuity to these societies, and the influence of his thought remains evident there in our own day. Beyond the four nations, Confucius's *dao* has manifested itself in diverse diasporas.

Today, were Confucius to revisit any of those four nations or their diasporic communities, the external effects of modernization notwithstanding, he would still recognize his basic principles and values regarding the bonds of human relations and the forms of authority, with emphasis on learning, on teaching, and on ethics in politics. *Xue*, learning, is the first word Confucius speaks as the book devoted to his life and thought begins.

In Chinese the book is called the *Lunyu*. It is a collection of nearly five hundred brief entries consisting of Confucius's solo statements, conversations with or among his disciples, and a few dialogues with regional rulers. In their cumulative effect these conversations and conclusions became precepts and concepts that shaped the social forms and guided the conduct of the peoples of East, or Confucian, Asia.

Though the continuity of values was one of his main themes, Confucius realized that his project to restore good governance by modeling governments on family values and ancient tradition would fail in his own time. *The Analects* not only tracks his heroic efforts to bring this cause to fulfillment, it also records his resignation to the adverse trends of history and the perversity of rulers. For this reason, apart from its practical, everyday wisdom and enlightened authoritarianism, the work has a kind of tragic grandeur.

The tragic aspect of Confucius's life is echoed in a moment of danger that he experienced as he traveled with some disciples from state to state searching for a ruler whose confidence he might win. "Are we wild oxen or tigers, to find ourselves led into this wilderness?" Confucius cried out, reciting the lines of a classic ode and then continuing, "Will my cause prove a failure? What are we doing out here?"¹ In *The*

1. Sima Qian, "Kongzi shijia," *Shiji*. This is the earliest account of Confucius's life, written by China's first historian of the imperial period. Sima Qian died in 90 BC. For

Analects, the moments when Confucius despairs are infrequent but telling. “He knows he cannot succeed but does not give up trying,” says one observer (A14.40). If he failed in his own time he became a guiding light in a future time.

As for its international status, while *The Analects* does not have the wide Western readership that the *Daode Jing* of Laozi enjoys, its influence has reached beyond the small world of China studies. One scholar, who approaches the work from a philosophical angle, writes, “When I began to read Confucius, I found him to be a prosaic and parochial moralizer. . . . Increasingly I have become convinced that Confucius can be a teacher to us today.”²

The Analects is not an object of sacred veneration. It makes no gestures toward the divine. It needs no garnish of illustrations. Though it has given rise to a long and diverse commentary tradition, it is for the most part rather accessible on its own, without priestly or scholarly intermediaries. No one swears on the text in a law court. Its homely words ask only to be lived by.

Wherein lies the power of *The Analects*? It is not a work of philosophical grandeur or metaphysical poetry. It is mundane, matter-of-fact, undramatic, and occasionally banal. Its suggestions and exhortations about political order and personal virtue, though often pithy in style, are plainspoken, low-key common sense open to all. Many of its phrases have been absorbed into the common language. In our own culture such a claim might be made mainly for parts of the Bible and certain passages in Shakespeare. While this study addresses the meaning of *The Analects* in its own historical period, as well as ways to present it in the classroom, its broader applications are worth keeping in mind.

Rather than think of this small book as a classic or cultural treasure, it may be more fitting to regard it as a common mode of consciousness or a behavioral “operating system” designed for a specific culture. If one were to attempt to summarize its message, it would have two parts: resolute self-reflection and self-discipline together with abiding concern for public service and the common good. Confucius

an English translation, see Sima Qian, *Selections from Records of the Historian*, translated by Xianyi Yang and Gladys Yang (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1979).

2. Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1998), vii.

stays within the secular sphere of individual, society, government, and history, rarely and tentatively venturing into matter known in other cultures as religious.

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As to the text itself, of its twenty books, book 1, with its sixteen passages, is relatively short; book 14, with forty-seven, is relatively long. In this study, passages are cited by book and number, preceded by an *A* for *Analects*. For example, the first passage of the first book is referred to as A1.1. The passage numbering follows James Legge's 1893 edition, but occasionally varies by a single entry; such differences are noted. Translations in this introduction and in appendix A may differ slightly from those in the body of the book since there is no definitive translation. By long-standing convention each of the twenty books of *The Analects* is named with the first two words spoken—or three if a name has three words. Book 1 is titled “*Xue er*,” which means “Having studied . . .” For completeness or clarification, this translation sometimes adds a word or so to the Chinese title. To book 5, for example, titled “*Gongye Chang*,” reference to his marriage is added. Book 12 is titled “*Yan Yuan*”; the translation adds “. . . asked about *Ren*.”

