

# CONFUCIUS ANALECTS

WITH SELECTIONS FROM TRADITIONAL COMMENTARIES

TRANSLATED BY  
EDWARD SLINGERLAND

“Edward Slingerland’s new translation of the Confucian *Analects* is something that we have long needed: an accurate, lucid rendition paired with helpful explanations and reference material, including selections from the most important traditional commentaries. General readers and students will find no more accessible, reliable entrée to this difficult and seminal text. This new *Analects* is an extraordinary contribution and should by rights become the preferred starting-point for English-language readers.”

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—JOHN BERTHRONG, Boston University

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Cover art: From a facsimile edition of the Songben Lunyu Zhushu (Song Dynasty edition of the *Analects* with commentary and subcommentary).

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EDWARD SLINGERLAND

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
Indianapolis/Cambridge

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10 09 08 07 2 3 4 5 6 7

For further information, please address  
Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.  
P.O. Box 44937  
Indianapolis, IN 46244-0937

[www.hackettpublishing.com](http://www.hackettpublishing.com)

Cover design by Abigail Coyle  
Text design by Jennifer Plumley  
Composition by SNP Best-set Typesetter Ltd., Hong Kong

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Confucius.

[Lun yu. English]

Confucius analects / translated by Edward Slingerland.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-87220-636-X—ISBN 0-87220-635-1 (paper)

I. Slingerland, Edward G. (Edward Gilman) II. Title.

PL2478.L8 2003

181'.112—dc21

2003047772

ISBN-13 978-0-87220-636-6 (cloth)  
ISBN-13 978-0-87220-635-9 (paper)  
eISBN 978-1-60384-019-4 (ebook)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	vii
Acknowledgments	x
Conventions	xi
Introduction	xiii
Traditional Chronology	xxvi

## *Analects*

Book One	1
Book Two	8
Book Three	17
Book Four	29
Book Five	39
Book Six	52
Book Seven	64
Book Eight	78
Book Nine	86
Book Ten	98
Book Eleven	111
Book Twelve	125
Book Thirteen	138
Book Fourteen	153
Book Fifteen	174
Book Sixteen	191
Book Seventeen	199
Book Eighteen	213
Book Nineteen	221
Book Twenty	231
Romanization	236
Appendix 1: Glossary of Terms	237
Appendix 2: Disciples of Confucius	244

Appendix 3: Historical Personages	248
Appendix 4: Traditional Chinese Commentators Cited	256
Appendix 5: Traditional Chinese Texts	270
Bibliography	277



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## PREFACE

The *Analects* is not a “book” in the sense that most modern Westerners usually understand a book—that is, a coherent argument or story presented by a single author, to be digested alone in the quiet of one’s study. It is instead a record—somewhat haphazardly collected and edited together at an unknown point in history—of a dynamic process of teaching, and most likely was only committed to writing many years after the primary touchstone of the process, the Master Confucius, had passed away. It probably represents an attempt by later students and followers to keep alive the memory of his teaching, which had been conveyed both verbally and by personal example. Many, if not most, of the passages are quite cryptic, and this may be at least partially intentional. In 7.16, the Master is reported as saying, “I will not open the door for a mind that is not already striving to understand, nor will I provide words to a tongue that is not already struggling to speak. If I hold up one corner of a problem, and the student cannot come back to me with the other three, I will not attempt to instruct him again.” As we see throughout the text, Confucius’ comments are often intended to elicit responses from his disciples, which are then corrected or commented upon by the Master. Therefore, these “ordered sayings” of Confucius were originally embedded in a conversational context within which their meaning could be gradually extracted.

By the late fourth century B.C.E., with the Master gone, direct conversation was no longer possible, but this merely forced the dialogue to take a different form. It is at this point that we get the beginning of what came to be an over two thousand year old tradition of commentary on the words of Confucius. The tradition begins with such Warring States texts as the *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, and the *Record of Ritual*, and continues up to the present-day—carried on for most of this time in classical Chinese, branching out into the various vernaculars of East Asian nations in the Chinese cultural sphere, and finally expanding in the 18th century into a wide variety of Indo-European languages. For the most part, this commentarial tradition represents an attempt by later followers or admirers of the Master to find “the other three corners,” no longer in dialogue with the Master himself, but rather by embracing extant clues about the Master’s possible intention, the views of previous students of the text, and the opinions of contemporaries. For later students of the *Analects*, this written commentarial tradition serves as a proxy for the original conversational environment, providing context, making connections, and teasing out implications.

