

6: THE BIRTH OF PHILOSOPHY IN CHINA¹

a. In what sense was Confucius "the last Sage"? In what ways was he also the first philosopher? How and why did his sagely and philosophical ideas both resemble and differ from those of Mo Zi?

b. In what sense was Confucius "the last Sage"? In what ways was he also the first philosopher? What were the main ideas of the early Daoists? In what ways and why did they differ from Confucius? Why were Confucius's intellectual descendants rather than those of the other early philosophers destined to dominate Chinese political thought?

A. Confucius: Our First Chinese Personality

Confucius is the first figure in Chinese history for whom we could write a profile in *People* magazine. All of his predecessors come down to us as archetypes rather than idiosyncratic personalities. Yellow Emperor is nothing but the beloved of Heaven; the Duke of Zhou is nothing but loyal minister.

Confucius, we are told by the closest to his time primary source, was ugly (facial warts and big bump on his forehead), but had a nice smile. He was fussy about his food, insisting that it be cut into small pieces. He could be irked by the stupidity of his disciples. He sometimes despaired of his ability to influence his contemporaries. He died believing he had indeed failed in his life's mission.

Perhaps it is a coincidence, but we could write an equally detailed profile of Socrates. However, I think it has something to do with the nature of the historical sources a high civilization spontaneously produces. Both Confucius and Socrates completed their cultures' transition into the first stage of high civilization on the intellectual side. Each of them was the first in his culture to live a life of the mind, to specialize in the love of understanding.

1. His life (c. BC 551-479)

a. the "Axial Age" birth of philosophy

The man we call "Confucius" (a Latinization of his Chinese honorific name, Kong Fuzi, coined by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century) bore the sublineage name Kong 孔, the given name Qiu 丘, meaning "mound," and the "alternate" name, a kind of formal nickname used in adulthood by one's friends, Zhongni 仲尼.² The suffix Fuzi 夫子 means "honored master." The conventional dates for his life, 551-479 BC are probably pretty accurate.

Confucius lived in the middle of that wonderful couple of centuries in the history of Eurasia that the philosopher of history Karl Jaspers has called the "Axial Age." During the years from c. 600 to 400 BC, East, South and West Asia more or less simultaneously finished evolving from early civilizations into high civilizations, and in the course of doing so created true philosophy of three different types but equal power to explain the cosmos. This may have been a coincidence. China's thousand year lag behind West and South Asia in entering the Iron Age would seem to falsify a material determinist explanation. Otherwise, why did the West and South Asians not create an Axial Age a thousand years earlier? Why, as it were, did West and South Asia wait for East Asia to catch up materially so all three could march into high civilization arm in arm (but without ever meeting), all doing philosophy of one kind or another. (No one has figured this one out yet.)

Solon, the Lawgiver of Athens, a figure roughly analogous to Confucius among the Greeks, died in 590 BC. The Persian Zoroaster may have been Solon's near contemporary. (He may also have lived as early as c. 1200 BC. His sect may merely have taken off in popularity around 600.) Socrates, a figure more closely analogous to Confucius, was born in 469, a decade after Confucius's death. In South Asia the historical Buddha may have been a near contemporary of Confucius.

The first high civilizations associated with these men did not just evolve more powerful states and richer markets using coined money. They also created the first elaborate theologies (as opposed to col-

lections of myths and sacred poetry). They then began to bud off philosophy from theology, but without yet quite losing philosophy's roots in religion.

For these first philosophers the key question was still how Heaven re-presented itself onto Earth. The somewhat different but still essentially congruent ways each answered this question greatly influenced the ways their civilizations' states and markets developed thereafter.

Only gradually did the successors of the early philosophers begin to concentrate more on Earth than on Heaven. It was not until the 3rd century BC in China, just after the end of the Axial Age, that purely secular philosophers began to become dominant.

So China's philosophers were not unique in their initial focus on the Heaven-Earth relationship. The Athenians executed Socrates for corrupting the young with a heterodox *theology*, one that taught disrespect for the old gods. Despite his seemingly skeptical injunction to "respect the spirits, but keep a distance from them," Confucius's teachings fit that same early pattern. He calls on Heaven to vouch for his philosophical correctness.

Socrates called some of his more pragmatic and non-theological opponents "philodoxers"—lovers of secular opinion. He reserved the label "philosopher"—lovers of wisdom—for people like himself. Confucius would have agreed with this distinction. His contrast of the "vulgar man" (*xiaoren* 小人) with the "gentleman" (*junzi* 君子) runs parallel to this.

b. a *xiaoren* meritocrat from Lu

Confucius was born in Lu, a small feudal principality just west of Qi (the first of the great powers of Eastern Zhou times) on the Shandong peninsula.

Both Qi and Lu had distinguished pedigrees. Qi was founded by the father-in-law of King Wen. Lu was founded by the eldest son of the Duke of Zhou. The Duke modestly refrained from giving his descendants as big a fief as he awarded to his father's in-laws.

By the 550s, Qi had long since fallen from primacy among the states but it still hoped to recover its power. Lu was often allied with Qi in its ambitions.

Confucius belonged to the class then disparagingly called the *xiaoren*, 小人 literally "small persons." This was, as some Chinese Marxist social historians

¹ 1st draft, 9/94; 3rd rev., 10/98, by Edward Kaplan.

² Note that family names come first in East Asian languages.

have detected, originally a class term. An aristocrat was called a *ren* 人 a “person,” “human being.” Other labels were used for lesser men who were not members of the ruling class: *zhong* 衆 (“mass”), or *min* 民 (“churls,” “subordinate people,” perhaps a pictograph of a commoner soldier carrying a halberd).

A *xiaoren* seems to have been a minor member of the ruling class. This term had apparently come to be used during Spring-Autumn times for younger sons several times five generations removed from an unambiguously aristocratic ancestor. Such people had become no more than commoners with genteel antecedents. They might (or might not) reenter the ruling class as meritocrats.

