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Confucian Teachings

*The ether of earth ascends,
the ether of heaven descends;
the Yin and Yang interact,
the forces of heaven and earth co-operate.
They are drummed on by thunder,
stirred by wind and rain,
kept in motion by the four seasons,
warmed by the sun and moon;
from all this the innumerable transformations arise.
This being so, music is the harmony of heaven and earth.*

—Book of Rites 17:23

The Confucians who preserved and taught the ancient writings held the fundamental belief that these texts represented the sage rulers of antiquity. Tremendous authority was vested in these works as a record of the thoughts and deeds of the sages. The sages themselves were seen as individuals who had ruled through an understanding of the ultimate authority of the universe, *T'ien*, and thus could properly be called *T'ien-tzu*, or "Son of Heaven." They were said to rule under the authority of *T'ien ming*, the "Mandate of Heaven."

Confucius, on the basis of the teachings of the ancients, focused on the moral transformation of the individual and society as the remedy for the chaos of the time in which he lived. He looked to the rulers of his day to become true "Noble People" and as a result to become true rulers bearing the Mandate of Heaven and capable of uniting the empire by following Heaven's authority. Failing to find such a ruler, Confucius redirected his attention to teaching his disciples in the hope of transforming society through the creation of a widening circle of people who were educated according to the moral ways of the ancient rulers.

Confucius used the term *chün tzu*, noble person, as the central figure in his concept of moral transformation. Throughout the classical period of Confucianism and up to the beginnings of Neo-Confucianism, the *chün tzu* remained at the center of Confucian teachings. Following the advent of Neo-Confucianism, that center shifted from the *chün tzu* to the sage, or *sheng*, with the understanding that anyone could become a sage through learning and self-cultivation. Despite this shift, the understanding of humankind remained largely the same in terms of basic Confucian teachings. Even after Neo-Confucian thought added sophistication and new dimensions to the tradition, there remained a core of basic Confucian teachings.

CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN TEACHINGS

Classical Confucian ideas are the products of a group of early Confucians principally represented by Confucius, Mencius, and Hsün Tzu. Rather than considering their teachings separately,

it is possible to talk in general terms about early Confucian thought, focusing on specific ideas largely shared by all Confucians. The most important of these teachings include *jen*, or “humaneness;” *i*, or “righteousness;” *li*, or “propriety/ritual;” and *hsing*, or “human nature.” *Hsiao*, or “filial piety,” is also a vital concept, one that is central for young people growing up in the Confucian tradition.

For the Confucian, these teachings may be said to characterize the ways of the sages of antiquity, who served as models for how to live. The teachings also came to characterize the idea of becoming a *chün tzu*, the ultimate goal of the moral cultivation of the individual. To understand the character of this noble person is to understand the nature of the traits that compose that moral character.

Humaneness

Jen, or humaneness, is probably the most commonly mentioned of Confucian virtues and the single most important teaching of Confucianism. The term, often depicted as a very general virtue in Confucian writings, has been translated in a wide variety of ways, in part reflecting the broad nature of the term, but also the complexity of trying to render the concept into another language. We can find *jen* translated as “benevolence,” “compassion,” “altruism,” “goodness,” “human-heartedness,” “humanity,” “love,” “kindness,” and “humaneness”—the last being the term that will be used here.

What does the Chinese character *jen* actually mean? It is composed of two parts, each a meaningful element. One part means “person,” and the other part signifies the number “2.” So, the word itself literally means something like “person ‘two-ed’” or “person doubled.” This definition suggests the relation of one person to another—and not just any relation, but the *proper* relation between two individuals. In this way, *jen* begins to refer to the moral relation of one to another, and thus, a sense of humaneness.

For all Confucians, *jen* is the most central teaching of the

THE CLASSIC OF FILIAL PIETY

The *Hsiao-ching*, or Classic of Filial Piety, became one of the most fundamental statements about the cardinal Confucian virtue of *hsiao*, or filial piety. Though not one of the original Five Classics, in later centuries it was added to an expanded canon of works called the Thirteen Classics. It is itself a product of the Han Dynasty, though tradition claims it was authored by a disciple of Confucius. There are a number of basic statements about the nature of filial piety that recur within this text, and because of this, it has been held in high respect through the centuries.

The passage that follows is representative of the way in which filial piety is described. There is little doubt about the nature of the relation between children and parents in this passage. With modernization came a strong rejection of this type of statement, though it is also apparent that the sentiment expressed is a deeply ingrained part of the Confucian heritage. At the heart of the notion of filial piety is the idea that one's body is a gift from one's parents and, for this reason, should be harmed as little as possible. In turn, the *Hsiao-ching* makes the virtue of filial piety the foundation for all other virtues:

Our body, skin and hair are all received from our parents; we dare not injure them. This is the first priority in filial piety. To establish oneself in the world and practice the Way; to uphold one's good name for posterity and give glory to one's father and mother—this is the completion of filial piety. Thus filiality begins with service to parents, continues in service to the ruler, and ends with establishing oneself in the world (and becoming an exemplary person). . . . Filiality is the ordering principle of Heaven, the rightness of the Earth, and the norm of human conduct. This ordering of Heaven and Earth is what people should follow: illumined by the brightness of Heaven and benefited by the resources of Earth, all-under-Heaven are thus harmonized.*

* William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, comp., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, pp. 326–327.

tradition. It defines the basic relationship between people in a way that respects the moral integrity of the individual and his or her relation to others. Confucius described *jen* as the “single thread” that runs throughout his teachings. It is generally assumed to be the main characteristic of the noble person. For all later Confucians, it continues to play an essential role in defining the character of Confucian teachings and the ideal of either the noble person or the sage.

Can we describe *jen* in any more specific way? When asked about the “single thread” that runs through Confucius’s teachings, a disciple commented that it may be described in several ways. In fact, two specific virtues are mentioned as ways to describe *jen*. These are the virtues of *chung*, or “conscientiousness,” and *shu*, which means “sympathy” or “empathy.” These words suggest a richer, deeper meaning for *jen*. On the one hand, *jen* means that a person demonstrates conscientiousness toward others, a sense of being concerned about people’s well-being, and acts toward others with nurturing care and consideration. On the other hand, *jen* also has a level of sympathy, or empathy—the capacity to share in the feelings of others and to express one’s own concern for any plight or misfortune that might befall them. This richer meaning is captured in part by the translations of *jen* as “humaneness” or “compassion,” as opposed to simpler definitions like “goodness” or “love.”

There is a famous passage in the Analects of Confucius that is taken as a description of the teaching of *jen*. It reads simply: “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you.” As has often been commented, it is essentially the Golden Rule of the Christian Bible. It says that an individual must consider the other person in all actions and not do something that he or she would not want done in return. This passage is a description of humaneness or goodness, and is a way of describing what should be the ideal moral relation between one person and another.

In describing this same virtue, Mencius says that it is

characteristic of human beings, whose basic nature is goodness, not to be able to bear to see the suffering of another person. This does not mean that some people are not capable of hurting others. Rather, it suggests that human nature has the ability to express goodness and, though it can be turned to evil, goodness is the true state of human nature, a goodness defined in terms of the virtue of *jen*.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of this virtue or teaching to the Confucian tradition as a whole. In fact, one can say that across the centuries of the history of Confucianism, the teaching of *jen* would be the one consistently defining characteristic of the tradition. Whatever century, whatever school of thought, whatever individual Confucian, *jen* has always played a central part.

