

Beyond Confucius: A Socio-historical Reading of the *Lunyu*

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The Unasked Question

The questions surrounding Confucius, his times and his teachings are legion. They concern the dating, structure, and authority of the transmitted sources, namely the *Lunyu*,¹ the transmission and interpretation of his teachings, problems of Confucius' biography, his historical context, his role in the editing of canonical texts, and many more.² The present article will not attempt to add another footnote to the awesome scholarship that has been devoted to these problems. Rather, it will – naively, perhaps – assume that there lived a man called Kong Qiu (Confucius, as I will call him) and that the *Lunyu* may serve as a source for his life and teachings. Leaving all questions surrounding these suppositions aside for the moment, it poses a different question which has so far received only scant attention. What were the historical circumstances that made it possible for this personality to appear, and what were the social preconditions that made his teachings plausible? Why is it that “since the beginning of mankind there had never been a Confucius,”³ and suddenly, 551–479 BC, there was one?

One reason why this question has failed to arouse scholarly interest seems to be that an authoritative answer had been given in the *Mengzi* long ago:

The world was in decay, and the principle was reduced to insignificance, blasphemy and violence were rife. There were cases of ministers murdering their rulers and of sons murdering their fathers. Confucius felt troubled and created the *Chunqiu*.⁴

The *Shiji* transmitted a very similar version of the story,⁵ and Zhu Xi gave it the final seal of approval in his preface to the *Daxue*:

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- 1 For problems of text criticism, cf. Simson 2006; for problems of higher criticism, cf. Hans Stumpfeldt's article in the present volume.
 - 2 For works up to 1998, cf. Joel Sahleen's bibliography in Norden 2002, 303–320. For a recent critical study of the image of Confucius in early texts, cf. Haupt 2006.
 - 3 *Mengzi zhengyi* 2A2, 216: 自有生民以來，未有孔子也。
 - 4 *Mengzi zhengyi* 3B9, 452: 世衰道微，邪說暴行有作，臣弑其君者有之，子弑其父者有之，孔子懼，作春秋。
 - 5 *Shiji* 47, 1935: 孔子之時，周室微而禮樂廢，詩書缺。追迹三代之禮，序書傳，上紀唐虞之際，下至秦繆，編次其事。

When the Zhou were in decay, wise and sagely rulers no longer appeared, scholarly administration was no longer provided for, the effects of teaching were obliterated, manners and customs were spoilt – that very time saw Confucius in his sagesness. Not having obtained the position of a ruler or instructor in order to carry out his politics and teachings, he simply adopted the methods of the former kings, recited and transmitted them, thereby instructing later times.⁶

Thus the question was put to rest. Ever since, it has been understood that Confucius' efforts were a reaction to times of decay and disorder. Virtually all sinological scholarship still implicitly or explicitly follows the *Mengzi* by contextualizing Confucius in an age of “moral decadence and political unrest,” “marked by the decay of the central power of the house of the Zhou kings,”⁷ and by “a chaos of civil and interstate wars”.

Of the more than one hundred states and city-states that once had submitted to the scion of the Zhou as overlord, a mere forty had survived – each virtually independent and all at war or on the brink of war with their neighbors. Over the course of the previous two and a half centuries, thirty-six rulers had been assassinated and fifty-two domains brutally conquered. Alliances were formed only to be broken; renegotiated only to be violated. The courts of each state had become playgrounds for would-be traitors. As the fortunes of powerful households waxed or waned, factions moved quickly to betray actual and suspected enemies. To an aspiring statesman like Kongzi, such turbulent conditions represented both an opportunity and a nightmare.⁸

From this perspective, it seems all too plausible that Confucius wanted to *restore* the ideal order of the early Zhou kings which had crumbled in the preceding centuries.⁹ Indeed, traditional as well as modern scholars have argued that Confucius did not teach anything fundamentally new.¹⁰ Does not the *Lunyu* testify that Confucius “transmitted without creating,” and that he “followed Zhou” in his teachings?¹¹ And does not the canonical *Shujing* testify to the wise institutions of the first Zhou rulers?

6 *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 1–2: 及周之衰，賢聖之君不作，學校之政不修，教化陵夷，風俗頹敗，時則有若孔子之聖，而不得君師之位以行其政教，於是獨取先王之法；誦而傳之以詔後世。

7 Opitz 1990, 518; Ess 2003, 12. Cf. also Cheng 1997, 54, Sancery 2009, 11–12, Gu 1999, 22–23, Schwartz 1985, 56–57, and many more.