Many of *The Analects*' passages consist of quotations. Among them, those of Confucius are dominant and authoritative, but never imposing, for he was as much a seeker as a giver of lessons. As he puts it in A7.21: “When in the company of several men, I have invariably found one who has something to teach me.” The disciples in *The Analects* number about thirty named figures; they represent a variety of social milieus and come from several different states, but only about half a dozen stand out as participants in multiple passages.

While individual passages carry compelling points and arresting thoughts, the text as a whole seems unorganized and presents no sustained argument. Thematically related passages appear in different books, while neighboring passages often have no connection, or at best, seem to come in pairs or little groupings. Thus random and incomplete, the text resembles an enlightened group conversation or even a temperate town meeting with a varied agenda, at which many state their cases or make their points, but in no particular order and with numerous interruptions and diversions. The presence of a multiplicity of interlocutors creates a vivid effect.

Never overbearing, Confucius leaves a great deal up to the reader—and to his students. He does not overexplain, instead speaking succinctly in provocative aphorisms often posed as questions. In brief dialogues he engages one on one with his students, his followers, and a small number of ruling authorities. All these voices contribute to developing the main themes of the work, making *The Analects* one of the most democratic works of philosophy; among this variety of voices, Confucius's is only the first among equals, authoritative but far from imposing and always ready to defer.

The very brevity of *The Analects*' entries reflects something essential about Confucius: an inclination toward reticence. A10.1 says that he tended to be rather self-contained when he was within his own community, "as if unable to speak." Perhaps he held back in order to avoid overshadowing his kinsmen and clansmen, or to allow them room to express themselves. This inclination to listen before speaking, to recognize that the other may have something important to say, also explains why he would say, in A13.27, "reticence is close to benevolence [*Ren*, regard for the other, humaneness]." One might call this a kind of Socratic method, but Socrates was far more wordy than the Master; he also tended to exploit and overpower as well as to midwife his interlocutors (or use them as *his* midwives). Unlike the Platonic oeuvre, *The Analects* can be read easily in a few hours, but it is worth a lifetime's study and discussion.

In its quotidian attention to human activity, *The Analects* is an unassuming work that seems by its very incompleteness and diffuseness to invite the reader to participate, to add his or her own voice, to reflect on his or her own thought and experience—the first text of interactive philosophy, which by implication values and includes its audience as an equal. Confucius respected the inner authority of every person. In A9.26 he says: "The general of an entire army may be captured; but no one can deprive even a common man of his own sense of purpose."³ This internalization of moral authority has an almost Reformation or Enlightenment, even Kantian, ring.

The concept of internal authority is embedded in a complex of social and political roles. At the level of the state and the clan (*guo* and

3. Readers will note that Confucius and his disciples use the generic masculine throughout this translation. Though words have no gender in Chinese, socially his world was a male one.

jia), the principal units of social organization of its time, *The Analects* deals with questions about authority: what external forms it takes, what it consists of, and how it is lost. Indeed, another title for *The Analects* might be *The Book of Authority and Discipline*—it examines how to practice self-discipline and how to relate to authority. This aspect of the work has to do with Confucius’s strong interest in social cohesion achieved through moral leadership. When asked what a ruler can dispense with if forced, he responds: first the military, next the food supply, last the people’s trust.

The conversion of the Chinese has been undertaken as a challenge by many Christians, almost as a derivative or compensatory project to the conversion of the Jews, a project that Christian leaders have set their sights on for almost two millennia. Like the “obstinacy” of the Jews, the resistance of the Chinese to this project, which has suffered from its historical intimacy with militarized colonialism, has to a great extent depended on the philosophical and ethical teachings operative in their culture, most important among them Buddhism and Confucianism. These schools and teachings amount to a behavioral equivalent to Western religious and political self-idealizations and self-representations. Thus Chinese cultural self-sufficiency and self-confidence have worked to protect them from the West’s ambitious bid to remake China in its own image (or imaginary).

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Born in 552 or 551 BC, Confucius became an active learner in his teens: “By fifteen my heart was set on learning” (A2.4). In middle age he traveled widely among the small states of the proto-Chinese areas around the eastern stretch of the Yellow River. His visits to some of these states, Wei and Qi, for example, are cited in the text. He returned to his home state of Lu in his final years, which he devoted to teaching and to editing classic texts. Although he held office in Lu, his political role was limited and hardly transformative.