Righteousness

I is usually translated as “righteousness” (though it can also be translated as something like “conscience”). It means being able to distinguish between right and wrong; it is almost an inner judge within an individual. In this sense, the word *conscience* applies very well to the idea of *I*. To say that someone has a conscience is to say that he or she will act on the basis of an inner sense of right and wrong. This distinction between right and wrong does not necessarily follow popular opinion alone. In fact, in most cases when someone is described as acting based on conscience, it means that he or she has made decisions based on a higher sense of right and wrong. In other words, he or she has not gone along with the majority point of view, because that point of view did not correspond with a higher sense of what was right, according to that individual’s beliefs in a particular situation.

When Confucians discuss righteousness or conscience, they often describe it by explaining what it is *not*. In this case, righteousness or conscience is said to be the opposite of *li*, or “profit,” and *yung*, “utility.” Profit and utility describe two reasons that a person might consider doing something.

Someone might say, for example, if I take a certain action, I will profit; or, he might say that the action will be useful to him, or to family or friends. From the Confucian point of view, these are the wrong motivations to use when judging whether an action should be carried out. The sole concern from the Confucian point of view is whether the action is ultimately right or wrong—that is, whether it is morally right or wrong in and of itself, regardless of possible consequences, good or bad. This question of moral right or wrong takes precedence over any potential thought of how useful or profitable something might be to the individual, or to society, for that matter.

This teaching proved difficult for Confucius and his followers. They were, after all, attempting to convince the rulers of their day to adopt their beliefs. As Confucius and his followers often discovered, the only real point of interest for any ruler of the day was the degree to which Confucian teachings would prove useful to his particular state in this period of terrible civil strife and great contention between states for power. Teachings that stressed doing only what was morally right with no thought of utility or profit were of little interest to political leaders. For this reason, the Confucians met with little success in their attempts to turn the rulers of their day toward their line of thought.

The concept of *I*, even after Confucianism had begun to change over the years, at times produced very grave difficulties for Confucians. Problems arose especially when Confucians served in high governmental positions, giving advice to emperors. Such situations sometimes produced the classic example of a battle of wills: The emperor may want to launch a military campaign to seize more territory. He sees that these actions will bring him great profit and will be highly useful, considering the additional resources that will be added to the realm. The Confucian minister is asked for his advice. Under some circumstances, the Confucian minister might be in complete agreement with the emperor's plan, if

he believes there is some specific justification for military action. However, in this particular case, he realizes that the emperor's decision rests solely on a desire for profit, and finds that there are no moral grounds to support the cause. His decision is that the proposed action is morally unjustifiable and he requests that the emperor desist in his plans.

From the Confucian point of view, no other decision is possible. It is a decision based on what is morally right. In some cases, the emperor might have accepted such advice; in other cases, though, the Confucian minister might be punished—a punishment that resulted from taking a moral stand in the face of a potentially immoral act. To stick by a decision based on a moral determination, no matter what the consequences, is part of the nature of this teaching of *I*. A Confucian minister of state did not relinquish a moral conviction, regardless of the fact that his action might lead to demotion, banishment, imprisonment, torture, or even execution. Moral right from the Confucian perspective was more important than even one's own life. The history of Confucianism is filled with individuals who became martyrs to the cause of *I*.

Rites or Propriety

Li, translated as “rites” or “propriety,” is a teaching found throughout the writings of the ancient sages, particularly the several writings that make up the Classic or Book of Rites. Much of the world of the sage rulers represented in the Chinese Classics is dominated by ritual performance. There are rituals for virtually every occasion and each is seen as significant in terms of the role of the sage ruler and his relation to the authority of *T'ien*. Such ritual reflected the order and structure that dominated not only the individual life of the sage ruler, but the larger society over which he ruled. In turn, it was believed that this order and structure was a mirror image of the order and structure that existed in Heaven itself, as the ruling authority over the entire universe.

Ritual, then, was not simply a casual performance of ceremonies. Instead, it was seen as directly connected to the moral order of the cosmos. At one level, ritual was a way for the individual to show respect to Heaven itself for the organization of all things. At another level, the ritual was itself the way in which moral order was maintained.

The Confucians, as the transmitters of the ancient writings, found a particular importance in preserving the ritual culture that represented China at the time of the sage rulers. As a result, there is much attention paid in Confucian writings to the importance of the ancient rituals. Beginning with the thoughts of Confucius himself, there are a number of passages that discuss the preservation of ritual and the importance of the proper performance of such rites. There are passages, for example, where Confucius is asked to spare the expenditures of ritual by limiting the number of items sacrificed or to lessen the suffering of sacrificed animals by reducing the number of animals included. In each case, Confucius responds by reinforcing the importance of performing the ritual fully and accurately, because he sees such acts not only as something mandated by the sage rulers of antiquity, but also as a symbol of the broader moral order of the universe. The accuracy of the ritual was important, and the Confucians took responsibility for the preservation of the exact form of ancient rituals.

In terms of ritual, Confucius served as both a transmitter and a creator. He emphasized not just the details of ancient rites, but also a critically important element of Confucian understanding of ritual. One can imagine that the ancient culture the Confucians sought to preserve might very well have seen the most important element in ritual as its accuracy and, in fact, might have concluded that any mistake in a ritual performance rendered the act ineffective. From the Confucian perspective, accurate performance was important, but not the most critical element. In a passage in the *Analects*, Confucius laments that ritual has become nothing more than

a mere performance, and he protests this. If the ceremony is performed with accuracy in all its details, what is missing, in Confucius's opinion? The answer is inner feeling. In fact, it is inner feeling that is the key to ritual.

A person performs ritual not for its own sake, but in order to enter into a special relationship with the object of the ritual. For the ruler, or Son of Heaven, the object is Heaven; for the individual, it may be the family, ancestors, or a variety of other possibilities. The point, of course, is that ritual is a symbol of the moral relations that tie all people and the entire world together. To experience the feelings of the ritual is to understand the larger moral implications of ritual performance. Without this broader understanding, there is nothing to the ritual but a physical performance. Although for some, this kind of performance might be quite adequate and efficacious, for a Confucian, it is the inner feelings—not the act of the ritual itself—that represent the real meaning.

This extended sense of inner feelings provides a broadened sense of the meaning of ritual for the Confucian. The term *li* originally meant “ritual,” “rite,” or even “sacrifice.” The Chinese character for the word was a pictogram of a sacrificial vessel being presented to a spirit. The term can be used, however, in a very broad context, one that falls outside of the strict use of the term *ritual* itself. For example, it can be said that one acts in a fashion of *li*, ritual, toward his or her elders. That does not mean he or she performs constant rituals for the benefit of elders. Rather, it means that the person behaves with a ritual attitude. But what does it mean to act with a ritual attitude? It means that one acts with propriety or an attitude of deference toward others.

Again, one does not normally think of a connection between the terms *ritual* and *propriety*. In a very real sense, however, propriety is, by definition, acting ritually. This connection is, for the Confucian, a demonstration of the degree to which all behavior may be considered ritual behavior because it is done out of deference to the moral authority

of sage rulers and the ultimate authority of Heaven. It is showing deference to the moral structure of the world in which we live.

Human Nature and Learning

With the ideal of the noble person, Confucians placed major significance on the ability of each individual to learn to become moral. Self-cultivation was aimed at the development of the kind of teachings described: humaneness, righteousness, and ritual and propriety. The question that arose early in the Confucian tradition was whether such qualities were inherent in the individual or were to be acquired from outside. The Confucians believed that the models for these teachings were the sages of antiquity; no one doubted the sages' ability to embody these virtues in their highest form. The question, of course, was whether all people shared the same nature as the sages.

Confucius himself did not address the question of human nature. He left that issue to be debated by the major teachers who followed him. Essentially, two positions developed on the question, one from Mencius and one from Hsün Tzu. It is important to remember that in the early days of Confucianism, Hsün Tzu was the most prominent interpreter of Confucius. Mencius was virtually unknown to his own generation, even though later, after the advent of Neo-Confucianism, he was recognized as the orthodox interpreter of Confucius.