Confucius was a *xiaoren* in the above sense. According to one account, his grandfather moved to Lu from the nearby small principality of Song where the Kongs may have once enjoyed aristocratic status. Soon after the conquest, the Duke of Zhou assigned Song as the fief of the half brother of the last Shang king. This man had to be rewarded for not resisting the Zhou invaders. It was also important to keep up the worship of the Shang ancestors to prevent them from turning into hungry ghosts causing mischief for their conquerors. Hence the half-brother was made the vassal in charge of the Song fief.

A number of aristocrats associated with the fallen Shang state took up residence in Song, and it is possible that Confucius’s ancestors were until his grandfather’s time, among them. However the Kong’s may have been men of Zhou assigned to the Song court to keep an eye on the Shang aristocrats. Confucius himself kept a distance from Shang customs. He made a point of studying in Loyang rather than in Song, and insisted that *he* was a man of Zhou. But that could have been an ancient instance of the phenomenon that our modern aphorism noting that converts often try to be more Catholic than the Pope.

Confucius’s family may have migrated from Song to Lu because as younger sons several times removed they were no longer entitled to hereditary government jobs there. Confucius’s father, called Big Kong because he was one of the tallest men of his generation, took an important meritocratic job in Lu. Confucius at first followed in his father’s footsteps. He took several fairly substantial jobs with the Lu government, and earned

a reputation for high intelligence and integrity.

So though a *xiaoren*, he was by no means an outcast. Rather he belonged to the new and still somewhat unstably established class of meritocrats. “Meritocrat” may be a better translation for the term *xian* 賢 which is usually translated as “worthy.” *Xian* seems to have been applied to *xiaoren* holding office.

Confucius, however, seems to have preferred to borrow and generalize the meaning of a more distinguished old term, *junzi* 君子, meaning “ruler’s son” to use for highly principled thinkers like himself. *Xiaoren* could then logically be used as the antonym of *junzi*. If he could have corresponded with Confucius, Plato might well have translated *xiaoren* as “philodoxer,” those who had merely secular opinions about aspects of Earth, but who could not even imagine linking the Earthly order to Heaven.

Though he was not hereditarily entitled to the important jobs he held, through his intelligence and force of character Confucius exerted a fair amount of influence, much like Big Kong before him.

But Confucius was dissatisfied. He wanted to do something far more fundamentally new. He wanted to rethink the Zhou vision of Heaven received from antiquity in order to make sense of the novelties of the new age that seemed to be delegitimizing the traditional institutions and habits he loved.

Not the least of these was the role of people like himself—*xiaoren* who knew (or thought they knew) what to do to rescue their state and civilization, but who lacked the hereditary right to do these things. These men were connected with the levers of power only as subordinates of the aristocrats. Their job descriptions did not authorize them to summarily change the vision of Heaven received from the sage kings of the Zhou founding period.

c. the first Chinese schoolmaster

On these fundamental issues, Confucius’s superiors in Lu would not listen to him. In frustration, he resigned from government work and established what we would consider an informal kind of school for adults, not unlike the one associated with Socrates a century later in Greece.

As far as we know Confucius was the first to run even an informal private school in China. At least if anyone pre-

ceded him in this there is no record of it.

State schools had long been parts of the feudal courts of Zhou, and such schools probably existed within the court of the preceding Shang Dynasty as well. At least some aristocrats and perhaps some of the commoner artisans were literate as early as Shang times, as shown by the sentence-length inscriptions on oracle bones and the cartouches that may be artisans’ names on royal pottery.

Given the Zhou court’s creation and use of the *Book of Changes* and *Book of Documents*, at least a few early Zhou courtiers must have been literate enough to read what some of their number had written in the *Documents*. The official schoolmasters taught aristocrats how to read at least the particular books most relevant to their particular hereditary tasks, substantive and ceremonial.

By Eastern Zhou times, the *Book of Odes* and the various histories of the feudal principalities eventually inspired a veritable flood of books written by and for meritocrats, though most of that flood appeared after the shift toward private academies pioneered by Confucius.

These official schools were taken for granted. But Confucius’s private school is explicitly mentioned as something unique even in his own times.

Confucius assumed literacy on the part of his students. He also expected them to have memorized the most important official texts.³ Confucius, however, was running something more than a primary school. He had invented something approximating one of our colleges or think tanks.

His pedagogic method was to have someone recite (usually from memory) a passage from one of the sacred books, and then ask him a leading question on the passage. The student’s answer would evoke a supplementary question, and perhaps ultimately a longer comment from Confucius.

³Not until the foolish ideas of the John Dewey Progressives spread among educators during the 20th century was this useful method of primary education abandoned. The Deweyites ignored the obvious fact that until about age 11 or 12, if then, most children are capable of little more than memorization. In all the great civilizations’ primary schools, ours no less than China’s, each schoolchild in turn would recite a passage from some sacred book with the schoolmaster standing behind him with a stick. If the student made an error, the schoolmaster would correct him and bop him atop the head with the stick to reinforce the point. At intervals the pupils would recite by heart everything they had learned so far.

This novel method would only work with bright pupils, selected regardless of their social rank. One day as Confucius sat on the mat,⁴ he pointed to a corner of the mat and said, "If I point to one corner, I expect a prospective student to be able to infer the other three corners." His insistence on capacity for rational thought was something new in Chinese ruling class life. Confucius had made explicit one of the basic criteria for any template of merit.

Two generations later at the other end of Eurasia, and quite independently, Socrates began using the same method (except that he did it vertically while walking around the city with his pupils). But while he too was inventing philosophy thereby, Socrates' civilization had no bureaucratic state to invent a template of merit for. His version of philosophy had to be applied to localized city-states. This different context had different consequences.

Also like Socrates, Confucius claimed (perhaps with equal disingenuity; both may have rigged the dialogues with their disciples) that the teacher tends to learn even more than his pupils from such exercises. Confucius even claimed there was no person so foolish that he could not learn something from him.