Since at least the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), no Chinese student of the text has attempted to approach the *Analects* outside of the context of this written commentarial tradition. Most modern Chinese people, of course, read

the text—originally written in classical Chinese, a purely literary language—with a translation into modern Chinese as well as extensive commentaries, but even traditionally educated Chinese conversant with the classical language find it necessary to base their understanding of the text upon the foundation of earlier commentaries. Indeed, the text of the *Analects* itself is arguably so concise as to be incomprehensible without some sort of interpretative apparatus imposed upon it. As John Makeham has noted, “Unless a reader is provided with a commentarial ‘context’ in which flesh is added to the very spare bones of the text, [the *Analects*] frequently reads as a cryptic mixture of parochial injunctions and snatches of dry conversation. It is the commentaries which bring the text to life and lend it definition” (1997: 261). I have therefore always found it astounding that Western readers of the *Analects* have, for the most part, been left to their own devices in understanding this exceedingly difficult text, being presented with simply the bare, original passages with usually no more than a translator’s introduction and occasional textual notes to rely on. Small wonder that so many have come away from the *Analects* with their impression of cryptic, mysterious Eastern “fortune cookie” wisdom reinforced. This, however, is not how the text is read in China, and is not at all how the text itself was originally meant. The passages that make up our received *Analects* were probably originally intended to be recited aloud, with teachers and students together discussing their meaning and subtleties. The commentarial tradition that has accreted around the text merely represents a written substitute for this original verbal interaction.

What this edition attempts to do is give the English-language reader a hint of the richness of this context, a glimpse of the living text in its natural habitat, by presenting it with extensive running commentary. Perhaps the best way to characterize the experience I am trying to create is to imagine reading the *Analects* with a friend by your side who knows classical Chinese, and already has some definite opinions about how to read the text, who then proceeds to skim through vast quantities of commentaries, sub-commentaries, textual notes, and other arcana surrounding the text and occasionally shout out things he or she thinks are helpful or illuminating, as well as providing recommendations for further exploration in the English-language scholarship. Not ideal, of course, but still a far sight better than being set adrift with only a translator’s introduction and the text itself, in all its cryptic glory. Of course, that actual situation is usually worse than that, for much of the cryptic quality of the original is already hidden in the translation by virtue of the choices the translator has to make in rendering the passages into intelligible English. As Alice Cheang has noted,

The first thing to disappear in a translation of the *Analects*—its most distinctive formal characteristic—is the opacity of the text. Much that in the original is dense and abstruse becomes clear, comprehensible, and pellucidly simple. The translator, constrained by the limits of the grammatically feasible, usually has to choose among several interpretations . . . so that most of the latent ambiguity in the original is suppressed in the converted text . . . What has been added is necessary in order to render the words of Confucius intelligible in another language, but the result is a text in which the balance of power is shifted towards the author (in this case the translator) and away from the reader. (Cheang 2000: 568–569).

Another way to describe what I am trying to do, then, is that by providing alternative interpretations of individual passages and identifying where various understandings are coming from, as well as by pointing the reader in the direction of works that contain more detailed discussions of the issues at hand, I am trying to give back at least a measure of this power to the English-language reader. Not *too* much, of course, because a certain measure of control has to be exerted to avoid producing utter nonsense, but something approaching the maximum amount of power someone cut off from the text in its original language can reasonably hope. I myself have ceded a great deal of power to the editor of the four-volume critical edition of the *Analects* which this translation is based, Cheng Shude 程樹德, one of the most important of 20th-century Chinese students of the text. The reader may be reassured to know that, at the very least, the hands holding the hands into which you have put yourself are trustworthy.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The task of translating the primary text of the *Analects* was eased considerably by the labor of previous translators, whose work I have built on, and whose well-turned phrases I have, in many cases, been entirely helpless to improve on. Uffe Bergeton and Ho Su-mei provided invaluable assistance in my translation of traditional commentaries by checking my work, catching many errors and infelicitous translations, and Uffe did much of the initial biographical research for Appendix 4.

Ivan Perkins was a great help in preparing the appendices, and an anonymous reader solicited by Hackett Publishing provided very helpful comments on the Introduction. Daniel Gardner, whom I initially contacted for assistance in solving a Song question of identity, very graciously agreed to read the entire manuscript, and provided extremely useful feedback that has made this a much more readable book. Jennifer Plumley and her production team at Hackett Publishing did a wonderful job of copyediting, helped me to clean up my sometimes turgid prose, and have generally made the publication process smooth and painless, which is by no means the norm in academic publishing. The completion of this work was facilitated by a USC Individual Zumberge Research Grant for the summer of 2002.

My biggest debts, however, are owed to Deborah Wilkes and Joel Sahleen. Deborah, my editor at Hackett Publishing, has been a source of constant encouragement and lucid advice, and has managed to skillfully balance our desire for academic integrity with the demands of common sense. Sensitive to the sometimes rather finicky needs of the author and yet thoroughly professional and efficient, Deborah has been a sheer pleasure to work with, and one could not hope for a better editor. Joel Sahleen, my longtime friend and colleague, generously agreed—despite the demands of new fatherhood and dissertation-writing—to watch my sinological back, commenting extensively on the first draft of this translation and saving me from innumerable embarrassing gaffs and stylistic crimes. I have only explicitly noted Joel's contributions where lack of attribution would constitute egregious intellectual theft, but as a result of his consistent firm guidance—urging me toward clarity of expression, grammatical responsibility, and historical accuracy—his voice in fact permeates this entire translation. In keeping with Confucius' dictum on friendship, Joel would remonstrate with me gently, desisting when I was too stubborn to listen (12.23), and was unable to save me from all of the sinological and stylistic errors no doubt still to be found in this translation. For these, of course, I take full responsibility.