On the question of human nature, Mencius and Hsün Tzu appear to have had very different interpretations. For Mencius, human nature was originally good. This does not mean that there are not evil people, but Mencius saw evil as a violation of the original good. In this respect, everyone has the same nature as the sages of antiquity, although the natures of the sages were fully realized, whereas ordinary people had to make great efforts to realize their own capacity to be a sage. Mencius defines this human nature in terms of *jen*, *i*, *li*, and *chih*, or "wisdom." Mencius said that human responsibility lies with

developing the inner moral nature with which each person is born. Learning, though arduous, was essentially focused on manifesting more fully what was already inherent within human nature.

For Hsün Tzu, by contrast, human nature was deficient without thorough learning and education. He even suggested that human nature in the raw was evil. (Hsün Tzu was the only Confucian philosopher to take this position.) Although this suggestion was never taken very seriously in the tradition, Hsün Tzu does represent a major trend within Confucian thought. This trend believed that human nature was in need of diligent effort in education under the very strict models of the sages of antiquity. Though Mencius came to dominate Confucian thought, Hsün Tzu played a critical role in emphasizing the Confucian tradition's belief in the importance of education in the process of the transformation of a person into a moral individual. It is a matter of degree as to how much moral quality the individual begins with, but there is a steady tradition of emphasis on the absolute necessity of learning to create the moral person, the noble person, envisioned by Confucius with the full embodiment of the virtues of humaneness, righteousness, and ritual or propriety and wisdom, as a reflection of the moral character of the sages of antiquity and ultimately heaven itself. It rested with the Neo-Confucians to bring philosophical sophistication to these teachings as well as the proximity of the sage as a model to emulate.

NEO-CONFUCIAN TEACHINGS

What makes Neo-Confucianism different from traditional Confucianism is its more philosophical orientation and the degree to which it is a response to both Buddhism and Taoism. Neo-Confucianism entertains questions about what human nature is like and what its relation is to the rest of the universe at a far more sophisticated level than earlier Confucian teachings did. The various schools of Neo-Confucianism have very different understandings of human nature and the universe,

a universe now understood in terms of a philosophical system rather than the simple ethical teachings of the Confucian predecessors. It is not that the ethical teachings are put aside, but rather that they are brought into a more elaborate system of ideas, including theories about the origins of the cosmos.

Neo-Confucianism is also different from earlier Confucianism because it represents a very conscious response to Buddhism and Taoism, one that is both negative and positive. On the one hand, Neo-Confucianism originally grew as an attempt to counter what were seen as the otherworldly characteristics of Buddhism and Taoism. To the Confucians, humankind's concern should be with real problems in the world, not the seeking of a spiritual release from the world itself. On the other hand, the Confucians recognized that both Buddhism and Taoism provided a model for religious life and could play a valuable role in establishing guidelines for a more spiritual life within Confucianism. As a result, the spiritual or religious life in Neo-Confucianism became much more significant than it had been in earlier Confucianism.

A basic core of teachings characterizes the Neo-Confucian movement, which stretches across a wide range of time and cultural settings and represents a broad variety of individuals. Basic Confucian values and teachings were reaffirmed, including the cultivation of sagehood as a religious goal and the need to take moral action in the world. Neo-Confucians felt the need to reemphasize the old teachings because many of these ideas seemed to have fallen into eclipse, particularly during the years after the end of the Han Dynasty and into the T'ang Dynasty, when the expansion of Buddhism and Taoism reached its height. It was the Neo-Confucians who established Mencius as the interpreter of Confucius, and, with this move, they were able to draw attention to the theory of the goodness of human nature as well as the foundation of teaching in terms of the basic virtues of Confucianism—humaneness, righteousness, ritual, and propriety.

The traditional Confucian ideal of the *chün tzu*, or noble

KAIBARA EKKEN'S INSTRUCTIONS FOR CHILDREN

One of the great Neo-Confucian teachers in Japan, Kaibara Ekken (1630–1714), was responsible for the creation of a set of fundamental Confucian teachings for children. These teachings are based on a Confucian view of the interrelations between all people and things in the universe. He told children that just as we express our love toward our parents, who have given us life, we should also express our love toward Heaven, which is the source of all life. These ideas are grounded in the teaching of *jen* (“humaneness”), or, as it is translated here, “benevolence.” *Nature* refers to the world as we know it, but at the same time, it is also the nature of Heaven, because from the Neo-Confucian point of view, all things ultimately hold the moral nature of Heaven within them.

To persist in the service of Heaven means that everyone who is a man should be mindful of the fact that morning and evening he is in the presence of heaven, and not far removed from it; that he should fear and reverence the way of heaven and not be unmindful of it. . . . [F]ollowing the way of Heaven, he should be humble and not arrogant toward others, control his desires and not be indulgent of his passions, cherish a profound love for all mankind born of nature’s great love, and not abuse or mistreat them. Nor should he waste, just to gratify his personal desires, the five grains and other bounties which nature has provided for the sake of the people. Secondly, no living creatures such as birds, beasts, insects, and fish should be killed wantonly. Not even grass and trees should be cut down out of season. All these are objects of nature’s love, having been brought forth by her and nurtured by her. To cherish them and keep them is therefore the way to serve nature in accordance with the great heart of nature. Among human obligations there is first the duty to love our relatives, then to show sympathy for all other human beings, and then not to mistreat birds and beasts or any other living things. That is the proper order for the practice of benevolence in accordance with the great heart of nature.*

* Ryusaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donde Keene, eds., *Sources of Japanese Tradition*, vol. 1, New York: Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 368.

person, was also transformed for the Neo-Confucians to the *sheng*, or sage. With the acceptance of Mencius as the orthodox interpreter of Confucius, the ideal of the sage moved out of antiquity and became a goal for every individual. Mencius had said that anyone could become a sage, and the Neo-Confucians took him seriously. Mencius did not mean that the goal of sagehood was easily accessible for most people. In fact, for most people, it remained largely unapproachable. Now, however, it was believed to be possible and came to be considered the direct object of learning and self-cultivation.

We have described the *Li hsüeh*, or School of Principle, and the *Hsin hsüeh*, or School of Mind, the two major schools of Neo-Confucianism. These divisions differed in their understanding of the self-cultivation process required to achieve sagehood because of subtle differences in their philosophical understanding of human nature. They were united, however, in their conviction that the individual needed to seek moral transformation, to work toward the goal of sagehood. Even the *shih hsüeh*, School of Practical Learning, which sought to turn away from the more philosophical teachings of the School of Principle and the School of Mind, did not reject the goal of sagehood. It defined sagehood in terms of the basic moral teachings of early Confucianism, but it retained that ideal state as the aim Confucians hoped to reach.

For all Neo-Confucians, then, sagehood was the goal of religious life. This religious life, in turn, was measured in terms of the Confucian's ability not to renounce the world as some believed the Buddhists and Taoists advocated, but to commit to the moral transformation of the world.

The end result of these concepts was that the Neo-Confucians were committed to taking moral action in the world. They saw in early Confucianism a tradition that focused on moral action and they sought to recapture this tone of the early teachings. Even as they became more interested in philosophical discussion and the cultivation of sagehood, they did not abandon the emphasis on the need to establish an agenda

of moral prerogatives for acting in the world. They saw their own reestablishment of Confucianism as a way of embracing this fundamental idea—to act and to transform the world through the power of the moral teachings of the sages of antiquity and through their own learning and self-cultivation.