Confucius's pupils were in fact amongst the best and brightest of the generation, drawn not just from Lu or from Qi, but from a variety of classes residing in a number of the other principalities of the northern half of Zone B. Hence he could not only learn from them philosophically, but find out what was going on politically and socially over a wide area.

From the accounts of his behavior given in the record of his "table talk," the *Analects* (*Lun Yu* 論語), Confucius appears to have been a teacher of considerable charm as well as intelligence. He was, like his father, much taller than the average. He was also rather ugly, with a mole on his cheek and a big bump on his forehead, but his gentle smile attracted more notice than his ugly face. He could be testy at his pupils' obtuseness, and fussy about his food, but his pupils remembered him above all for his rationality and goodness.



Confucius. A Ming Dynasty album leaf portrait.

By the end of the 6th century BC, Confucius was approaching his fiftieth year. He believed he finally understood what the rulers and ministers of the age had to do to relegitimize themselves in terms of the old vision of Heaven. He had also devised ways to reinterpret that vision to make those new tasks clear to them.

d. his failed search for a sympathetic ruler

The rulers of the world had to be informed about that momentous discovery. Confucius was not merely interested in these new ideas and the new techniques for learning them merely for their own sake, though he loved learning. He wanted to *use* them to change the world.⁵ He had long since failed to do this in Lu. He hoped now to find a sympathetic ruler somewhere else in the realm of Zhou.

In actuality, however, he never left the bounds of subzone B2. This is a measure of how alien from each other the subzones of the Central Zone remained even after half a millennium of Zhou rule.

For a decade, either from c. 510 to 500 or from around 500 to 490 BC, Confucius made his version of a "Long March" within subzone B2. And yet he never succeeded in finding a ruler who would use him and his ideas.

It was not for want of trying. On one

occasion he even had audience with a female usurper. He put up with the jeers of proto-Daoist hermits as he passed their caves by the side of the road. When he visited the state of Chen, not that far from Lu, he even feared being lynched.

Deeply disappointed, he returned home to Lu and resumed teaching. Though his school prospered and budded off many additional schools run by his original pupils, Confucius died believing he had lived a failed life.

e. failed Slave Society apologist or archetypal zealot meritocrat?

For the most part, posterity has disagreed with Confucius on this point. The Confucians have rightly pointed out that his ideas triumphed. His best pupils found important jobs even during his lifetime. Modern students of mythology point out that Confucius was self-consciously imitating those quasi-divinities, the sage kings of antiquity. Such heroes often must fail, in some cultures even die, as part of the preparation for their ultimate triumph.

During this century, however, the material determinists of his own country have sometimes denounced Confucius as a profoundly reactionary force. Material determinist intellectuals turned their back on Confucius even before the last dynasty fell in 1912. For two decades after they took power in 1949, the Marxist material determinists tolerated Confucius as a cultural icon. However, during the awful waning days of the Cultural Revolution, in the early 1970s, when answers to all the problems of the cosmos could supposedly be found in the "Little Red Book" of the sayings of Chairman Mao,⁶ the ideological authorities deliberately substituted the Sayings of Mao for the ancient *Analects*, the sayings of Confucius as recorded by his pupils' pupils.

The authorities also launched an anti-Confucius campaign between 1972 and 1974, and linked it to the anti-Lin Biao campaign.⁷ Lin's alleged treason was linked to its ancient supposed moral equivalent, Confucius's alleged attempt to roll back the tide of history by upholding the

⁶American student revolutionaries then also liked to wave that red-plastic-covered little tome as they sat in on deans and occasionally blew up laboratories. I was over thirty by then, so contented myself with collecting various language versions of the Little Red Book.

⁷Lin was the unfortunate general who was first designated Mao's heir-apparent and then purged and apparently killed at Mao's order in 1971.

⁴The Chinese then sat on the floor, on something like a thin version of the tatami mat still used by the Japanese. The chair did not reach China from the West until after the 7th century AD.

⁵This impulse to apply knowledge imbued most later Confucians. During the 20th century it rendered Marxism more attractive than it might otherwise have been to ex-Confucians. Marx had said that the thing to do was to change the world, not understand it. Confucius had wanted to do both.

values of the Slave Society of Western Zhou. This supposedly exacerbated the birth pains of the Feudal Society struggling to exit the womb of the old order during the last decades of the Spring-Autumn period. Hence '70s Marxists characterized Confucius as unprogressive even for his own time because he was the prime apologist for the Slave Society ruling class whose members had founded the Zhou Dynasty five centuries earlier. Their descendants had brought Slave Society to its last, fully mature climax.

Ironically, by linking him to Slave Society's values, the Chinese Marxist rulers were tacitly acknowledging Confucius's links to the religion of early W. Zhou, which they had made the last phase of Slave Society. Once the Earthly vision of Heaven of the Marxists failed less than a decade later, this characterization of Confucius turned out to make it easier for people to return their allegiance to a Confucian vision of Heaven.

By the 6th and 5th centuries BC, '70s Marxist historians claimed, new men were creating the first forms of Feudal Society. But, to steal a cliché from the politically correct wing of American political life, Confucius just didn't get it. He was trying to convert these representatives of feudal landlordism from their progressive-for-their-time land-grabbing back into slavery-preserving, people-stealing rulers of a Slave Society and their courtier running-dogs.



Leaf from an anti-Confucius comic book of 1974.

Since the early '80s, even the Marxists have tacitly conceded that their vision of Heaven has failed. The Marxists themselves have since hidden behind Confucius's robe and borrowed his vision of Heaven to legitimize themselves. Once again Confucius is revered as the last sage of antiquity and the founding father of Chinese high civilization.