8 Nylan and Wilson 2010, 1.

9 This is strongly emphasized by Tu 1994, 653, who asserts that “the story of Confucianism does not begin with Confucius.” Cf. also Tu Wei-ming’s paper in this volume.

10 Cf., for example, Nivison 1999, 754: “Did Confucius, the first philosopher, have a philosophy featuring new ideas of his own? It is not easy to find any.”

11 *Lunyu zhengyi* (henceforth: *Lunyu*) 7.1, 251: 子曰：「述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。」(Note the contradiction to the statement of the *Mengzi* [above, fn. 4] that Confucius *created* the *Chunqiu*.) 3.14, 103: 子曰：「周監於二代，郁郁乎文哉！吾從周。」

According to this narrative, everything falls nicely into place. For all remaining questions as to why exactly Confucius came up with his teachings there was a simple answer: he was a sage, a *shengren*. After all, Heaven used Confucius “as a bell with its wooden tongue” and “gave him free reign to approach sageness;” indeed “being benevolent and wise, the master is certainly a sage.”¹² As such, he is “beyond good or evil, endowed with inborn intuition and cosmic-magical powers.”¹³ Possessed of perennial wisdom, he is above historical change and unmoved by social influences, his teachings are timeless. “A sage understands the Heavenly principles,” states the *Wuxing pian*,¹⁴ and the *Bohu tong* is even more explicit about the consonance between a sage and Heaven:

What is a sage? Sageness implies penetration, principle, and voices. There is nothing that his principle does not penetrate, nothing that his brilliance does not illuminate; upon hearing their voices, he knows the nature (of things); he shares the virtue of heaven and earth, he shares the brilliance of sun and moon, he shares the order of the four seasons, and he shares the fortunes of ghosts and spirits. [...] The reason why (sages) have such unique perception and foresight and why they join the spirits in penetrating nature is that they are all begotten by Heaven.¹⁵

In other words, “sage” is a God-term. An unmoved mover, a sage is the first cause of things and the last resort of reasoning.¹⁶ The function of a God-term is to terminate a logical *regressus ad infinitum* by giving the ultimate answer beyond which no more questions can be asked.¹⁷ Questioning Confucius was out of the question.

12 *Lunyu* 3.24, 133: 天將以夫子為木鐸。9.6, 329: 子貢曰：「固天縱之將聖，又多能也。」
Mengzi zhengyi 2A2, 213: 子貢曰：『學不厭，智也。教不倦，仁也。仁且智，夫子既聖矣。』 Note that these are the words of his disciples. Confucius himself modestly declined such an appellation (*Lunyu* 7.26, 274; 7.34, 282), although he did consider himself endowed with Heavenly virtue (7.23, 273; cf. also 9.5, 327).

13 Trauzettel 2002, 145.

14 *Wuxing pian*, line 197: 聖人知而〈天〉道。知而行之，聖也。

15 *Bohu tong shuzheng* 7, p. 334 and 341: 聖人者何？聖者、通也，道也，聲也。道無所不通，明無所不照，聞聲知情，與天地合德，日月合明，四時合序，鬼神合吉凶。[...] 聖人所以能獨見前觀，與神通精者，蓋皆天所生也。 The connection of sageness with “resonance” (*sheng*) seems to relate to the fact that the words “sage,” “sound/resonance,” and “hear” anciently could be written with the same character, hence thought to be related.

16 On the “sage” as a “limit-concept” (*Grenzbegriff*), cf. Thomas Fröhlich’s paper in this volume.

17 A moderated version of the “sage” narrative is the tendency to attribute Confucius’ teachings to his *individual* characteristics. Cf. Michael Nylan’s description of Confucius as “a self-absorbed, unlikable, and crabbed personality,” “a sanctimonious and arrogant know-it-all” who only late in life became a “sage” (Nylan and Wilson 2010, 2–4), or Bryan van Norden’s speculation that “the early death of his father contributed to Confucius’ strong

Another factor that may have kept scholars from inquiring into the preconditions of Confucius' teachings is their self-evident plausibility. Benevolence, courteousness, truthfulness, the importance of learning: all this seems so obvious to us that there is no need to question its premises. Indeed, Confucius' teachings appear so commonplace that they have struck modern observers as banal truisms.¹⁸

But could Confucius have become so influential simply by teaching platitudes? Should "civilization's greatest sage" really have done no more than reinvigorate lessons of the past? And should the golden age of Chinese philosophy that began with Confucius really have coincided with altogether rotten times? Judging from the present state of scholarship, none of the above assumptions – namely, that Confucius lived in an age of decline, that he restored an old order, and that he was a sage who restored eternal truths – would seem to be acceptable without careful scrutiny.