Chapter 4

Restoring Meritocracy

with the Confucians and Plato

(7.6 k / 19)

On the basis of differing levels of competence among the citizens, both Plato and the Confucians advocate aristocracy (in the sense of rule by the best) in the form of a meritocracy (rule by the ablest), rather than a system based on heredity or putative equality. In what follows I'll talk simply of meritocracy, since the term 'aristocracy' has acquired connotations of being well born or well off that are irrelevant. When it comes to ruling, we want the best not only in competence but also in virtue—for if the most competent at ruling were also the most vicious tyrants, we'd have the worst possible regime. History teaches that royal or imperial families don't always make the best monarchs, and that a dynastic succession from father to son often results in worse rule rather than better. The question then arises of how the most meritorious will be found, and selected and educated to lead.

After Plato's praise for meritocracy in the *Republic*, the idea persisted in the West over more than two millennia, though it was rendered redundant when hereditary monarchies held sway. These latter drew support from the Christian idea that, although the ultimate power comes from God, He invests some of this power in secular rulers as 'God's ministers'.¹ Although the 'divine right of kings' theory was abandoned as a result of the political revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries, meritocratic ideas continued to be accepted until the 19th, as promoted by such figures as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville.

The founders of the American republic were squarely in this tradition and perfectly aware of orders of rank, both natural and social. Here is Thomas Jefferson writing to John Adams in 1813:

I agree with you that there is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . There is also an artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents; for with these it would belong to the first class. The *natural aristocracy* I consider as *the most precious gift of nature* for the instruction, the trusts, and government of society

... May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?²

Jefferson is advocating that we acknowledge a natural aristocracy as a gift of nature, and let it be our guide in governing.³

A century later it seemed to one prominent foreign observer that democracy in America had failed miserably in its task, owing to the predominance of sophistry and demagoguery. In a speech given in Tokyo in 1906, Sun Yat-sen criticised American democracy in a way that the Founders, and Plato, would have found sympathetic:

With respect to elections, those endowed with eloquence ingratiated themselves with the public and won elections, while those endowed with learning and ideals but who lacked eloquence were ignored. Consequently, members of America's House of Representatives have often been foolish and ignorant people who have made its history quite ridiculous. ... [Because appointees come and go with the President] the corruption and laxity of American politics are unparalleled among the nations of the world. This would seem to be entirely due to the inadequacy of its public service examinations.⁴

The situation seems to have deteriorated even further since Dr Sun made these observations.

The idea of a natural aristocracy of talent has fallen out of favour in the West over the course of the last 150 years, displaced by notions of political equality and the democratic idea of 'one person, one vote'. But could its prevalence throughout most of the Chinese tradition—and a recent resurgence of interest in the West—be a sign that we've been missing something important?

Radical egalitarians object to meritocracy because it's elitist, but in principle there's nothing wrong with elites if the members are the best at what they do. Just as professions such as architecture or surgery, for example, have elite members who are consummately competent, we can safely assume that the art of rulership will likewise be practised best by the superior few. The resistance to the very idea of superiority is strongest in the United States, presumably because the *Declaration of Independence* states that 'all men are created equal'—and, one would have to add, they don't become less equal as a result of education, environmental influences, and so forth. This leads to a distrust of not only elites but also experts in general.

As Mark Lilla has wryly remarked, the 'new Jacobins' of the Tea Party combine 'two classic American traits: blanket distrust of institutions

and an astonishing, and unwarranted, confidence in the self.⁵ The distrust of any kind of expert verges on the pathological. Why risk relying on a member of the medical profession (and of course not all of them are trustworthy) when we can simply type our symptoms into a field on some website, and from the ensuing prescriptions order the medications to be sent by post, so that we can treat ourselves in the comfort of our own homes? Yet, if you set up a medical system where the doctors practise for the benefit of the patient and not for their own, trustworthy experts won't be so hard to find. Nor does the existence of experts in any way jeopardise the only equality that's relevant: our equal dignity as human beings.

There's a deep inconsistency in the American antipathy toward excellence, since those who oppose rank-ordering in the intellectual sphere are quite unfazed by the orders of rank that obtain, for example, in sports. Suppose that I when young, tall and with hands large enough to palm a basketball, try out for the university team. I fail because not only because I'm not fit enough, which I could remedy, but also because I lack the requisite bulk, which is simply a limit of my physical constitution. Are we to say that to rank-order basketball players is invidious comparison, and that to deny Parkes a place on the team is unfair because it might lower his self-esteem? Or do we say, We're sorry, but he's just not a good enough player?

Few sports fans—and most people seem to enjoy sports—have qualms about rank-ordering players: indeed many think they can do it better than the professionals. But they balk when it comes to saying that, by criteria for academic ability that are relatively independent of cultural adaptation, these children are doing better work at school than those. Although the U.S. education system professes to be concerned with the country's competitiveness in a globalised world, there's a reluctance to do what would help achieve this goal, which is to evaluate performance comparatively.

Selecting the Best (7)

Recognising the benefits of meritocracy, Confucius and his followers prepared the ground for a system of examinations open to everyone, the results of which would indicate fitness for public service. This examination system was officially inaugurated in the 2nd century BCE and has

prevailed, on and off, in some form or other, up to the present day. Critics have pointed out various shortcomings, but its longevity attests to a certain degree of success in appointing competent officials. The system was abolished in 1905, after the national humiliations of the nineteenth century, and then re-instituted in the 1990s. The current Chinese government is on one level a robust (if sometimes corrupt) political meritocracy, though perhaps less so than the more Confucian-influenced government of Singapore.⁶

Xi Jinping emphasises the importance of evaluating the performance of those in charge because he shares the ‘dread of incompetence’ that beset the leaders of the CCP in its early days, who realised that the intellectual resources of the nation were sorely depleted. He consequently exhorts all members of the party, and especially those in a leadership position to ‘constantly improve their professional competence’, above all by ‘developing the broadest possible perspective and broadening their horizons’.⁷ His understanding of the place of studying and learning in political life, and of the content of such studies, is traditionally Confucian.

A robust meritocracy will select rulers and officials who are not only the most competent but also the most virtuous in the sense of being immune to the corrupting effects of the desires for personal profit and fame. As the President says:

Good officials should have moral integrity and professional competence. ... At the current stage, we require that good officials be politically reliable, professionally competent and morally upright, and that they be trusted by the people.⁸

And if they’re professional and reliable, the people will not only trust but also emulate them.

The Confucian world is like Plato’s in being based on the premise of a hierarchy of noble and base that is independent of the heights of rank or wealth and the depths of poverty. Insofar as the philosopher/gentleman is capable of restraining his personal desires so as to be able to live well with and benefit others, nobility tends to go with moderation and modest circumstances. For one to indulge, or be seen to indulge, in expensive pleasures at the cost of others is shameful. In encouraging the Peking University students to cultivate socialist core values and virtues, Xi Jinping cites the ancient book of *Master Guan*:

In ancient China our ancestors developed core values highlighted by ‘ritual propriety, rightness, honesty, and a sense of shame: the four anchors of our moral foundation and a question of life and death for the country’.⁹

In exhorting Party leaders to support his ‘combat corruption and uphold integrity’ campaign, Xi invokes the ‘socialist maxims of honour and disgrace’. For example:

Serving the people is honourable and ignoring them is disgraceful; respect for science is honourable and ignorance is disgraceful; working with and helping others is honourable and profiting at their expense is disgraceful; being honest and trustworthy is honourable and sacrificing principles for profit is disgraceful; living a simple life is honourable and living extravagantly is disgraceful.

The formulation actually comes from former President Hu Jintao in 2006, but Xi Jinping’s full endorsement is evident.¹⁰ Socrates sees it the same way, regarding ‘love of honour and money’ as disgraceful.