That is how I have always treated him since I came to understand Eric Voegelin's ideational determinist view of the evolution of civilization. The Western academic consensus, not having the responsibility for legitimizing the Chinese state, has been rendered uncomfortable by this Confucian revival and has for the most part ignored it.

2. The Last Sage

a. the sage as zealot meritocrat

In my jargon, Confucius was the very archetype of what I call the "zealot meritocrat," which is my way of placing the ancient concept of the "sage" (*sheng*, something like the ancient Hebrew "prophet") within the framework of a valid modern political theory.

The academic consensus provides some of the substance for such a theory. Anthony Downs is a good liberal member of the academic consensus who has long worked for the politically liberal Brookings Institute in Washington, DC. Nevertheless he wrote an important book analyzing bureaucracy in the 1950s called *Inside Bureaucracy*, which contains a taxonomy of—i.e. a way to label—the different kinds of bureaucrats which is useful to ideational determinists.

Downs describes zealots, executives and conformists as the three main subtypes of bureaucrats. I add the word "meritocrat" to the label of each. A zealot meritocrat resembles the members of the sect of Zealots of ancient Judaism after whom Downs names them. The Zealots believed that they had a direct connection with God. Hence they preferred to fight the Roman invaders of Palestine to the death at Masada rather than accept the Roman conquest and the Roman gods.

A zealot meritocrat is a meritocrat in direct touch with Heaven, or someone who believes he is. In terms of Eric Voegelin's ideational determinist political theory, the zealot meritocrat uses that direct contact with Heaven to create his own vision of Heaven. He then creatively re-presents that vision onto Earth as an explicit template of merit on which bureaucrats are expected to model their behavior, particularly while in office.

The executive meritocrat is not capable of creating a new template of merit, but he can creatively apply in a new situation one created by a zealot. The conformist is capable of reliably serving un-

der an executive, but no more. He can only faithfully fit himself to a template of merit created and applied by others.

No one could claim that Confucius was the first meritocrat. Meritocrats had been mutating out of the ranks of the housemen-courtiers in Loyang and in the courts of the feudal principalities and their subfiefs at least since the 8th century BC, two centuries and more before his time.

Confucius was, however, the first successfully *thoughtful* zealot meritocrat. He managed to link the current tasks of bureaucracy to the old, sacred patterns of the Zhou religion, both by rethinking these tasks and by reinterpreting the symbolism of the old religious ceremonials. This made him a new kind of sage.

b. apparent failure

Two things happened when Confucius went looking for a ruler to hire him and use his principles. First, Confucius never got hired himself, but second, his best students, the executive meritocrats, and his middling students—the conformist meritocrats—began to get important jobs, even before Confucius died.

Confucius himself never was hired simply because it was too dangerous for a mere hereditary aristocratic ruler to hire a zealot meritocrat. What could a ruler do to stop him if that zealot kept on fiddling with the template of merit or even the vision of Heaven from which the template was re-presented?

By hiring him on his own terms (and a zealot will accept no other), the ruler would be conceding the zealot's direct link (bypassing the ruler) to Heaven. That would allow the zealot to rewrite the fundamental law any time he pleased. Hiring such a man would have been far too risky for any prudent ruler. It would have been impossible for the increasingly insecure feudal lords on the eve of the Warring States period to even consider doing so.

One such zealot in power would have been impossible, two of them in one place is inconceivable. Downs compares putting two zealots in one organization to putting two scorpions in a bottle. Only one of them at most could survive, and perhaps neither would, and might drag the state down along with them.

And yet, Confucius was providing the first coherent set of rules for the embryonic bureaucratic states of the time. Because he did this by persuasively showing how bureaucracy was also a re-present-

ation of the order of Heaven, bureaucrats who believed his teachings could be trusted both at court and out of sight of the ruler.

The zealot's best students, the executive meritocrats, could be trusted not to tamper with the template of merit. Their conformist meritocrat colleagues made ideal staff members under these executives. Both would faithfully conform to the template of merit crafted by their teacher, the zealot, because they were not themselves zealots. The result would be a stable and trustworthy bureaucracy.

Some of his students were already being hired even as Confucius was making his unsuccessful travels around subzone B2. During the centuries following his death, Confucians of one sort or another came to dominate the courts of Warring States China.

Confucius had internalized and rationalized the idea of Tian literally watching over the ruler's subordinates. He turned it into an ethical principle. He provided rational reasons for the men of merit to remain obedient when sent over the horizon to administer their ruler's territories.

The most impractical thing imaginable—a mere new way of handling words, which derived philosophy from theology—turned out to be far more practical than overtly more practical-seeming ways of acting. By being a sage—as it turned out the last one—Confucius made sure that bureaucrats would not only be rational, but obedient and loyal even when not under observation.

c. his timing: mythic & civilizational

Of course Confucius could not have had so profound an influence if he had not come at the right time. His lifetime coincided with the climax of the transition into high civilization. People felt intuitively that some sort of fundamental change was occurring. Until Confucius and his successors, however, no one managed to link the fading of Zhou central power and the rise of the great principalities, and the accelerating monetizing of the markets until the invention of philosophy by Confucius quite unexpectedly began to tame both bureaucracy and market.

Confucius also satisfied the mythic requirements for sagehood. He had the good luck to be born approximately one grand conjunction of the five planets (500 years) after the one that had marked the Zhou conquest.

However, once Confucius succeeded in persuading people to accept his internalization of the astronomical Heaven's logic, notice of such things as conjunctions of the five planets gradually faded out of men's consciousness. The fact that during the next couple of centuries, vague references to a five hundred year interval between sages were often no longer directly linked to the motions of the planets helped convince the pious that the Mandate of Heaven had shifted from rule by the Zhou kings to the *ideas* of Confucius.

Dong Zhongshu, who lived in the 2nd century BC, was the last important philosopher to feel obliged to seriously argue that sages come every five centuries. He also argued that the old method of changing the Mandate had after Confucius been abandoned forever. The Mandate had been permanently transferred to the ideas as well as the person of Confucius. His students and their students for all time to come would remain the proprietors of these ideas.