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## CONVENTIONS

The *pinyin* system of romanization is used throughout. In order to avoid confusion, Chinese words appearing in quotations from Western scholars have also been converted into *pinyin*, with the exception of titles of articles or books.

References to *Analects* passages will be in the form x.x, where the first number refers to the “book” and the second to the passage number within the book.

Due to the fact that this classroom edition is oriented primarily toward readers with little or no knowledge of Chinese, references for traditional Chinese texts cited by Cheng Shude or other commentators are only provided in cases where a complete English translation is easily available. All translations from Chinese are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Traditional Chinese commentators often make direct or oblique references to classical texts, and these I will note with brackets.

To avoid cluttering the text and commentary with Chinese characters, the characters for proper names will be omitted unless immediately relevant, but will be included in the entries in Appendix 3 (“Historical Personages”).

The disciples of Confucius are often referred to by a variety of names. Their more formal style-name (*zi* 字) is usually used in third-person narrative, whereas in first person speech or when they are usually addressed by Confucius their personal name (*ming* 名) is generally used. The benefits of reflecting these differences in level of formality in the translation seem to be outweighed by the confusion they will create for the English reader, so throughout the translation I have kept to one form of reference—usually the style-name, but sometimes the full name when the style-name is not used or is only rarely used in the text. I have followed the same practice with other potentially confusing proper names, such as the Shang Dynasty, which is also referred to as the Yin.

In order to avoid confusion, I have adopted nonstandard romanizations of certain proper names:

Zhou 紂, for the evil last king of Shang, to distinguish him from the Zhou 周 Dynasty;

Qii 杞, for a minor state mentioned in the text, to distinguish it from the much more prominent state of Qi 齊;

Jii 姬, for the Zhou clan name, to distinguish it from the Ji 季 of the Ji Family that ruled the state of Lu in Confucius’ time.

I have exclusively used the male third-person pronoun when referring to the Confucian practitioner because, as far as we can tell, the *Analects* was composed by and for men, and the idea that women might have any place in the Confucian worldview—other than as temptations to immorality, or (from the Han

Dynasty on) subsidiary helpmates toward morality—has no place in an account of traditional Confucianism (refer to the commentary to 17.25). I am not at all unsympathetic toward certain modern Western attempts to make Confucianism more gender-neutral, but feel it is a scholarly disservice to obscure the gender attitudes of traditional Confucians.

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## INTRODUCTION

The *Analects*, or *Lunyu* 論語 (lit. “ordered sayings”), purports to be a record of the teachings of Kongzi 孔子 and his disciples. Kongzi is more commonly known in the West by the latinization “Confucius,” bestowed upon him by Jesuit missionaries in the 18th century; his traditional dates are 551–479 B.C.E. The *Analects* has been traditionally viewed as a coherent and accurate record of the teachings of the Master, recorded during his lifetime or perhaps shortly after his death, but this view of the text began to be called into question by the philologists of the Qing Dynasty, and modern textual critics have argued convincingly that the text actually consists of different chronological strata, assembled by an editor or series of editors, probably considerably after the death of Confucius.

The earliest explicit quotation from the *Analects* in another early text is found in the *Record of Ritual*,<sup>1</sup> which most scholars agree is of pre-Han Dynasty provenance. Unattributed quotations of the *Analects* found in other pre-Han texts suggest that something like our received version was circulating during the Warring States period. According to the first discussion of the *Analects* as a text, that of Pan Gu (32–92) in the *History of the Han*, there were three different versions circulating in his day: the Lu 魯 version (of twenty books), the Qi 齊 version (of twenty-two books), and the “Ancient text” (*gu* 古) version (of twenty-one books), the last of which was supposedly found in the walls of Confucius’ house, hidden there and therefore saved from the infamous burning of the books carried out by the first emperor of Qin in 213 B.C.E. From the comments of early textual critics we know that these versions—none of which have survived in their entirety—apparently varied not only in number of books, but also in the content of the individual books. In the early Han Dynasty, scholars specialized in mastering any one of the three versions, and the imperial academy instituted by Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 B.C.E.) trained and tested students on all three. This situation began to change during the reign of Chu Yuan (48–44 B.C.E.), who appointed a scholar by the name of Zhang Yu (d. 5 B.C.E.) as tutor to the crown prince. Zhang Yu was trained in both the Lu and Qi *Analects*, and edited them together to create his own eclectic version, since referred to as the Marquis Zhang version. Zhang Yu’s student became Emperor Cheng in 32 B.C.E., and Zhang himself was appointed Prime Minister in 25 B.C.E., at which point his eclectic version of the *Analects* began to eclipse the other “original” versions. Another prominent eclectic edition of the text circulating at the time was that of Zheng Xuan (127–200), which consisted of the Lu version amended with

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<sup>1</sup>Chapter 30 (“Record of the Dykes”); Legge 1967, vol. 2: 290. For brief accounts of traditional texts mentioned in the translation and commentary, the reader is referred to Appendix 5.

textual variants from the Qi and Ancient versions, with Zheng Xuan's commentary appended. Neither the Marquis Zhang nor the Zheng Xuan version survived intact, and what we will be referring to as the "received" version is a doubly eclectic version assembled by He Yan (190–249), which drew on the Marquis Zhang and Zheng Xuan versions.