Corruption in politics is shameless, and Xi’s first long speech announcing his anti-corruption drive acknowledges that the Party leaders must be exemplary if lower-level corruption is to be wiped out. He cites an ancient source saying, ‘He who is good at governing through restriction should first restrict himself, then others.’ If there’s a need to restrain people from certain kinds of behaviour, the person doing the restraining had better be an exemplar of self-restraint. Given the official benefits and perquisites that come with a particular position, Xi warns that ‘Party members must not seek any personal gain or privilege over and above those.’ And although personal and private ultimately lie on a continuum, those in positions of power must distinguish between them.

As officials under the leadership of the Party, we must separate public and personal interests and put public interests before personal ones. Only if we always act for the public good can we be honest and upright in our conduct, and remain clean and prudent in exercising power.

It’s especially important to be vigilant in the face of the two great temptations of money and power:

Public funds must be used for public purposes, and not one cent may be spent on seeking personal gain. State power must be exercised for the people, and it must never be used as a tool for private benefit.¹¹

The qualifications for being selected to rule are now more evident: both sides call for a combination of talent and virtue, wisdom and compassion, understanding and activity free of the constraints of self-interest. Just as Plato advocates rule by philosopher kings, so the Confucians regard sage-rulers as most competent to ‘nurture the empire’. Xunzi in par-

ticular consistently recommends rule by the 'humane authority' of the 'sage king'.¹²

The rulers must not only be, as Socrates says, 'the most skillful at guarding the city', but they must also 'love' and so 'care for the city'. They love the polity because they realise that their own well-being is intimately intertwined with its flourishing; for this reason they would 'in no way be willing to do what is not advantageous for the city'.¹³ When Mencius is asked how much power, or potency, a man must have before he can become 'a true King', he replies: 'He becomes a true King by tending the people.' The primary Confucian virtue, which the ruler must have in abundance, is benevolence or humaneness: Confucius explains how to cultivate it by saying, 'Love your fellow human beings.' Mencius elaborates by emphasising the family as a model:

Loving one's parents is benevolence; respecting one's elders is rightness.
What is left to be done is simply the extension of these to the whole world.

The ruler is thus for the Confucians, as Mencius says, 'father and mother to the people'—which echoes an ancient line from the *Book of Odes* that celebrates rulers as 'parents of the people'.¹⁴ Just as parents take care of their children not from selfish or ethical motives but because they're their children, so the rulers will put the interests of the ruled before their own.

Socrates and Plato, rather than focusing on the loving relationships among the closest family members, find the instructive analogy in the profession of medicine. With an eye on the nature of the ruler, Socrates observes that the good doctor is in the medical profession for the benefit of the patient rather than himself. He is one who cares for the sick: not one who works 'for his own advantage', but rather 'a ruler of bodies' for the benefit of the sick man, who is temporarily incapable of ruling his own. In this sense doctors, as practitioners of an altruistic art, are quite different from 'businessmen' or 'money-makers'.¹⁵

In the case of the medical practitioner it clearly benefits society to disconnect professional activity from personal gain. If a doctor is also a businessman or money-maker, he is apt to be swayed in his professional decisions by the prospect of profit. Suppose I'm a surgeon, and it's my considered medical opinion that the chances of a certain procedure's benefiting the patient are 50:50, statistically even. If I stand to earn, say, \$10,000 for performing the operation, of course I'll go right ahead. But what if the chances are 60:40 against? Well, I may still be inclined to operate, just in case it helps. But what about 70:30 against? And then 80:20

and 90:10? It's no coincidence, given the financial arrangements that prevail in medicine as practised in the United States, that the nation leads the world in the number of unnecessary surgical (and other) procedures that are performed.¹⁶

If, by contrast, a national health service pays me a fixed salary for being a surgeon, regardless of how many procedures I perform, it's easy to decide whether treatment is called for purely out of consideration for the patient. Whether I operate or not, prescribe medicine, or do any kind of treatment, this will have no effect on my earnings. Such an arrangement benefits everybody—except perhaps a lover of money who practises medicine. Correspondingly, the good ruler works for the benefit of the ruled and not at all for his own. As Socrates puts it: 'There isn't ever anyone who holds any position of ruler . . . who considers or commands his own advantage rather than that of what is ruled.'¹⁷

The problem is that, if you arrange the political system so that the rulers have no opportunity for personal gain, it will be difficult to persuade anyone to take on the burden of rulership. As Socrates aptly remarks: 'No one willingly chooses to rule and get mixed up in straightening out other people's troubles'. Indeed 'the best' will be especially reluctant to rule, being uninterested in either the profit or the honour that could ensue—for after all, Socrates says, 'love of honor and love of money are said to be, and are, *reproaches*'.

The best will have to be persuaded to rule, and are likely to consent only if they're shown that all other candidates are less qualified, since they'll be reluctant to be governed by people who are less able than themselves. If the persuasion works, the city will 'necessarily be governed in the way that is best and freest from faction'—in sharp contrast to the way 'many cities nowadays [4th century BCE] are governed by men who fight over shadows with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good.'¹⁸ This latter way of governing has staying power, being sadly widespread still in the political world of today.

To ensure that the rulers can't possibly be swayed by the prospect of profit, Socrates requires that they possess no private property except for the necessities, which will be provided as a 'salary' by other citizens, in moderate amounts that result in neither surplus nor lack. Because the guardians and warriors have been led to believe they have gold or silver in their souls, they'll have no need of the physical kind and will be prohibited (unlike the lower classes) from owning, or even touching, silver

or gold. These arrangements ensure that the prospect of personal gain can't enter into the decisions the rulers make concerning what is best for the community. The basic premise of the whole discussion is, as Socrates says, that 'we are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole.'¹⁹

The Chinese thinkers didn't envisage resorting to such measures for ensuring that the ruler doesn't act out of self-interest because they placed more faith in the effects of self-cultivation. After the appropriate education, the candidates for rulership are obliged to engage in forms of self-cultivation designed to reduce egocentrism and promote concern for others. Although the Confucian thinkers rarely condemn the desire for profit as roundly as Socrates does, they consistently warn that looking out for personal gain can divert one from doing the right thing.

Xi Jinping has insisted on the separation of money from politics for quite some time. In an interview from the year 2000, in response to a question about his desire 'to do something good for society', he replied:

When that is the goal of your life, you must at the same time be aware that you can't have your cake and eat it. If you go into politics, it mustn't be for money. Sun Yatsen said the same thing, namely that one has to make up one's mind to accomplish something and not go for a high position as an official. If you wish to make money, there are many legal ways of becoming rich. Becoming rich in a legal way is worth all honour and respect. Later the taxation authorities will also respect you because you are contributing to the economic development of the country. But you should not go into politics if you wish to become wealthy. In that case you will inevitably become a corrupt and filthy official.

Four years later he urged his colleagues in government, 'Rein in your spouses, children, relatives, friends and staff, and vow not to use power for personal gain.' The message apparently failed to get through to some Party leaders, whose families are enormously wealthy.²⁰

Xi's crackdown on corruption has a philosophical justification in a harder line that can be traced through Chinese political thought. When Xunzi was asked how best to govern, his response on one occasion was remarkably Legalist in tone:

Promote the worthy and capable without regard to seniority; dismiss the unfit and incapable without hesitation; execute the principal evildoers without trying first to instruct them; and transform the common lot of men without trying first to rectify them.

The book of *Master Guan*, which is from the same period and exhibits even more influence from Legalism, prescribes the perfect remedy against corrupt politicians: 'If you discover that any of your ministers are working for their personal profit, have them executed immediately'.²¹ That'll teach them. If it's profit they're after, as Xi Jinping remarked, they can go into business or the world of finance. Given the prevalence of corruption and incompetence in today's politics, we would benefit greatly from a restoration of meritocratic principles to ensure that those who are the most competent at governing are put in charge.