This is what made Confucius the last of all the sages. His labors, though more intellectual than physical, were comparable to those of Yu in rescuing the Nine Provinces from the Great Flood. They matched still more closely the Duke of Zhou's heroic efforts to reconquer Shang, establish the feudal empire and compile the words of all the earlier sages into the *Book of Documents*. This last task, once Confucius had shown how to extend its applicability, would provide guidance in ruling that empire not just to the Duke himself but to all his successors.

According to the Confucian tradition, the analogously sagely labors of Confucius were to edit the *Book of Odes* and the annals of Lu (the *Spring-Autumn Annals* as they are somewhat redundantly known in English). Proto-meritocrats had been compiling these ever since the 8th century. Supposedly Confucius selected the poems most appropriate to be retained in the *Odes* and annotated the *Annals*. By choosing exactly the right verb for key passages of the latter, he expressed praise for the virtuous and heaped blame on the wicked. This was, we are told, enough to cause the wicked to shudder in fear.

Actually, we have no direct evidence that Confucius performed these editing tasks. It is surely significant that even the myths do not have Confucius actually composing anything. Books were still considered sacred things. Unless he was

to supersede the sages of Zhou, it would have been impious for Confucius to go beyond commenting on the sacred books they had already produced.

Furthermore, *he* never claimed he was a sage. It was his followers who did so, mostly after his death. Everyone noticed that a grand conjunction of the planets roughly coincided with his lifetime. Another story which appeared early on was the claim that an animal sacred to the sages had appeared just before his birth and again soon before his death. Another story claimed that his mother had carried him in her womb for 27 months.

Perhaps Confucius was not just being modest. Perhaps he sensed that if he was not quite the old type of sage it was because he was also something quite new—something for which we use the label philosopher. So it may have been appropriate that even the mythic claims made for Confucius were not as physically demanding as those having Yu opening up the ditches or as heroic as those having the Duke of Zhou reconquering the Shang capital from his own brothers.

The likely apocryphal stories that he edited the ancient works of Zhou perhaps symbolizes the fact that Confucius did indeed create the *mental* order for Chinese high civilization by verbally interpreting the old sacred documents in new ways.

3. The First Philosopher

a. "differentiated" added to "compact" language

Eric Voegelin uses two rather unfamiliar words to distinguish the linguistic aspects of this shift from sage to philosopher. The old sacred books are written in what Voegelin calls "compact" language. The first philosophers, he says, began to "differentiate" that compact language.

The New Testament, for example, is literally compact. It can be contained, along with the apocrypha, in a volume capable of fitting in your hip pocket and still have type large enough to be quite readable. The *Harper's Biblical Commentary*, however, which is not considered long as Bible commentaries go, so elaborates on the compact language of the New and Old Testaments that its differentiated prose occupies a very thick volume.

Even though only orally, Confucius was creating an analysis of China's history in differentiated language for the first

time in Chinese history. His elaborate talk is sometimes boring to moderns like us, burdened as we are by a surfeit of differentiated language. But it must have been exciting for his students to encounter such use of language for the first time.

Like the Greek presocratics in the city states of Asia Minor at about the same time, Confucius was for the first time abstracting the inner logic out of religion, and stating it explicitly. After doing so, he tried to reconcile that inner logic with the more elaborate arrangement of earthly institutions which had evolved since the vision of Heaven of the Zhou founders had first been re-presented onto Earth.

b. arguments from authority, analogy

The new teaching method made it possible for him to evoke through his questioning of his students a set of logical arguments, some of which were wholly novel, others never before applied to holy writ. His comments on his students' answers let him tease out hitherto unseen or unappreciated elements of significance in the sacred books.

In the West this method is known as the Socratic dialog, but we might as well call it the Confucian dialog since Confucius was employing it more than a generation before the birth of Socrates.



CONFUCIUS
Reproduction of the *Chung-kuo chiao-ku* edition preserved in the
Chungking Imperial Library

Confucius the teacher. R.P. Kramers (tr.), *The School Sayings of Confucius* (Leiden, 1950).

In an informal way Confucius was also beginning to invent formal logic.

The most decisive argument at his disposal was a more formal version of the no doubt already existing argument from authority. Something may be taken as true if the Duke of Zhou said it was true in a document which we have good reason to

believe came from him. Such a document might be found in the *Book of Documents*.

We still use the argument from authority. We have to. Otherwise each generation would have to begin to learn anew from the very beginning. It is a wise (and normal) child who accepts his mother's warning that the stove is hot without touching the stove. Even in our courts of law, jurors are instructed that if they already have reason to believe in the essential truthfulness of a witness, they should be inclined to credit other things he says, if they seem plausible.

More interesting and more fundamentally new, though softer than the argument from authority, was Confucius's use of the argument from analogy: A particular statement may be said to be likely true because it is analogous to one which we already know to be true.

The very first passage in the *Analects*, the book closest in time to Confucius,⁸ opens with the Sage making an extended implied analogy. Isn't it nice to do several other nice things, says Confucius, and isn't it also nice to study diligently? If seeing a friend coming from afar, the first in this chain, is pleasant, so too is the last term in the series, seeing a new book come into your ken which you can then study and learn from.

c. arguments by generalization of meaning of old words

Confucius makes some other substantial generalizations by extending his use of implied analogies. For example, he uses induction—reasoning from the particular to the general—to suggest that there are many particular virtues that come down from the sage kings of antiquity. These can be universalized, with consequences of great significance for both politics and personal life.

1) *xiao*

For example, the word *xiao* that we now translate as filiality—the pious reverence and care for one's parents—was actually used in early Zhou documents much more literally. It originally meant no more than “to ceremonially feed dead ancestors” when used in inscriptions on old bronze ceremonial vessels: “I had this vessel made and used it to *xiao* my father

who died last year.”