It is that received version on which this translation is based, although occasional reference will be made to textual variants—points where the Lu, Qi, or Ancient versions differed from the received version—that were recorded by early textual critics and that managed to survive the demise of these original versions. Reference will also be made to textual variations found in various "extant" versions of the text—copies of the text that have survived in stone carvings or handwritten manuscripts, usually in very fragmentary form. Until recently, the earliest of these extant versions was the Xiping stone text, which dates to approximately 178 C.E., but an additional twist was added to *Analects* textual scholarship by the discovery in 1973 of the so-called Dingzhou 定州 version, written on bamboo strips and found in a Han Dynasty tomb that was sealed in 55 B.C.E. The Dingzhou *Analects* appears to be a variant of the Lu version and reflects slightly less than half of the received text. Due to difficulties involved in reconstructing the order of the bamboo strips, which were originally strung together by cords that have long since rotten away, the Dingzhou text was not published until 1997. Although it contains many textual variations from the received text, most of them are not conceptually significant; the few that are will be noted in the translation.

As for the received version of the text, there is no doubt among contemporary scholars that it is a somewhat heterogeneous collection of material from different time periods, although scholars differ in their identification of the different strata, as well as in the significance they attribute to these differences. At one end of the spectrum of opinion are scholars such as D.C. Lau 1979, who—drawing upon the work of the Qing scholar Cui Shu (1740–1816)—separates the book into two strata (the first 15 books and the last 5) of different ages, but treats the work as more or less thematically homogenous. Steven Van Zoeren 1991 represents what was until recently the other end of the spectrum. He uses a form-critical approach to divide the work into four strata—from earliest to latest, the "core books" 3–7, books 1–2 and 8–9, books 10–15, and books 16–20—which he sees as representing not only different time periods, but also substantially different viewpoints. This end of the spectrum has recently been pushed to a new extreme by Brooks and Brooks 1998, who see each individual book as representing a discrete stratum, identify vast numbers of "later interpolations" within each stratum, and claim that the work was composed over a much longer period of time than has been generally accepted—the later strata being put together as late as the third century B.C.E. Brooks and Brooks radically reorganize the structure of the *Analects* and regard it as an extremely heterogeneous collection of different (and in many cases competing) viewpoints. Their view is quite speculative, however, and it is the D.C. Lau-Cui Shu's approach that seems most plausible. Though no doubt representing different time periods and somewhat different concerns, the various strata of the *Analects* display enough consistency



in terminological use, conceptual repertoire, and general religious viewpoint to allow us to treat the text as a whole. The probable late date of the last books in the *Analects* (especially books 15–20) should always be kept in mind. Nonetheless, the fact remains that nowhere in the *Analects* do we find even a hint of the sophisticated new conception of the heart-mind (*xin* 心)<sup>2</sup> debates about human nature and inter-school rivalries that so permeate Warring States texts such as the *Mencius*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Xunzi*. It is highly unlikely that any stratum of the *Analects* was composed after the early fourth century B.C.E., which means that we can safely view the text as a genuine representation of the state of the “School of Confucius” before the innovations of Mencius and Xunzi.

The primary distinguishing characteristic of this edition of the *Analects* is the inclusion of traditional Chinese commentary on the text. For a translator wishing to include such commentary, several approaches are possible. One strategy would be to choose a single traditional commentator—preferably someone widely read and respected—and follow his commentary throughout. This is the explicit approach of William Soothill, and the implicit approach of scholars such as D.C. Lau, who fairly consistently follows Zhu Xi’s commentary in his translation, although he rarely mentions Zhu Xi explicitly. The problem with this approach is that it chains us to the interpretative vision of one person, however brilliant or influential, and confines us to their hermeneutic assumptions. In the case of a neo-Confucian commentator, such as Zhu Xi, who read quite a bit of anachronistic Buddhist metaphysics into the *Analects*, this is at times undesirable. I therefore provide a selection of commentaries, in order to afford the reader choices and give a sense of the variety of the commentarial tradition, as well as the sorts of debates that it has engendered. This decision, however, creates the problem of choosing from the hundreds of extant traditional commentaries that fill the 408-volume edition of the *Analects* edited by Yan Lingfeng (Yan Lingfeng et al. 1966). Since scholarship works by building upon the contributions of others, the solution was to confine myself to the commentaries already culled by the eminent 20th century scholar Cheng Shude in his exhaustive, four-volume critical edition of the *Analects* that serves as the standard in the field. Cheng reviewed more than 140 commentaries, as well as references to the *Analects* in other early texts, and his selection seems ideal to me because he also made a conscious effort to include many sides of various debates (although he usually ends up weighing in on one side or the other), as well as unusual or unorthodox readings.