In what follows, I will discuss the problems of these assumptions and then explore an alternative approach which rests on quite contrary premises: that Confucius lived in an age of growing social complexity, that he introduced something radically new, and that he was not a sage, but a regular member of society, an *ens sociale*.¹⁹ Subsequently, I will demonstrate how this approach could contribute to our understanding of the *Lunyu*.

A New Perspective

The view that Confucius lived in an age of decline would seem to be based on a narrowly *political* perspective of history, more specifically: on the perspective of the central government.²⁰ Only from this perspective does the loosening of central con-

traditionalism" (Norden 2002, 10). This "psychological" approach, too, ultimately locates the *movens* of history in the subjectivity of a great personality.

18 Cf., for example, Cheng 1997, 55: 1997: "Au prime abord, sa pensée apparaît plutôt terre à terre, son enseignement fait des truismes." Fung 1952, 48: "Thus looked at, Confucius would be nothing more than an old pedant." For the "popular understanding of Confucius as a wise man, bearer of platitudes," cf. the Gary Larson cartoon reproduced in Jensen 1997, 6. For the historical background to these views, cf. Lühmann 2003.

19 In fact, it would make good sense to treat Confucius not as an historical personality, but as a *symbol* for social developments that took place in the 6th to 3rd centuries BC. After all, there exists no contemporary evidence for the life of Confucius, much less for the feats of administration, education and scholarship that his biography recounts. All we have are accounts that postdate his presumed life time by centuries, making Confucius no more tangible as an historical personality than, say, Laozi.

20 This perspective, which implicitly underlies many sinological studies, is somewhat irritating. It seems to derive directly from official Chinese historiography which extols central order and orthodoxy to the exclusion of regional or alternative orders. Especially in view of Chinese history in the 20th century, the paradigm of the strong state appears less than comforting.

trol – and the growth of regionalisms – appear as a deterioration of order. Viewed from a regional perspective, a wholly different picture would emerge. In fact, viewed from any other but the political perspective, the age of Confucius appears as a time of growth, progress, and upswing. The Chunqiu period saw the spread of iron technology, great advances in agriculture, rapid development of commerce and communication, the emergence of a monetary economy, the growth of cities, and a significant population increase. It marked the beginning of the classical age of Chinese philosophy. All this has little to do with decline, as Herbert Fingarette observed long ago:

We, who look at the situation in the light of historical evidence, see that rather than a devolution from some great past civilization, an evolution toward a new and universalistic civilization was taking place. [...] In short, what Confucius's idiom and imagery portray as the increasing chaos of a civilization in course of degeneration was, in fact, the inevitable disorder attendant upon the evolution of a new, larger and greater single society out of various older, smaller, culturally separate and more primitive and provincial groups.²¹

Confucius himself seems to have shown little concern with the political events of his age: in the *Lunyu*, there is hardly a word about wars and great states occupying small ones. Instead, Confucius' teachings were all about ordering *society*. In a telling passage,

Duke Jing of Qi asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, "Let the ruler be ruler, and the minister be minister; let the father be father, and the son be son."²²

Although the duke appeared to be delighted by the answer, it is doubtful that he could have derived any political decision from it: whereas he asked about *government*, Confucius' answer was all about social order.²³ Perhaps even the translation of *zheng* as "government" misses the point, since for Confucius and his contemporaries there seems not to have been a clear notion of "government," "politics," or "state" as distinct from other social phenomena.²⁴ The less it seems apt to interpret his role with sole reference to political events.

21 Fingarette 1998, 60–61.

22 *Lunyu* 12.11, 499: 齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰：「君君，臣臣，父父，子子。」

23 I owe this interpretation of *Lunyu* 12.11 to Stumpfeldt 2010, 10. Cf. also Gu 1999, 133, who notes that Confucius "knew no difference between state and society."