By the time Confucius was through with *xiao* he had extended its meaning to include being loyal to and protecting living parents, including one's mother as well as one's father. The later Confucians went even further, fully conflating *xiao* with the political virtue *zhong* 忠—meaning loyalty to a political superior.

2) *li*

Confucius similarly expanded the meaning of ceremoniousness *li*. It was still important to perform each religious ceremony at the right time and in the right way, but it had to be performed sincerely and meaningfully (*cheng* 誠). That is why taking care of a live parent was even more important than feeding her dead spirit by using the proper ceremonial.

It was still more important not to turn in a live father for breaking some law (though a filial son should remonstrate with him to change his ways). Such behavior was more important than observing the formal rules of the ceremonies, though these too should be faithfully upheld.

Confucius redefined ceremoniousness into a word better translated as the “constitutional order of a state and the basic rules of behavior in a society.” This gave *li* and the other old virtues much more weight than before. Mere custom became less important than these more abstract formulations of what underlay custom and what useful and wholesome novelties custom made possible.

On one occasion Confucius even said that he might under some circumstances prefer living among the Yi barbarians of the east rather than among the civilized peoples of Lu or Qi. Even though the Yi didn't even button their jackets on the right side (i.e. had a different culture), if they were faithful in carrying out the essence of the ceremonies and behaved righteously, and the people of Lu or Qi did not do so, a righteous man would prefer life among the Yi.

3) *ren*

Confucius also expanded the meaning of the virtue of fellow-feeling amongst fellow clansmen, *ren* 仁. By the time Confucius was through with it we have to translate *ren* as meaning “fellow-feeling” for all virtuous human beings, including even well-behaving barbarians. This provided the ultimate basis for the creation of the first Chinese universal state three cen-

⁸It is a record of his conversations written down by his disciples' disciples just as the disciples' generation was passing from the scene, a half-century after Confucius's death

turies after Confucius's death. *Ren's* universality also underpinned Confucius's version of the Golden Rule: "Do not do unto others what you do not wish them to do unto you."⁹

4) *rectification of names*

By generalizing the meaning of these old virtues Confucius created the first generation of lords of merit capable of being trusted to create and then administer an extensive bureaucratic state.

Though generalized, these definitions became even more precise than before. Confucius could hold aristocrats and meritocrats, who were supposed to embody these virtues, to an even higher standard of behavior than before.

He called this pattern of increased definitional rigor the *zhengming* 正名, the "rectification of names." Though he expressed it rather crudely ("A ruler should be a ruler . . . a father should be a father"), this probably began the Chinese development of formal logic, a discipline always linked in China to the word "name" (*ming* 名).

He borrowed for such lords of merit the word *junzi* 君子, literally "ruler's son," a general term for a member of the aristocracy. When Confucius was through defining it a *junzi* was simply a "gentleman," a man of *any* respectable class who had demonstrated his qualifications, moral and intellectual, to hold high office.

Once the meanings had been precisely established, *xiaoren* became the antonym of *junzi*. *Xiaoren* no longer necessarily meant someone whose family had dropped below aristocratic status. It now meant someone who did not live up to Confucius's definition of a gentleman. Apparently no word was safe in Confucius's hands if he could find a more wholesome use for it!

d. a sharp intellectual break

It is evident that despite his greater commitment to Zhou tradition compared to any of the other early philosophers, Confucius made the most drastic break with the intellectual patterns of the immediate past of his civilization.

China's supposed complete break with its Feudal Society to leap into Socialism

during the 20th century has turned out to be trivial by comparison. *The Little Red Book* of Chairman Mao's sayings, so ubiquitous a generation ago is now little more than a curiosity. The *Analects* is now once again an important intellectual force among the Chinese in China. (It never lost its importance among many of the Chinese living outside China proper.)

By the 1980s, the rulers of the People's Republic, had almost altogether lost their legitimacy. Hardly anyone, including most of the rulers, any longer believed in the truth of their material determinist vision of Heaven. They now find themselves left only with the Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist visions of Heaven, supplemented by a small but influential constituency for the Christian vision. Of these, still the most important, especially for the men of merit who run the contemporary Chinese socialist state, is the Confucian template of merit.

And yet, like the vegetation deities in a hundred ancient myths that required the deity to die before he could prevail, or like Moses kept by Yahweh from entering the Promised Land, or David forbidden by God to construct the Temple, Confucius died unhappy at not being fully used. He was skeptical of the ability of even his best disciples to remain steadfast in office. Their failure would be his failure.

Despite his conviction that he had failed, Confucius never regretted the uncompromising course he had taken. As he said to one of the Daoist hermits who jeered at him from the side of the road as he endured the trials of his hegira, "Why would Tian have put these ideas into my head, if He did not expect me to attempt to carry them out?"

The zealot who creates the pattern for his civilization is perhaps always denied Heaven's permission to enjoy in his person the exercise of power under that pattern.

I can only hope that whatever else you take away from this text and course, you will retain the essence of this portrait of Confucius as a passionate religious figure, a true sage with many of the traits of an Old Testament prophet, torn by his fear of failure in a world that had lost its connection to the ancient vision of Heaven he embraced. This is far nobler as well as truer than the traditional version of Confucius in the West as the worldly Charlie Chan-like figure spouting pidgin English fortune cookie aphorisms. That is the

Confucius of the Western academic consensus and an echo of the view of the now discredited Chinese material determinist view.

B. Other Early Chinese Philosophers

Confucius may have been the first to cross over this threshold from theology to philosophy, but he and his disciples soon had some company. He may even have had some of this company during his own lifetime among the Daoist hermits he encountered on the road. A generation after his death, Confucius's disciples inadvertently helped create his first great rival, the eponymous founder of Mohism, by educating (or miseducating) him in one of their schools.