The commentators cited are all listed in Appendix 4, which includes their dates and brief biographical sketches. This is intended to give the reader some impression (however vague) of the interpretative standpoints that might inform their views of the text. The overarching interpretative standpoint adopted in the translation—the standpoint that has determined which commentators will be cited, and when—is that of a modern, historically and philologically responsible

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<sup>2</sup>For the early Chinese, the *xin* 心 (originally a pictogram of the heart organ) was the seat of both emotions and reason, thus encompassing both “heart” and “mind” in English. Depending upon the context, it will be variously translated below as “heart,” “mind” or “heart-mind.”

student of the text (whether a Qing Dynasty Chinese philologist or a contemporary Asian or Western scholar), fluent in reading classical Chinese and interested in the thought of “Confucius.” This standpoint assumes that the text of the *Analects* is a relatively coherent whole, edited together at one time by an editor or group of editors (the “early Confucian school”) in accordance with a vision they had of what their Master, Confucius, was trying to teach. In attempting to understand this vision, modern readers of the text should try to be as historically and philologically responsible as possible—that is, they should avoid imputing to the editor(s) of the text views that would have been unrecognizable to them, and whenever possible should refrain from introducing anachronistic terms or ideas. In practice, this means that our knowledge of late Spring and Autumn and Warring States language usage, society, history, and thought should delimit the parameters of possible interpretations of the text. While this set of assumptions is by no means the only angle from which one might approach the text of the *Analects*, ultimately it seems the most rewarding and historically responsible standpoint for someone interested in understanding the text in something resembling its original religious and cultural milieu.

### *Pre-Confucian Background*

Traditional Chinese historiography presents the Xia Dynasty as the first of the legendary dynasties of the Golden Age, supposedly founded by the legendary sage-king Yu. Yu is also credited with taming the floods of the Yellow River, thereby making what we now think of as north-central China habitable for the Chinese people. The earliest Chinese civilization for which we have archeological and written evidence, however, is the Shang Dynasty (sometimes alternately referred to as the Yin Dynasty), the traditional dates of which are 1751–1122 B.C.E. It is from the Shang that we have the first written records from China, in the form of so-called “oracle bones.” These oracle bones are pieces of ox scapula or tortoise shells used in divination. Questions concerning the proper course of action or requests for things such as rain, directed to the spirits of the Shang ancestors, were written upon them, and heat was then applied. The answer from the ancestors—yes, this military campaign will be successful or no, rain will not be forthcoming—were revealed in the resulting pattern of cracks decoded by the diviner, who was often the Shang king himself.

Often the ancestors were asked to intercede with the being who wielded the greatest power of all over the Shang people, the ur-ancestor known as the “Lord on High” (*shangdi* 上帝). The Lord on High seems originally to have been a nonhuman god who gradually came to be viewed as the first human ancestor of the Shang people, and therefore—by virtue of seniority—the most powerful of the ancestor spirits. The Lord on High and the other ancestor spirits of the Shang were viewed as dwelling in a kind of netherworld somewhere above the human realm (hence the Lord “on High”), from which vantage point they continued to monitor the behavior of their descendents, receive sacrificial offerings, hear questions and requests, and control all the phenomena seen as lying beyond

human control (weather, health and sickness, success or failure in battle, etc.). Establishing and maintaining a good relationship with these spirits—especially the most powerful of them, the Lord on High—was one of the primary concerns of the Shang ruler. In the oracle bones we find a special term, *de* 德, referring to the power accrued by a ruler who, through timely and appropriate sacrifices, successfully established and preserved such a relationship with the ancestors. We will translate this term as “Virtue,”<sup>3</sup> with the caveat that the reader should keep in mind the original sense of the Latin *virtus*—the particular “power” residing in a person or thing, preserved in modern English in such expressions as, “By virtue of his great intelligence, he was able to solve the problem.” Virtue in the early Shang context refers to a kind of attractive, charismatic power residing in a ruler who had won the endorsement of the ancestral spirits. This power could be perceived by others, serving as a visible mark of the spirits’ favor, and its attractive qualities allowed the ruler to both win and retain supporters.

Sometime near the end of the second millennium B.C.E., a people known as the Zhou invaded the Shang realm and deposed the last of the Shang kings. The traditional date of the conquest is 1122 B.C.E., but this has been the subject of great dispute and the conquest may in fact have occurred over a period of time rather than in one fell swoop. In any case, what is clear is that the Zhou people were very eager to identify with the religious and political systems of their predecessors. We have much more in the way of written material from the Zhou Dynasty that helps us to understand their religious worldview. The most reliable source is the set of inscriptions that have been found on bronze ritual vessels discovered in tombs, intended as commemorations on the occasion of the making of the vessel, which reveal much about early Zhou history and thought. Less reliable—because subject to scribal changes, both intentional and unintentional—but far more rich in content are the received texts that purport to date from the Zhou Dynasty. The most helpful of these are the *Book of Documents* (*shangshu* 尚書 or *shujing* 書經) and the *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經), the former a collection of historical documents and governmental proclamations supposedly dating back to earliest years of Chinese history, and the latter a collection of folk songs and official state hymns. The current belief in scholarly circles is that at least half of the *Book of Documents* is a fourth century C.E. forgery, whereas much of the *Book of Odes* represents genuinely pre-Confucian material, probably dating between 1000–600 B.C.E.