How long after Confucius’s death the *Lunyu* took its final form remains uncertain, with a timespan from the late fifth century BC (the earliest suggested dating) to about 150 BC, in the Han dynasty. Over the millennia most Chinese scholars have favored an earlier date, viewing the text as an edition of his disciples’ (and their disciples’) diverse notes and memories. Even contemporary Chinese scholars

have been hesitant to challenge this tradition, holding that the text “had been in existence since the early to middle Warring States period [ca. 420–350 BC].”⁴

In its form, *The Analects* is a mosaic of judgments, homilies, arguments, and exchanges, nearly five hundred in number, arranged in twenty books of varying length. Did it assume this form at one time, or over many generations? There is no generally accepted answer. Furthermore, we “do not know how long Confucius’ teachings were passed on orally after his death, the extent to which his disciples made notes of his teachings, nor how many different sets of students’ notes were compiled and transmitted.”⁵ While this statement is true, *The Analects* should not be thought of as an oral tradition that has become a text. In A15.6, Zizhang asks Confucius about the nature of good conduct and Confucius replies, “‘If your speech is true-hearted and trustworthy, if your conduct is consistently respectful, then even among the uncultured tribes your conduct will be acceptable. If not, even in your own town and village your conduct will not be acceptable.’ . . . Zizhang wrote these words on his belt.”

This habit, among the various disciples, of quoting and transcribing is attested to in other texts of the Warring States and early Han periods, and supports the view that records of what a leader—in education or in politics—had said existed during Confucius’s lifetime and in the two generations following. Based on this, as well as on the fact that bits of *The Analects* have appeared in the recently unearthed Guodian texts from a tomb dating to around 300 BC, the contemporary scholar Yang Chaoming argues for an *Analects* date between 428 and 400 BC.⁶ As Yang Chaoming observes, the very form in which the statements of Confucius are prefaced—*Ziyue*, or “The Master [Zi] says [yue]”—tells us that a statement made by Confucius has been taken down, as if by dictation.

One further detail worthy of note is that we find about ten *Analects* passages spread across five of the seven books of the *Mencius*, believed

4. John Makeham, “The Formation of *Lunyu* as a Book,” *Monumenta Serica: Journal of Oriental Studies* 44 (1996): 1–24, 1–2.

5. Makeham, “Formation of *Lunyu*,” 5.

6. Yang Chaoming, “Xinchu zhushu yu ‘Lunyu’ chengshu wenti zairenshi,” *Zhongguo zhexueshi*, no. 3 (2003): 35–37.

to date from the late fourth century to the early third century BC; the passages are from books 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, and 17 of the received *Analects*. By contrast the later *Xunzi* contains only two paraphrases.⁷ *The Analects* quotes in the *Mencius* are attributed to “the Master,” but not to any text, *Lunyu* or otherwise. Upon what source the *Mencius* editor drew is unknown. But he may well have had before him a collection of entries resembling our *Analects*.

Then there is the *Xunzi* (based on the teachings of Xunzi, ?310–?220 BC). The *Lunyu* and *Xunzi* texts are framed in a similar way: the opening books of both take up the theme of study (*xue*) and the closing book takes up the figure of the legendary sage-king Yao. Since the *Xunzi*, though respectful toward Confucius, departed from Confucian doctrine on major points and never acquired classic status, it is not likely that *The Analects* took it as a textual model. More likely, the *Xunzi*’s editor, Liu Xiang (d. 6 BC), sought to recall *The Analects* and implicitly borrow some of its and Confucius’s own prestige. But Liu Xiang’s edition may not reflect the original order of the *Xunzi*’s books.

Concerning terms, there is an *ex nihilo* argument to be made. Human nature (*renxing*), a fundamental issue for Mencius and Xunzi, plays no role of any importance in *The Analects*. Moreover, although Confucius praises the legendary sages Yao and Shun, he never mentions the supposed transfer of power by abdication, something that became an important issue among later Confucians. This may indirectly support the argument for an early compilation of *The Analects*. Of course, dating the compilation does little to determine the dating of contents.

If the contents of *The Analects* date largely to the late sixth and early to mid-fifth centuries BC, it may well be, as John Makeham argues, that the order and selection of the passages was not finalized until generations later.⁸ One might ask, further, does the fact that these two Warring States works, the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi*, contain quotes of Confucius that are not from *The Analects* suggest that the *Analects*

7. James Legge, “Prolegomena,” *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean*, Chinese Classics 1 (London: Dover, 1971; repr. of Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893), 17.