1. *The Mohist alternative use of the northern Heaven*

a. Mo Zi (Mo Di): commoner, ex-knight

By the next generation after Confucius, the followers of Master Mo (Mo Zi 墨子) were also creating philosophy out of theology and ceremonial practice and applying it to political life.

Master Mo, like Confucius, came from Lu and worshipped the same northern Zone B Heaven as did Confucius. He too was a commoner, but of more obscure origins than Confucius. He may have come from an ex-military aristocrat family of feudal knights (*shi* 士) which after the passage of several multiples of five generations of younger sons had lost the hereditary right to a government job. It is also possible that he came from a family of peasants who rose in status by purchasing land. They may even have been former knights who fell into the peasantry and then recovered some of their social position by prospering and buying land.

Master Mo's birth date is traditionally given as 469 BC, a decade after the death of Confucius. He is also sometimes referred to as Mo Di (墨迪), which would suggest his family name was Mo and his given name was Di. However, since Mo also means "tattoo" and is rarely used as a family name, some have speculated that Mo Di means Tattoo Di, and that he bore a tattoo on his face, a brand placed on criminals during their imprisonment.

Whatever may have befallen his son

⁹ The human moral code appears to be universal, though each culture states it slightly differently. See the appendix to C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* for a survey of how the world's main faiths and moral philosophies coincide on the moral code.

as an adult, the father of the future Master Mo could afford to buy him an education of the new type at the hands of some of the disciples of Confucius's disciples.

We know this because Mo Zi bitterly denounced his Confucian teachers as being little better than a collection of glorified funeral directors. All they did, he complained, was teach him empty ceremonials without regard to the ends the ceremonials were designed to serve.

Confucius, he said, knew better than to do that, but was also flawed because he did not state his ideas clearly enough to keep his disciples from falling into the error of which he had warned them.

b. profit becomes utility

Mo Di's most important contribution to the evolution of philosophy was to provide a more rigorous way to measure the link between ideas and their outcomes. He abstracted the essence of the concept of "profit," and created from it the philosophical term for which we use the word "utility," just as Confucius had generalized the meaning of other words with a more sacred origin.

Mo Di did this with the word for "profit" (*li*). Even in its modern form *li* preserves the ancient pair of pictographs from which it was crafted. These were an ear of grain on the left and a knife on the right, together symbolizing the harvest. The character stood for the "increase" of the harvest over the seed originally planted.

The men of the market had already generalized the meaning of this agricultural term to mean "profit" in commercial exchanges.

With the characteristic earthiness of the commoner (and/or practical soldier, and/or ex-con), Mo Di further transformed *li* into a philosophical term meaning something like our word "utility."

Mo Di was not just the first utilitarian, he was a better one than Jeremy Bentham, the late 18th and early 19th century British figure who coined the term utilitarianism. Bentham defined the highest utility as the greatest good for the greatest number. Under that definition, if all the students in my classes could obtain "A"s by hanging me on the spot, they would be justified in doing so.

Mo Di, however, defined the greatest utility as coming closest to fulfilling the intentions of Tian. He took all the Confucian virtues and ruthlessly purged them of

ceremoniousness for its own sake. He kept only those activities that most efficiently furthered Tian's main aim of creating a just order on earth.

That meant, he concluded, getting rid of music, fancy funerals and anything else that did not directly contribute to the reign of virtue that would fulfill Tian's intentions for life on earth. Oddly, he encouraged belief in ghosts and demons. They had a function: Their role was to scare people into living virtuously.

Above all, Tian wanted everyone to treat everyone else equally well. That even meant that people should love other men's fathers equally with their own. At that point Mo Di made his sharpest break with both the received version of the Zhou religion of Heaven and with the Confucians. This may reflect the commoner origins of Mohism's founder. Perhaps he carried over into philosophy a commoner's egalitarian populism that re-presented the egalitarianism contained within some northern commoners' fertility cult religion. It may merely reflect the intensity of his devotion to the logic of his position.

At a higher level, this view of utility justified creating a super-rational bureaucratic state, one purged of any elements of non-functional tradition. Grim though life in a land ruled by such a state might be, at least that state would not be justified in engaging in aggressive warfare (since that would damage Tian's creation). A Mohist state could, however, defend itself against others' aggression by purely defensive moves.

c. independent religious institutions

Mo Di set up a religious structure separate from both state and family. He wanted a base from which to act to make sure the state behaved appropriately. In effect, he became pope of a Mohist church. His chief disciples became his priests. The church had its own treasury, buildings, and perhaps even its own army to defend its supporters against the aggression of others.

Setting up a separate church turned out to be Mo Di's biggest mistake. His was the first and only independently instituted religion in ancient China, and the Chinese were not ready for it. Nobody was in the ancient world. Independently instituted religions were quite rare then.

Almost all ancient religions, and virtually all the successful ones, had diffused institutions, i.e. with their functions dif-

fused into and carried out by existing political and social agencies. The Zhou king was also the "pope" of the religion of Tian. The "bishops" were the feudal lords. The "priests" were the aristocratic and meritocratic courtiers, and outside the structure of the state, the fathers of the various lineages and sublineages. This comingling of church and state made it much easier for religion and politics to justify and support each other.

Mo Di's church had to grab power from outside the state before its vision of Heaven could legitimize political power. To the ancients this looked like banditry. Hence Mohism remained no more than the faith of what was perceived as an eccentric minority, absurdly trying to act politically outside the state's structure.

Though it exercised significant influence on the other ancient schools of philosophy, over the long run Mohism was, therefore, doomed to extinction.

2. The Daoist (Taoist) Southern Heaven

Much more important over the long run was the Heaven of the southern half of Zone B and the nearby parts of C1, which was re-presented onto earth as the civilization and state of Chu and some of its southern neighbors.

a. the hermits from Chu

As we have seen, even in Confucius's time, migrants from Chu lived in the northern part of Zone B. This reflected the military advance of Chu as far into the north as the Huai River valley since Spring-Autumn times. (See chapter 5B.)