The traditional account of the Zhou conquest credits King Wu (“The Martial King”) with defeating the last of the Shang kings, the infamous Zhou 紂, and posthumously declaring his father to be the first of the Zhou kings, King Wen (“The Cultured King”). When King Wu died, his designated heir, the future King Cheng (“The Perfected King”), was not yet old enough to assume the throne. For the duration of his minority, China was ruled by King Wu’s brother,

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<sup>3</sup>*De* as a particular power derived from Heaven will be translated as “Virtue” in order to distinguish it from “virtue” in a more general sense, although in the *Analects* and later writings it sometimes does possess the latter sense.

the famous Duke of Zhou, a wise and strong regent who promptly ceded his position once King Cheng came of age. This triumvirate who established the early Zhou—King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou—became bywords for virtue and wisdom.

The religious worldview of the Zhou borrowed heavily from the dynasty that they replaced. One reflection of the Zhou eagerness to identify with the Shang was their adoption of the Shang high god, the Lord on High, who was conflated with and eventually replaced by their own tribal god, *tian* 天. Early graphic forms of *tian* seem to picture a massive, striding, anthropomorphic figure, who is from the earliest times associated with the sky. Hence “Heaven” is a fairly good rendering of *tian*, as long as the reader keeps in mind that “Heaven” refers to an anthropomorphic figure—someone who can be communicated with, angered, or pleased—rather than a physical place. Heaven possessed all of the powers of the Lord on High and in addition had the ability to charge a human representative on earth with the “Mandate” (*ming* 命) to rule. *Ming* refers literally to a command issued by a political superior to an inferior or a decree issued by a ruler; in a metaphorical and religious sense, it refers to Heaven’s command to its proxy on earth, the king, to rule the human world. Just as the Lord on High sent blessings down to those of his descendents who performed the sacrifices correctly, Heaven was believed to grant the Mandate to the ruler who maintained ritual correctness. The *Book of Odes* and *Book of Documents* claim that the Shang lost the Mandate because of gross ritual improprieties and general immorality, which motivated the Lord on High/Heaven to withdraw the Mandate and give it to the Zhou. In this way, the Zhou rulers presented their motivation for conquering the Shang as merely the desire to enact Heaven’s will, rather than any selfish desire for power on their part.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, since the holder of the Mandate was believed to also receive Virtue from Heaven as a sign of its favor, early texts present the conquest as relatively effortless—King Wu simply arrived on the battlefield with his troops and the awesome power of his Virtue caused most of the opposing armies to immediately submit to him.<sup>5</sup> This is the origin of two themes in Chinese religious thought that were inherited by Confucius: only someone who is selfless and sincere will receive Virtue from Heaven, and political order is properly brought about only through the charismatic, non-coercive power of Virtue—the need to exert force viewed as evidence that a ruler does not truly enjoy Heaven’s favor.

Another important development seen in early Zhou texts is what might be described as the increasingly impartial nature of their supreme deity. The Lord on High was the blood ancestor of the Shang royal line and thus had a special loyalty to the Shang kings. Heaven, on the other hand, is a supreme deity who has chosen to bestow the Mandate upon the Zhou because of their ritual pro-

<sup>4</sup>See, for instance, the *Book of Documents*-like fragment reproduced in 20.1, where Tang, mythical founder of the Shang Dynasty, humbly declares to Heaven that his vanquishing of Jie, the evil last king of the Xia, is intended merely as punishment for Jie’s transgressions against Heaven’s order.

<sup>5</sup>See, for instance, the account of the conquest given in Chapter 31 (“The Successful Completion of the War”) of the *Book of Documents* (Legge 1991b: 306–316).

priety. In this case, what has been given can also be taken away. Ancestors still play a crucial role, and the Zhou were eager to claim for their ancestral line the same sort of privileged access to the supreme deity that the Shang line enjoyed, but there is no longer any guarantee that the ancestors can protect their descendants from the wrath of Heaven if they go against its will. This accounts for a constant refrain seen throughout the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*: the Zhou kings must be extremely careful about preserving their Virtue, lest they suffer the same fate as the Shang. As in Shang times, the manner in which to assure the favor of the supreme being was through the proper observance of a set of practices collected referred to as “ritual” (*li* 禮), but in the Zhou conception both the scope and nature of ritual practice was understood differently. Shang ritual consisted primarily of sacrificial offerings to the spirits of the ancestors, and the main concern was that the sacrifices were performed properly—that the food and drink offered were of sufficient quality, that the proper words were intoned, etc. By Zhou times, the scope of ritual had grown significantly, encompassing not only sacrificial offerings to the spirits, but also aspects of the Zhou kings’ daily lives that we might be tempted to label as “etiquette,” the manner in which one dressed, took one’s meal, approached one’s ministers, etc. In addition, proper performance of ritual duties became more than a matter of simply observing external forms because in order for ritual practice to be acceptable to Heaven, it was necessary that the king perform it with *sincerity*. We thus see in the Zhou beginnings of a concern with internal state of mind—a demand that one’s emotions and thoughts match one’s external behavior—that becomes a primary theme in the thought of Confucius.

Related to the perceived need for sincerity in ritual practice are the hints in early Zhou texts of a religious ideal that will come to be known as “wu-wei” (*wuwei* 無為). Meaning literally “no-doing” or “non-doing,” wu-wei might be best translated as “effortless action,” because it refers not to what is or is not being done, but to the *manner* in which something is done. An action is wu-wei if it is spontaneous, unselfconscious, and perfectly efficacious. Wu-wei action represents a perfect harmony between one’s inner dispositions and external movements, and is perceived by the subject to be “effortless” and free of strain.