To remedy the drawbacks of democracy we could introduce reforms to ensure that one qualifies for public office through ability rather than popularity. A meritocratic ideal would help us modify our current democratic systems toward less corrupt and fairer forms. Nicholas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels have made a number of insightful (and concrete) proposals along these lines in their book *Intelligent Governance for the 21st Century*. As the subtitle suggests, the authors offer 'a Middle Way between West and East' in proposing a regime of more intelligent governance that would combine Chinese meritocratic features with Western checks on accountability.²² They demonstrate that it's quite feasible to incorporate some kind of overseeing agency into a Confucian system of government, and by the same token to improve democracy by insulating it from money and making it more meritocratic.

Those with merit in society contribute more if their virtues and talents are nurtured by appropriate education. So, once you've found those among the young who display the greatest aptitude for governing, you want to consolidate and nurture that talent through teaching them what they need to know. If the future rulers are to be uninterested in profit and devoted to caring for the people, they must—since such altruism doesn't come naturally to most of us—be educated in the right way. It's significant that both Confucius and Plato advocate education of the body through physical training and shaping of the emotions through the medium of music, which in both cases includes poetry as well as song. The aim is graceful embodiment and psychical harmony, of the individual and consequently the state as well.

Educating the Rulers (6)

Acknowledging that children are not equally endowed with talent but endowed with different talents, the primary task of the educator in ancient Greece as in China was to offer the broadest possible access to ed-

education through a system where competent parties judge the students' abilities and inclinations, and direct them toward the kind of education that best equips them to contribute to the public good. Although both societies were overwhelmingly patriarchal by our standards, when Socrates talks of children and students he means female as well as male.

A remarkable and insufficiently appreciated feature of the political philosophy presented in Plato's *Republic* is Socrates's insistence that women be granted equal access to the highest education. Their natures equip them to rule, he argues, just as well as men, and even to perform the duties of the warrior class—though he acknowledges that because they're physically less strong than men they should be assigned less physically demanding tasks in warfare. As far as ruling is concerned, Socrates insists that 'there is no practice of a city's governor's which belongs to woman because she's woman, or to man because he's man'. Because he wants the very best to rule, the best among women must be candidates as well as the best among men.

Socrates realises that the different roles assigned to men and women in the traditional family structure (men working outside the home and women bearing and raising children) will make it difficult more women to become as good as men at ruling or guarding the city. This is one of his reasons for proposing to dissolve the family and institute a communal structure in the society, whereby everything—work, possessions, sexual partners, children—are held in common. To ensure 'an easy-going kind of child-bearing for the women guardians', he'll arrange things so that 'the wakeful watching of infants and the rest of the labor are handed over to wet nurses and governesses'.²³ In this respect Plato anticipates some enlightened modern ideas about the place of women in society.

Bai Tongdong compares Plato with Confucius on this issue, arguing that the absence of a political role for women in Confucian philosophy reflects the tenor of the patriarchal times rather than being integral to the philosophy itself. On the basis of the Confucian view of humanity and the continuity between private and public, he argues persuasively that political equality between men and women is perfectly compatible with Confucian thought. Confucians regard the prescribed three-year period of mourning for the death of a parent—which allows one to express one's family reverence and respect and gratitude for one's seniors and benefactors—as excellent preparation for doing well in public life. 'By the same rationale,' Bai suggests, 'a Confucian can argue that a female politician

may well become a better leader through the experience of spending a few years raising her children'.²⁴

The Confucian dictum 'Men are close to one another by nature, but diverge as a result of repeated practice' implies the importance of education for developing a person's full potential. And when Confucius says 'It is only the most intelligent and the most stupid who are not susceptible to change', he means that some people are born with so much intelligence that they hardly need education, while another minority, since 'they do not even try to learn', are hardly worth trying to educate. In general, though, the Confucians want education to be accessible to everyone prepared to make the requisite effort.²⁵

In ancient China the indispensable condition for becoming a fully human being, not to mention a gentleman or ruler, was self-cultivation through the traditional 'Six Arts': ritual propriety, the playing of music, calligraphy, mathematics, archery, and chariot driving. Assuming that training in mathematics involved the use of some kind of abacus, then all six arts demand considerable physical skill, and a training of the body requiring diligent practice. (As we'll see in chapters 7 and 8, the prevalence of somatic practices of this kind distinguish the Chinese tradition from the Western, which after Plato lost a sense for the importance of training the body.)

For Confucius the most important arts are the first two, ritual propriety and music. These complement one another: mastery of ritual propriety shapes the impulses and energies of the body from the outside, as it were, through its relations with other people and things; whereas playing (and listening to) music, with and through the body, moulds our moods and emotions and ways of moving from 'inside'. As is written in the *Book of Rites*, in a well-known chapter on music:

Music comes from within, and ritual propriety from without. Music, coming from within, produces stillness (of the mind); ritual propriety, coming from without, produces the elegancies (of manner). The highest style of music is sure to be distinguished by its ease; the highest style of elegance by its unmonstrativeness.²⁶

Music and ritual propriety are indispensable in the work of culture insofar as they shape the raw impulses of the soul, and humanise the instinctual life that the body always carries with it.²⁷

By 'ritual propriety' Confucius means something broader than the religious sacrifices and sacred ceremonies that pervaded social life in ancient China. Whereas the rituals performed by the emperors were to ensure

that the activities of the state conformed to the rhythms and patterns of Heaven and Earth, the social rituals the rest of us engage in serve to generate social harmony in our interactions with other people and things. In talking of ritual 'propriety' we should hear the basic meaning of 'being appropriate, right, or fitting', rather than the term's moral connotations. Thanks to its derivation from *proprius* ('one's own') it conveys the Confucian idea that one becomes fully human by appropriating and making one's own the ritual practices of the society one grows up into. To incorporate into in one's person this living and evolving body of practices doesn't come naturally: it takes education in the form of bodily practices (though less overtly energetic ones than the gymnastics of the Greeks).

Like Confucius, Plato regarded music and training of the body (in gymnastics) as the key components of education. Socrates recommends that the curriculum introduce music before gymnastics for the sake of balance: if the young men practise gymnastics without music, they'll become too hard, to the point of 'savagery'; while if they play music without doing gymnastics, they'll become too tame and verge on 'oversoftness'. The proper combination of music and gymnastics will produce individuals whose physical abilities are perfectly harmonised.²⁸

Included in the ancient Greek notion of *mousikē* are poetry and drama, which involve third person narration and dramatic, physical 'imitations'. Imitating is crucial to education since children are natural imitators to begin with, and so are happy to be instructed by way of imitating models. In ancient China emulating an exemplar was even more central to the transmission of culture, and both sides agree that early childhood education has to pay special attention to the source as well as the content of the transmissions. As Socrates observes:

The beginning is the most important part of every work and this is especially so with anything young and tender. For at that stage it's most plastic, and each thing assimilates itself to the model whose stamp anyone wishes to give to it.

The imitation of models is a powerful technique with effects that are long-lasting: 'If imitations are practiced continually from youth onwards, they become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought.'²⁹

Imitating makes a deeper impression on us, body and soul, than we might think. It's natural to imitate, and what we imitate becomes second nature, ingrained in our bodies as habits, and so capable of moving us unconsciously. Socrates therefore insists that great care be taken to pro-

vide the best models for the potential rulers among the young to emulate: 'If the future guardians do imitate, they must imitate what's appropriate to them from childhood: men who are courageous, moderate, holy, free.' Best is to show them living exemplars and inspiring scenes from drama and literature.