We don't know much about Chu culture except for inferences from a few objects excavated from ancient tombs. The Chu religion seems to have had much less to do with the night sky than did the religion of the Zhou peoples. It was more nearly a fertility religion. A dragon carried the dead (at least among aristocrats) up to Heaven. The dragon was originally a mythical southern beast associated with the metaphysical fecundity of the earth.¹⁰ Images of sacred deer with strangely extended antlers also appear in Chu tombs.

¹⁰ Southern Chinese dragons did not breathe fire the way medieval European dragons did. When they rose from some river or from a chain of hills resembling a female body in a sexually receptive posture, they breathed a fructifying mist that would make a lady pregnant if it landed on her.

As Chu interacted with the Zhou principalities, it absorbed Zhou political forms and ultimately accepted parts of the religion from which these forms were represented. As Chu became more successful and occupied more northern land, the Chu individuals serving in such occupied areas must have absorbed ever more of the northern culture if only because these occupied areas had to be governed more in accord with their own traditions than Chu's.

Some of these Chu sojourners in the north, particularly those more deeply rooted in their own culture and its religious traditions, must have resented such alien influences. A few of them apparently decided they were unwilling to pay the price of cultural-political alienation for the power to compete with the northern states on the northerners' own terms.

No doubt most of the Chu occupiers put up with this alienation as the price of power. Others, however, seem to have retired from office prematurely, some of them becoming hermits who overtly rejected not just the Zhou state, but states in general.

One such was Jie Yu, the "mad hermit of Chu," whom Confucius met during his travels around subzone B2. Jie Yu lived in a cave by the side of the road. He jeered at Confucius and his disciples for attempting the hopeless and hence foolish task of reforming the states re-presented from the Zhou vision of Heaven. He urged Confucius to join him in eremitism. Confucius could only exclaim that if Tian had not wanted him to have these ideas about reforming the states, Tian would not have put them in his head. He then walked off, the cynical laughter of the hermit echoing behind him.

Jie Yu seems to have advanced beyond the position of the fox in Aesop's fable who jeered at the grapes he could not reach as probably being sour. Perhaps men like him had begun to generalize from their resentment of the alien Zhou style of state to at least a dim philosophical awareness of the inadequacy of *all* states. If they had, they were the earliest of the Daoists (Taoists). During the ensuing classical age of philosophy their successors tried to demonstrate that all states did indeed tend to behave badly.

b. loose analogy to Frantz Fanon

The attitude of these hermits perhaps also anticipated the style of thought of the

prophet of modern black anticolonialism, a black writer from Martinique in the French West Indies, Frantz Fanon.

Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, bemoaned his loss of the aboriginal culture and religion of West Africa from which the Europeans had snatched his ancestors to become slaves in the West Indies. It was no comfort that the Europeans had eventually allowed him, the descendant of these slaves, to gain a sophisticated French education, at first in Martinique and then in Paris. In addition to a good general education, Fanon received a highly useful medical education. Nor was he appeased by recognition that the French had acknowledged him as one of the great French prose stylists of the century.

He could find no better outlet for his genius than this anguished book, a cry from the heart rejecting the only culture he truly knew, but one that he could never accept as his own.

Perhaps something like that was what the early Daoists were doing. Both Fanon and the Daoists were alienated from their native culture, Fanon through defeat and enslavement of his ancestors; the Daoists through their state's conquest of the alien Zhou Dynasty's territory. The Daoists generalized from their cultural dilemma to create a philosophical basis for political anarchism; Fanon let himself be caught up in a sterile Marxism. As a consequence, while we still read the Daoists for their substance as well as their style, we read Fanon only for his style.

3. Roots of Confucianism's Dominance

And yet even as their Mohist and Daoist rivals were elaborating elements of philosophy not adequately noticed by the Confucians, the Confucians were becoming ever more dominant.

a. the meritocratic connection

Confucianism's dominance was partly because it was designed by and for meritocrats, an ever more important part of the Chinese ruling class. Even now, China's remains the culture most overtly meritocratic in the composition of its ruling class.

The Daoists' philosophical anarchism did not much appeal to meritocrats in office, though Daoist books often comforted

even orthodox Confucian meritocrats when adherence to their principles had led to their expulsion from office.

b. ancient dominance of diffused over independent institutions

People's perception of its independent religious structure as alien accounts for the failure of Mohism to compete with Confucianism, and for the disappearance of Mohism during late antiquity.

Unfortunately for Daoism, one wing of it probably swallowed the Mohist cults' members and with them the Mohist principle of maintaining independent religious institutions. Association of some sects in peoples' minds with these Mohist sectarians tended to undermine Daoism's legitimacy too.

Eventually, after the 3rd century AD, Buddhism became dominant and legitimized the idea of independent religious institutions. It thereby also inaugurated the second stage of high civilization in China. By then, however, Confucianism and the bureaucratic state had sunk such deep roots that eventually even the Buddhist churches had to subordinate themselves to both the state and Confucianism.

c. dominance of north over south

Confucianism's dominance also had a geographic component. As we have already seen in chapter one, over the long run, northern China has tended to dominate southern China. Since Confucianism was inextricably linked to the religious tradition of the northern half of Zone B, and Daoism was equally inextricably linked to the religious tradition of the southern half of Zone B and the nearby parts of Zone C, the geostrategic ground was tilted in favor of Confucianism.

Northern dominance seems still to hold. During 1945-9, a Communist force from B1 whipped the Nationalist government centered in southern C1. As tensions have risen recently between the rapidly industrializing southeast (C2 and northern C3) and the less advanced north (most of Zone B), the southerners complain that a statist and increasingly Confucian meritocracy in the north is stifling their Daoist-inspired industrialization.

If historical precedent is any guide, the Daoist capitalists of the south had better watch their step lest the born-again ex-Marxist Confucian meritocrats of the north once more exert dominance. EHK