In early Zhou texts, a sort of unselfconscious skill and sincerity is associated with ideal exemplars, both the aristocratic lord or gentleman (*junzi* 君子)—who throughout the *Book of Odes* is described as embodying the martial and social virtues that become his station with an effortless ease—and the more explicitly moral sage-ruler of old, such as Shun or Yao. Throughout early Zhou texts, the effortless moral skill of these aristocratic warriors or virtuous sage-kings is portrayed as a result of a special relationship to Heaven. Virtue is understood in these texts as accruing to those who are ritually correct in an wu-wei fashion—that is, those who accord with Heaven’s Mandate in a completely sincere, spontaneous, unselfconscious fashion. Attaining a state of wu-wei harmony with Heaven, they are thus rewarded with a power that not only brings them personal benefit, but that also allows them to more effectively realize Heaven’s will in the world. We will see this theme elaborated in the *Analects* where Confucius’ wu-wei gentleman combines both the physical mastery of the martial aristocrat

in the *Odes*—although his mastery shows itself in ritual performance rather than in war—and the unselfconscious ease and selflessness of the virtuous kings of the Zhou, also sharing with them a special relationship to Heaven.

### *The Age of Confucius*

The Zhou system resembled that of feudal Europe, where the king enjoyed the fealty of the local feudal lords—usually relatives of the royal family or favored retainers—to whom he had granted hereditary fiefdoms. Although these fiefdoms were governed independently, all of the feudal lords were bound to obey the Zhou king in times of war and to submit periodic tribute to the Zhou royal court. The beginning of the decline of the Zhou can be traced to the sack of the Zhou capital in 770 B.C.E. by barbarian tribes allied with rebellious Chinese principalities. The Zhou court was forced to flee and a new capital was established farther east. The movement of the capital marks the beginning of the so-called “Eastern Zhou” period (770–221 B.C.E.), the latter part of which is often subdivided into the “Spring and Autumn” (722–481 B.C.E.) and “Warring States” (403–221 B.C.E.) periods. The Eastern Zhou period was characterized by a gradual decline in the power of the Zhou kings, with local feudal lords and ministers gradually usurping the traditional Zhou kingly prerogatives, and more and more openly running their fiefdoms as independent states. By the time of Confucius’ birth in 551 B.C.E., the Zhou kings had been reduced to mere figureheads, and even many of the feudal lords had seen their power usurped by upstart ministers. This was the case in Confucius’ native state of Lu 魯, where the authority of the dukes—who could trace their ancestry back to the Duke of Zhou himself—had been usurped by a group of powerful clans, collectively known as the “Three Families”: the Ji-sun family, Meng-sun family, and the Shu-sun family.<sup>6</sup>

Not very much is known about the life of Confucius. Most of the traditional details are derived from a biography in the *Record of the Historian*, compiled around 100 B.C.E. by the Grand Historian Sima Qian, much of which clearly consists of legend and literary invention. Some modern scholars have attempted to construct coherent chronologies of Confucius’ life from a variety of early sources and to separate potential facts from clear fiction, but so little can be known for sure that it seems best to stick to whatever facts we might glean from the *Analects* itself. Confucius was clearly a native of Lu (18.2), of humble economic background (9.6), and seems to have been a member of the scholar-official (*shi* 士) class, the lowest of the three classes of public office holders.

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<sup>6</sup>The designation Ji-sun 季孫 (Ji Descendants) was derived from the fact that the ancestor of this family was the *ji* 季 son (youngest son) of Duke Huan of Lu (711–694 B.C.E.), who in 626 B.C.E. granted each of his three sons sizeable, independent domains within the state of Lu. Similarly, the other families that make up the “Three Families”—the “Meng-sun” 孟孫 (Meng descendants) and Shu-sun 叔孫 (Shu descendants)—were descendants of, respectively, the *meng* 孟 son (eldest after the heir) and the *shu* 叔 son (second to youngest) of this Duke, which is why these families are often alternately referred to as the *sanhuan* 三桓, or “Three [Families descended from Duke] Huan.”

Originally referring to an aristocratic warrior, *shi* had, by the time of Confucius, come to refer to a class of people who filled the middle and lower ranks of state governments, primarily in civil posts. Like Confucius, it seems that a subset of these scholar-officials were also *ru* 儒. This term, which later came to mean “Confucian,” appears only once in the *Analects* (6.13) and referred in Confucius’ time to a class of specialists concerned with transmitting and preserving the traditional rituals and texts of the Zhou Dynasty. Mastery of the Zhou classics and traditional ritual etiquette was a valued skill in public officials and led many aspiring scholar-officials to seek out *ru*-like training for the sake of acquiring public office and—most importantly—the salary and public prestige that went along with it. As we shall see, this was only one of many contemporary phenomena that troubled Confucius, who felt that training in traditional Zhou cultural forms should be pursued as an end in itself.