Such is the power of imitation that Socrates even advocates censorship to prevent the young, and especially the potential leaders, from being exposed to inappropriate models that they might later imitate involuntarily, and to the detriment of the community.³⁰ Many of us moderns would say that censorship is surely to be avoided wherever possible; yet when you consider the coarsening effect on young children from exposure to a diet of popular music that degrades women and girls and often incites violence, you have to wonder. If a thinker of the calibre of Confucius, coming from a different cultural and philosophical tradition, agrees with Plato on this point, we do well do consider their concerns with care.

Just as Confucius and his followers constantly encourage their listeners to study the poems of old, so Xi Jinping begins a speech on 'Cultivating and Disseminating Core Socialist Values' by saying, 'We should inherit and carry forward the fine traditional Chinese culture and virtues'. When, in the early decades of the People's Republic the regime trashed traditional Chinese culture, the country was adrift in the wider world. But this drift can be curbed by rooting core socialist values in traditional Chinese culture.

To renounce such values is tantamount to severing our cultural lifeline. The extensive, profound and outstanding traditional Chinese culture is the foundation for us to stand firm upon in the global mingling and clashing of cultures.

The cultivation of core values will be more fruitful if it faces the future from a basis in the best of ancient wisdom: 'only by carrying forward what our ancestors have left us can we learn to be more creative'. Xi talks in Confucian terms about the 'boundless power' of setting a fine example: the tradition is full of exemplars that Party members are to emulate so as to inspire people 'to follow their exemplary behaviour and noble personalities'. Sounding as much like Socrates as the Confucians, he says:

We should inform the people by means of fine literary works and artistic images what is the true, the good and the beautiful, what is the false, the evil and

the ugly, and what should be praised and encouraged, and what should be opposed and repudiated.

The people can be informed in this way only if government officials are well educated to be leaders in culture as well as politics, or in culture *as* politics.

Leading officials should study history and culture, especially traditional Chinese culture, to develop wisdom and become more refined. . . . Our ancient scholars held that our aspirations should be as follows: 'being the first to worry about the affairs of the state and the last to enjoy oneself; 'never being corrupted by riches and honours, never departing from principle despite poverty or humble origin, and never submitting to force or threat' [Mencius].

Suppose President Obama were to talk this way, encouraging members of Congress to study history and culture for the sake of cultivating themselves and benefitting their constituents. Imagine the outrage and scorn—if being able to speak French is already for many Americans a sure sign of decadence—that would greet such a recommendation. But it's quite democratic in the sense that historical understanding, refinement and culture are attainable without any need for large sums of money. Xi Jinping goes on:

Leading officials should also study literature. They should refine their tastes and develop uplifting interests through appreciation of works of literature and art.

You could organise guided tours for members of Congress at the National Gallery in Washington DC, for example, and have the best poets and novelists give readings in the Senate and House.

For the ancient Chinese the basis of education was naturally Chinese culture, since few exemplars were to be found beyond the Central Kingdom. But now times have changed and Xi emphasises in a Confucian spirit the pluralistic and transnational dimensions of culture.

We should not only study Chinese history and culture but also open our eyes to the rest of the world and learn about the histories and culture of other peoples. We should give preference to what is uplifting in these histories and cultures and reject what is base.³¹

Now we'll have to arrange congressional visits to the Peking Opera and the Palace Museum in Beijing as well. Meanwhile we should note that it's not a matter of reviving and revering the past indiscriminately, but of critically appropriating those aspects of our traditions that will best enhance our flourishing.

Back in Plato's *Republic*: Socrates understands education in music as 'sovereign'—because 'rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul and most vigorously lay hold of it in bringing grace with them'. The aesthetic taste developed through training in music also transfers to other areas, so that the student becomes sensitive to the beauty, or lack of same, in 'products of craft or nature'. In this way he comes to 'take pleasure in the fine things and, receiving them into his soul, he will be reared on them and become a gentleman'. Very much the same could be said about the education of the Confucian gentleman, to whose movements music lends grace and who likewise cultivates aesthetic taste and style.

In a well-interconnected (rather than internet-connected) polity, the producers of crafts play a role in the education of the future rulers, insofar as the competent among them enhance the material surroundings of the young. Socrates recommends banishing inept craftsmen and seeking those

whose good natural endowments make them able to track down the nature of what is fine and graceful, so that the young, dwelling as it were in a healthy place, will be benefited by everything; and from that place something of the fine works will strike their vision or their hearing, like a breeze bringing health from good places.³²

Here's another parallel with the Confucians, since for them the combination of music and ritual propriety creates a social environment of refined beauty from which young people can draw their models and inspiration. It's a matter of experiencing the world as a work of art, and then working one's life into a play of beauty and grace.

Harmonious Regimes (4)

Music in the time of Confucius was vocal as well as instrumental, and was often used to accompany recitations of poetry, as well as performances of dance. The Master was himself an accomplished singer and musician, and such an enthusiastic listener that, after hearing a renowned form of classical music for the first time, he 'didn't even notice the taste of meat'. He is said to have said: 'I never imagined that music could be so sublime.'³³

By contrast with the Homeric epics and Greek tragedy, which formed the literary context within which Plato was working, the *Book of Odes* (also known as the *Book of Poems*) depicts sane and sober ways of liv-

ing, so that it could be used in Chinese education without need of censorship. Lamenting to his students that they no longer learn those poems by heart, Confucius says:

The Odes can be a source of inspiration and a basis for evaluation; they can help you to come together with others, as well as to properly express complaints. In the home, they teach you about how to serve your father, and in public life they teach you about how to serve your lord. They also broadly acquaint you with the names of various birds, beasts, plants, and trees.

Yet such poems are the basis rather than the peak of education, which is music—perhaps because instrumental music operates beneath the level of language by directly affecting the body. Confucius said, ‘Find inspiration in the Odes, take your place through ritual propriety, and achieve perfection with music.’³⁴ In playing music one learns to conform one’s activity with the musical work and, in ensemble settings, with the activity of one’s fellow players. In this sense it perfects the practice of taking one’s place among others in society.

The music employed for the education of the gentleman and the ruler derived from the music and dance used in ancient shamanic rituals, which affirmed human relations with the powers of Heaven and Earth, as well as with the spirit world. As interest in the spirit world declined with the advent of Confucian philosophy, music came to serve the purpose of establishing harmonious relations in society—but still through its power to move body and soul from within, in harmonious interplay with the surrounding natural phenomena.³⁵

For both Confucius and Plato the culmination of self-cultivation on the part of the most capable members of society is an expansion of their activities into the public sphere. The natural consequence of the appropriate training and development is engagement with public life. As Socrates insists in the story of the Cave, the enlightened person who has escaped from the darkness is obliged to go back down and help his fellow human beings to ascend to the light. After all,

It’s not the concern of law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives to bring this about for the whole city, harmonizing the citizens by persuasion and compulsion, making them share with one another the benefit that each is able to bring to the commonwealth.³⁶

For Confucius, the process of self-cultivation involves the gentleman’s realising himself as a configuration in the network of family and social relationships, so that it’s natural that he should find himself living an ex-

emplary public life. When one of his students asked Confucius about ‘the gentleman’:

The Master said, ‘He cultivates himself in order to achieve respectfulness.’ ‘Is that all?’ ‘He cultivates himself in order to bring peace to others.’ ‘Is that all?’ ‘He cultivates himself in order to bring peace to all people.’³⁷

The breadth of the gentleman’s field of influence is breathtaking: ‘all people’. In practice, peace will ensue only when good government prevails, globally, and this will happen only if the ruler is selflessly devoted to the well being of the ruled.