8. Anne Cheng lists the various suggestions for an early Han date. See Anne Cheng, “Lun Yu,” in *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, edited by Michael Loewe, 313–23 (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1993), 316.

corpus had yet to be authoritatively consolidated at the time of their compilation? Perhaps *The Analects* was formed from a diffuse body of material that existed in various collections, much like the elements that would eventually become New Testament books before their canonization in the fourth century. Maybe the title *Lunyu* should be translated *The Canonical Analects*, or *The Definitive Analects*?

That the “*Lunyu* as a book did not exist prior to about 150–140 BC” is the hypothesis of Makeham.⁹ He holds that *The Analects* crystallizes as a book in the Han, arguing that the apparent absence of the title *Lunyu* until the Han era suggests that there was no stable text before then.¹⁰ Makeham concludes that the *Lunyu* first became a book in a time when Confucianism was ascendant and there was a need for an “orthodox and standard version of Confucius’ recorded sayings.” Nonetheless, he goes on, there is “no reason to suspect that much if not most of the material contained in [it] . . . did not ultimately derive from the early Warring States period.”¹¹

A stable text could have existed for some time before a title was affixed to it. Moreover, tombs have yielded texts that are not titled or are titled by default, that is, by the opening words of each book, as each book of *The Analects* is still titled. Hence Makeham’s hypothesis, which in any event concerns the title and the form more than the content, does not exclude taking the content as reliably representing the ideas of, and the issues and stakes for, the early Confucian school. In other words, a late compilation date need not rule out the historical authenticity of the content as reflecting the late sixth through early fifth centuries BC, that is, the lifetime of Confucius, his followers, and theirs. Meanwhile, how the dating of the text’s compilation affects interpretation of Confucius’s teachings is a question of considerable importance to be held open.

Taken as a whole, this body of transcribed passages constitutes a handbook of ethical, social, and political guidance. It is rich in historical detail and incident, and its points and purposes emerge from contexts of immediate experience. Its aphorisms and metaphors have

9. Makeham, “Formation of *Lunyu*,” 1–2.

10. Makeham, “Formation of *Lunyu*,” 10. The “*Fangji*” section of the *Liji*, which mentions the title, has yet to be definitively dated as either Han or Warring States.

11. Makeham, “Formation of *Lunyu*,” 14.

entered into the Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese languages as living idioms: “A *junzi* [noble man] will not serve (or treat others) as a mere instrument.” “It does not take a battle ax to kill a chicken.” Even fragments like “friends who come from afar” are embedded in modern speech. And yet it is the collective power of *The Analects*’ underlying themes that has informed its multiple small moments with significance and applicability beyond their occasion.

TRANSLATING AND TRANSLATIONS

A dozen or so translations of the *Lunyu* into English have been made. One of the earliest, by the Scottish missionary James Legge, was published in 1861 in Hong Kong. Legge imparted to his translation something of the gravitas of the King James English in which he was steeped. More than one student has said that parts of Legge’s text remind one (in some ways) of the Old Testament. Later translators, Arthur Waley and D. C. Lau for example, have chosen a more secular tone and here and there have improved upon some of Legge’s renderings, but his thoughtful and erudite translation has not been superseded. Legge’s edition has the added advantage of placing the handsomely printed Chinese text above the English, giving the reader easy reference to the original and also indicating its superior authority. Legge acknowledged this authority when he wrote, in his preface to the 1893 reprint of his 1861 translation, that his object had “always been faithfulness to the original Chinese rather than grace of composition.”

Analects, Legge’s inspired rendering of the Chinese title *Lunyu*, has become the accepted English title of the work. It is possible that this name was suggested by the *Analecta Rabbinica*, a work by the famed Dutch orientalist of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Adrian Leland. The word comes from the Greek: *ana*, meaning “from before,” and *lect*, meaning “gathered, regathered.” The term “analects” well characterizes the book’s salvaged conversations and sayings.

The Chinese title, *Lunyu*, suggests something slightly different: it is generally taken to mean the collected (*lun*) sayings (*yu*) of Confucius and his followers. For *lun*, Legge chose the word “digested,” meaning systematically arranged and condensed. Another possibility, however, is that both *lun* and *yu* are nouns, with *lun* meaning conclusions, positions, statements, or judgments, and *yu* meaning conversations. This