“Would that I did not have to speak!” Confucius sighs in 17.19. His stubbornly obtuse disciple Zigong is puzzled. “If the Master did not speak,” he asks, “then how would we little ones receive guidance?” Confucius’ response is brief, poetic and perhaps tinged with a trace of bitterness: “What does Heaven ever say? Yet the four seasons go round and find their impetus there, and the myriad creatures are born from it. What does Heaven ever say?” Heaven governs the natural world in an *wu-wei* fashion, without having to resort to words. The seasons go round, the myriad creatures are born and grow to maturity, and all these phenomena find their source in Heaven. The counterpart to Heaven in the human world is the sage-king of old, someone like Shun: “Was not Shun one who ruled by means of *wu-wei*? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his [ritual] position facing South, that is all” (15.5). In the ideal state of harmony between Heaven and humans that prevailed in ancient times, the ruler had no need to act or to speak. He simply rectified his person and took up the ritual position fitting for a ruler, and the world became ordered of its own accord.

In Confucius’ view, this sort of natural, spontaneous, unselfconscious harmony had once prevailed during the reigns of the ancients sage-kings Yao and Shun, as well as during the Golden Age of the “Three Dynasties”—the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou. This idealized vision of the past serves as Confucius’ moral and religious benchmark, which is why he finds the need to “speak”—that is, to teach, cajole, admonish—so distasteful, and is so contemptuous of “glibness” and those who speak too much. The social world should function in the same effortless, *wu-wei* fashion as the natural world, and Confucius has been summoned to speak, to bring the world back into the state of wordless harmony, only because the Way has been lost in his own age. Confucius’ own speech—the “categorized conversations” that constitute the *Analects*—is thus a necessary evil, a wake-up call sent from Heaven to a fallen world. Such is the opinion of the border official of Yi in 3.24, who clearly perceives the sacred nature of Confucius’ mission. After being presented to Confucius, he has some comforting and prophetic words for the disciples: “Why should you be concerned about your Master’s loss of office? The world has been without the Way for a long time now, and Heaven intends to use your Master like the wooden clapper for a bell.”



This mention of “the Way” (*dao* 道) should be noted because Confucius seems to have been the first to use this term in its full metaphysical sense. Referring literally to a physical path or road, *dao* also refers to a “way” of doing things, and in the *Analects* refers to *the* Way—the unique moral path that should be walked by any true human being, endorsed by Heaven and revealed to the early sage-kings. More concretely, this “Way” is manifested in the ritual practices, music, and literature passed down from the Golden Age of the Zhou, which were still preserved in the state of Lu by a few high-minded, uncompromising *ru* (6.13, 19.22).<sup>7</sup> The fact that “the Way of Kings Wen and Wu has not yet fallen to the ground” (19.22) serves for Confucius as a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape. He saw his mission to be serving Heaven by helping to reinvigorate this “Way” in his otherwise fallen and corrupt age, and to thereby bring about a restoration of the lost Golden Age—a “second Zhou in the East,” as he puts it in 17.5. Below we shall briefly explore the various elements of Confucius’ religious vision: his diagnosis of the causes of the fallenness of his age; the path of self-cultivation that he proposes to remedy this state of fallenness; and the characteristics of the ideal state which lies at the end of this path—the state of *wu-wei* or “effortless action.”

Contemplating his own age, Confucius was appalled by the sorry state of his contemporaries. In 8.20, he reflects wistfully upon the relative wealth of talented officials who served the ancient sage-kings Yao and Shun, and notes that this flourishing of Virtue reached its peak in the Zhou Dynasty. Infused with this powerful Virtue, the ritual practice of the Zhou was of the highest efficacy and brought order throughout the world. Asked in 3.11 about the *di* sacrifice—the performance of which was the prerogative of the Zhou kings—Confucius answers: “I do not understand it; one who understood it could handle the world as if he had it right here,” pointing to his palm. By his time, however, the performance of the *di*—continued by the nominal successors of the Zhou in his own native state of Lu—had degenerated to the point where Confucius could no longer bear to look upon it (3.10). This degeneration in ritual performance was accompanied by a similar decline in the quality of men participating in public life. After explaining the various grades of worthiness in 13.20, Confucius is asked, “What about the men who are in public service today?” He answers dismissively: “Oh! Those petty functionaries are not even worth considering.” Even in their faults and excesses, the men of ancient times were superior to those of Confucius’ own day (17.16), and the general state of decline that followed the demise of the Zhou is summed up by the disciple Master Zeng in 19.19: “For a

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<sup>7</sup>One might wonder why Confucius so venerated the culture of the Zhou, and not that of the even more ancient Shang or Xia. In 3.14, Confucius suggests that the Zhou represents the culmination of ancient culture, combining the best features of the cultures that preceded it: “The Zhou gazes down upon the two dynasties that preceded it. How brilliant in culture it is! I follow the Zhou” (cf. 8.20). He also, however, seemed to have a more pragmatic rationale: there simply was not very much extant information about the cultures of the Shang or the Xia that one could follow (3.9), whereas the great advantage of the state of Lu was that, as the fiefdom of the descendents of the Duke of Zhou, it preserved Zhou culture more or less intact (commentary to 3.17, 6.24).



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