Insofar as the ruler gets his power to rule from ‘Heaven’, from the forces of Heaven and Earth, he can bring about harmony in the human world by resonating with the greater harmony that’s inherence in the natural world. The way to that productive condition is through music. The chapter on music in the *Book of Rites* understands music and song as natural responses to the impressions made by events in the world. Therefore the ancient kings paid attention to such events and included music and ritual propriety in the four basic political institutions, along with laws and punishments.

The end to which ritual propriety, music, punishments, and laws conduce is one: they are the instruments by which the hearts of the people are assimilated, and good order in government is achieved.

Music is able to contribute to social and political order because its attunement is to a deeper and broader source, the natural world:

Music is an echo of the harmony between Heaven and Earth; ritual propriety reflects the orderly distinctions in the operations of Heaven and Earth. From that harmony all things receive their being; to those orderly distinctions they owe the differences between them. . . . Let there be an intelligent understanding of the nature and interaction of Heaven and Earth, and there will be the ability to practise well both ritual propriety and music.

A later passage explains music’s origin from Heaven as flowing naturally from the processes of ‘generation and change’, especially as these are manifest in ‘the processes of growth in spring and of maturing in summer’.³⁸

There’s a remarkable parallel here with Plato’s ideas, though you have to look beyond the *Republic* to see it (aside from an allusion near the end of that work to the Pythagorean idea of the music of the heavenly spheres). In a later dialogue, the *Timaeus*, an account of the creation of the cosmos emphasises that the world soul, which precedes as its proto-

type the human soul, is 'characterised by reasoning and harmony' in its revolutions. The movement of the human soul is likewise a revolving; but when at birth the soul is joined together with a body, the shock throws its circular motions off and so produces 'disharmony'. But this condition can be remedied later by proper education in music.

Attunement is an ally, provided by the Muses for the soul in its fight to restore itself to order and harmony. Rhythm also was given for the same purpose by the same benefactors, to support us because for the most part our internal state is inconsistent and graceless.³⁹

When Xunzi claims that the human being is by nature 'crude' (not 'evil', as some translations have it), he is making a similar point: that we need musical education and self-cultivation in order to acquire the style and grace of which we're capable.

For Socrates the ruler achieves inner harmony by bringing reason to bear on his decisions and doings through a proper ordering of the inner regime.

I suppose we call a single man . . . wise because of that little part [reason] which ruled in him and . . . possesses within it the knowledge of that which is beneficial for each part and for the whole composed of the community of these three parts. . . . Isn't he moderate because of the friendship and accord [*symphonia*] of these parts—when the ruling part and the two ruled parts are of the single opinion that the thinking part ought to rule and don't raise faction against it?

In the larger world of the polis, where three classes correspond to the three parts of the soul, it's again a matter of harmonising different strains—as if the ruler were the musical director, or conductor, of the societal symphony. In the best case,

Moderation . . . stretches throughout the whole, from top to bottom of the entire scale, making the weaker, the stronger and those in the middle . . . sing the same chant together. So we would quite rightly claim that this unanimity is moderation, an accord of worse and better, according to nature, as to which must rule in the city and in each one.⁴⁰

And just as it's the philosopher king who is best suited to bring about such harmony, so Xunzi writes:

A situation in which there are class divisions is the most basic benefit under Heaven. And it is the lord of men who is the indispensable element where-with to 'arrange the musical scale' of the classes of men.⁴¹

If we are to add our voice to the oratorio of the polity in a way that enhances rather than detracts, we have to listen to our fellow singers, and also make sure that we keep to the part for which our voice is best suited. When everyone knows his or her part, and place in the whole, the role of the ruler as conductor is to keep time based on an understanding of the nature of the polity in the context of the greater harmony of natural things and processes.

Notes to Chapter 4

- ¹ *Romans* 13:1-6.
- ² <http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s61.html> (emphasis added); cited in Bell, ch. 2*.
- ³ *ADD Stephen Macedo, "Meritocratic Democracy" in *East Asian Challenge for Democracy*.
- ⁴ Sun Yat-sen, 'The Three People's Principles and the Future of the Chinese People', in Julie Lee Wei *et al.*, eds, *Selected Writings of Sun Yat-sen, Prescriptions for Saving China* (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1994), 49-50.
- ⁵ Mark Lilla, 'The Tea Party Jacobins', *New York Review of Books*, 27 May 2010.
- ⁶ See Daniel A. Bell, *Democracy and Meritocracy*, ch. 2 (draft p. 5), ch. 4 (draft 29ff*); and for the case of Singapore, ch. 2**.
- ⁷ Xi, *Governance*, 449-50.
- ⁸ Xi, *Governance*, 461.
- ⁹ Xi, *Governance*, 187, citing *Guanzi* **.
- ¹⁰ Xi, *Governance*, 433, 435.
- ¹¹ Xi, *Governance*, 428, citing Xun Yue, *History as a Mirror*, 430, 437-38.
- ¹² *Xunzi*, chapter 11, 'The True King and the Hegemon'.
- ¹³ Plato, *Republic* 412c-e.
- ¹⁴ *Mencius* 1A:7; Confucius, *Analects* 12.22; *Mencius* 7A:15, 1A:4; Legge *Book of Poetry*, 1970, vol. 4, 273, 489*.
- ¹⁵ Plato, *Republic* 341c, 342d.
- ¹⁶ See Atul Gawande, 'America's Epidemic of Unnecessary Care', *The New Yorker*, 11 May 2015.
- ¹⁷ *Republic* 342e.
- ¹⁸ *Republic* 346e-347d, 520c-d.
- ¹⁹ *Republic* 346c-347d (emphasis added); 423e-424a, 416d-417b, 420b.
- ²⁰ NYRB MacF, 32; Xi Jinping interview in 2000, translated by Carsten Boyer Thogersen and Susanne Posborg (<http://nias.ku.dk/news/interview-2000-china%E2%80%99s-vice-president-xi-jinping-translated-western-language-fi>), cited by Bell in D&M*? ch 2, 66. *New York Times*, *** **.
- ²¹ *Xunzi* 9.1, 2:94; *Guanzi* ***.
- ²² See Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels, *Intelligent Governance for the 21st Century: A Middle Way between West and East* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), ***.

- ²³ Plato, *Republic* 451c - 460d.
- ²⁴ Tongdong Bai, *China*, 58-59. For some unspecified reason Bai assumes that Socrates isn't serious when he proposes abolishing the private family, and so mistakenly concludes that the *Republic* poses a challenge to political equality between the sexes because it wants to keep the traditional family intact.
- ²⁵ Confucius, *Analects* 17.2, 17.3; compare 7.7, 15.39, 16.9.
- ²⁶ *Book of Rites*, XVII. 1. 17.
- ²⁷ Confucius, *Analects* 3.3, 11.1.
- ²⁸ Plato, *Republic* 444d; 410c-412a.
- ²⁹ *Republic* 377b, 395d,
- ³⁰ *Republic* 395b; on censorship, 377b, 401b.
- ³¹ Xi, *Governance*, 181-83, 453-54.
- ³² Plato, *Republic* 401d-e, 401c.
- ³³ Confucius, *Analects* 7.32, 17.20, 7.14.
- ³⁴ *Analects* 19.9, 8.8.
- ³⁵ *Analects* 3.23. On ancient Chinese ritual practices, see Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), chapter 1.
- ³⁶ Plato, *Republic* 519c-520a.
- ³⁷ Confucius, *Analects* 14.42.
- ³⁸ *Book of Rites* XVII, 1.2-3; 1.23 (L 100); 1.28 (L 102-103).
- ³⁹ Plato, *Republic* 617b-c; *Timaeus* 35b-36e, 47e. Plato, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford World's Classics, 2008).
- ⁴⁰ *Republic* 442c, 432a.
- ⁴¹ *Xunzi* 10.4 (2:123).