24 Certain passages of the *Lunyu* attest to a rather unsophisticated view of "government," which simply equates it with proper conduct: 政者，正也。子帥以正，孰敢不正？(12.17, 505), 苟正其身矣，於從政乎何有？(13.13, 531). The entire book does not convey political thought independent of moral precepts: politics, in the *Lunyu*, evidently has not emancipated itself from other considerations. Nor did this change in later Confucian thought:

Moreover, the idea of a golden age which Confucius aimed to restore appears less than convincing. True, the benevolent order of the early Zhou rulers is described in the *Shangshu*, *Shiji*, and other ancient texts.²⁵ Modern scholarship has so far followed tradition in relying on these accounts. However, recent studies have cast doubts on this narrative. While the *Shiji* and other Zhanguo- or Han-texts could never be considered primary sources to begin with, philological analyses have also called the value of the *Shangshu* as a primary source for early Zhou history into question.²⁶ With faith in these textual sources shaken, we are left with archaeological finds as the only reliable primary sources – and they do *not* seem to confirm the traditional narrative. Quite to the contrary, archaeologist relying on newly excavated material claim that the traditional view of early Zhou history “is in large part a historical fiction.”²⁷ The archaeological record suggest that

[...] the ritual system idealized by Confucius and his followers did not come into existence at the beginning of the Zhou dynasty, as was believed until very recently. Instead, its principal features – systematic ranking of ancestors and of living lineage members and sacrifices of food in graded sets of vessels (with alcohol use conspicuously deemphasized) – took shape during a decisive reform in the mid-ninth century BC [...].²⁸

Whatever the relationship of Confucius’ teachings to the ritual system created in the 9th-century “ritual reform,” the view that he harked back to a putative ritual system of the early Western Zhou – 11th and 10th centuries, that is – seems no longer tenable. Instead, it appears that Confucius, in claiming to “follow Zhou”, created the first *invented tradition* in Chinese history.²⁹ What he taught, was not old, but fundamentally new. Again, Fingarette pointed this out:

We must begin by seeing Confucius as a great cultural innovator rather than as a genteel but stubbornly nostalgic apologist of the status quo ante. [...] He talked in terms of restoring an ancient harmony; but the practical import of his teaching was to lead men to look for new ways of interpreting and refashioning a local tradition in order to bring into being a new, universal order to replace the contemporary disorder. What Confucius saw were in historical fact the newly *emerging* similarities in social-political practices, the newly *emerging*, widespread sharing of values that had

for the conflation of politics with morality and its 20th-century critics, cf. Thomas Fröhlich’s paper in this volume.

25 For an overview, cf. *Yishi*, 19, 200–222, 346.

26 Behr: 4–6, Krjukov 2000, Sagart 1999: 57–61, Vogelsang 2002.

27 Falkenhausen 2006, 2.

28 Falkenhausen 2006, 154–156.

29 On the concept, cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, esp. 1–14. On the grand tradition invented by Zhu Xi, cf. Lionel Jensen’s article in this volume.

once been restricted to a small region which included Lu. He saw the emerging of widely shared literary forms, musical forms, legal forms and political forms.³⁰

In all this, Confucius does not appear as a sage who created social order of and by himself, but as a child of his times, conditioned by the society he lived in. In fact, “sageness” should not be a category, much less a God-term in scholarly discourse. In what follows, I propose to introduce *society* as a new God-term,³¹ trying to explain the appearance of Confucius with reference to (changes in) social structure.³² The question is: what were the specific historical conditions that made it possible, perhaps necessary for a personality like Confucius to appear? The answer, in a nutshell: increasing social complexity.

A New Society

The societies of Shang and early Zhou, centuries before Confucius’ times, were primarily structured along kinship lines. Shang society has been characterized as a “conical clan” in which “lineages were key elements.”³³ These lineages (*zu*) were largely autonomous, units that “must have developed their own customs.”

Since the *zu* lived in the same place and the members knew each other, the customs of a *zu* were very probably known to all its members, especially to the parents of the families. Furthermore, the customs of a particular *zu* might apply only to its own members, and thus there were probably few, if any, conflicts between the customs of different *zu*.³⁴

30 Fingarette 1998, 60. Schwartz 1985, 59, notes that there was “intellectual progress and creativity” in Confucius’ times, but stresses “that they are not particularly germane to the concerns of the Master.” Cf., in a similar vein, Roetz 1995, 9–10.

31 This, of course, is the fundamental tenet of sociology. Society functions as a God-term most radically in sociological systems theory which insists that society is *autopoietic*, that is created and re-created entirely by itself (Luhmann 1984). Biological, geographical, climatic and other external factors affect society but never determine its operations.

32 By “social structure” I do not mean demographic factors such as age, gender, or income distribution, nor hierarchical orders or kinship systems. Rather, I take the term to signify the communicative relationships within a society. Social structure determines which people get into touch with one another and who communicates with whom in what ways.

33 Keightley 1999, 290. The author suggests that in certain respects the Shang king “was still functioning like the ‘big man’ of a pre-state chiefdom.”

34 Liu 1998, 28. Liu stresses (29) that “there existed neither a centralized state organization nor a unified law which could be applied to all the *zu*”.

This social structure may aptly be described as a *segmentary society*, comprised of numerous similarly structured groups that may be in contact, exchanging commercial and cultural goods, but that ultimately remain autonomous. They are not integrated in an overarching unity but treat each other as external.³⁵ This social structure certainly did not come to an abrupt end when the Zhou conquered the Shang in the middle of the 11th century BC. Quite to the contrary, archaeological evidence suggests that “for its first two centuries the Zhou essentially continued the traditions of the preceding Shang dynasty.”³⁶ Only gradually, in a process that is not yet clearly understood, Zhou society outgrew the structure inherited from earlier times. In his recent book on *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC)*,³⁷ Lothar von Falkenhausen identifies two decisive caesurae: the “ritual reform” of ca. 850 BC and the “secondary transformation” of the 6th–3rd centuries BC. Whereas this is not the place to discuss details of these transformations, two aspects deserve to be pointed out.

Firstly, the “ritual reform,” which changed virtually all aspects of bronze culture,³⁸ introduced standardized vessel sets that were correlated to the social rank of their recipient: high court officials would be endowed with nine *ding* cauldrons and eight *gui* tureens, lower administrators with seven *ding* and six *gui*, local rulers with five and four, respectively, and so on.³⁹ Such imposing vessel sets, made to be viewed from a distance, suggest that “the ritual performances now took place in larger and less intimate spatial settings.”⁴⁰ The ancestral sacrifices now seem to have been performed not among clan members exclusively, but in front of broader elite circles that transcended kin groups.⁴¹ Apparently, the growing emphasis on rank

35 The concept of “segmentary society” was first introduced by Emile Durkheim; cf. Durkheim 1992, 229–237. For more recent studies, cf. Wimmer 1996, 163–216; Luhmann 1997, 634–662.

36 Falkenhausen 2006, 2; Rawson 1989.

37 It may be noted that this “age of Confucius” refers to quite a different time frame than the present paper. In fact, the title is perhaps the only questionable point about this admirable piece of archaeological scholarship, given that there is not a shred of archaeological evidence that would testify to Confucius as an historical personality.

38 Some old vessel types disappeared entirely, while new vessels were introduced; massive food vessels gained importance, chime bells became part of the ritual display; the calligraphy of inscriptions changed, and the zoomorphic decoration of earlier vessels gave way to strictly geometric patterns; vessels became bigger, more imposing and somewhat coarser. For a detailed description, cf. Rawson 1990, 93–125.

39 Cf. *Shang Zhou kaogu* 1979, 203–215; Falkenhausen 2006, 51, table 4.

40 Falkenhausen 2006, 299. The author also speculates that the “demise of wine-drinking during rituals may well encapsulate this loss of ‘communitas’.”

41 Cf. Kern 2009, 184–185, who notes that in “mid- and late Western Zhou times [...] the practice of the ancestral sacrifice was expanded into a much broader culture of com-

differences among the elite correlated with higher visibility: with a universally accepted ranking system in place, ranks of nobility became comparable beyond the confines of kinship groups. All of this must have created a heightened sense of coherence among members of the elite. Perhaps the 9th century BC was the time when the segmentary, kinship-centered society of early Western Zhou was transformed into a stratified *elite society* that transcended kinship bounds. With the appearance of this elite society, an entirely new problem presented itself: “to maintain a shared culture over a distance without the possibility of all-round direct contacts.”⁴²

Secondly, and this brings us closer to Confucius’ times, “particularly from the Middle Springs and Autumns period onward, one can trace the division of the ranked elite into two distinct social strata.”⁴³ While the higher elite became increasingly remote, mortuary evidence suggests that the lower elite was by and by degraded to the point of merging with the commoner classes.⁴⁴ The finely graded elite that evolved in the 9th century split into a two-tiered society, and high culture was clearly separated from popular culture. This would seem to have been the precondition for the well-known “rise of the *shi*” as an intermediary class.⁴⁵ Such an intermediary class, sociology informs us, serves as the crucial stabilizing element in society that makes social order possible.⁴⁶ It is this class that shapes society.

To sum up, around the 9th century there occurred a transition from a segmentary society, in which a lineage or perhaps a few lineages provided the basic frame of social interaction, to a stratified society that transcended local and kinship borders. To be sure, this elite society was very small, the vast majority of people still living in segmentary, locally limited societies.⁴⁷ But since the 6th century BC, increasing numbers of commoners qualified to participate in and shape this elite society.

This was a quantum leap in complexity that changed everything. “With the passage to stratified society man enters a completely new area of social life.”⁴⁸ In

memoration” just like court rituals “were no longer addressed to a small group of clan members but to a much broader political elite.”

42 Tenbruck 1986, 318.

43 Falkenhausen 2006, 326. Whereas the tombs of rulers now reached unprecedented sizes, the largest even dwarfing those of the Shang kings, tombs of the lower elite “had nothing even remotely resembling the splendor of these funerary complexes” (ibid., 336).

44 Cf. Falkenhausen 2006, 370–399.

45 Cf. the classic description by Hsü 1965, 34–51, and *passim*.

46 Cf. Giesen 1991, 24–25, and 32–37.

47 In fact, this has remained the mode of existence for the great majority of the Chinese people until well into the 20th century.

48 Fried 1960, 721.

segmentary societies, as described by ethnologists and sociologists,⁴⁹ the basic frame of reference, even for elites, is the own kinship group. This is Laozi's ideal community:

In a small state with few people, let them, though they possess weapons of war, not make use of them. Let the people honor the dead and not roam afar. Though they possess boats and carriages, they never mount them, though they have arms and shields, they never take them up. Let the people revert to the use of knotted cords, let them find sweetness in their food, beauty in their garments, peace in their dwellings and joy in their customs. Though there be a neighboring state in sight and the voices of its chickens and dogs heard, the people will grow old and die without having intercourse with it.⁵⁰

Segmentary societies are largely self-sufficient, mobility is restricted and contact with strangers rare. In fact, strangers are regarded as inherently dangerous, vile and contagious, not even fully human.⁵¹ Linguistic, cultural and physical barriers are so high as to keep them nicely apart from the own group.⁵² People stay within their group, where socialization takes place as a matter of course through everyday interaction with one's own kind. The norms of such societies are simply rules for practical behavior which are created and recreated in direct interaction. There is an unspoken consensus about these norms, needless to discuss or codify them. Members of such societies understand the rules of behavior like they understand the grammar of their language without being able to name or describe them.⁵³ Since specific situations define the frame for social interaction, and there is no need for general and abstract normative structures. It is a world of certainties and self-evident truths.

All of this changed with the emergence of an elite that transcended regional and familial barriers. In the Chunqiu era, many city states of Western Zhou times grew to become territorial states, creating a network of cities, connected through country roads. These developments facilitated travel within and between states

49 For the following description, cf. Giesen 1991, 25–29.

50 *Laozi jiaoshi* 80, 307–309: 小國寡民，使有什佰之器而不用，使人重死而不遠徙。雖有舟輦，无所乘之；雖有甲兵，无所陳之。使民復結繩而用之。甘其食，美其服，安其居，樂其俗。鄰國相望，雞狗之聲相聞，民至老死，不相往來。

51 Thus, the terrifying human sacrifices of the Shang, who slaughtered thousands of Qiang captives and offered them to their gods, may be explained not by primitive blood-thirst, but by social structure. In a “conical clan,” people beyond the confines of the extended kin-group were simply not human, hence free to be slaughtered like animals.

52 Cf. Müller 1987, 86–87, 255–256, with many anthropological examples, as well as Giesen and Junge 1991, 262.

53 Giesen 1991, 28–29. On mutual understanding in kin groups, cf. Müller 1987, 67–68, and Tenbruck 1986, 318: “The meaning of mutual action needs to be verbalized but imperfectly, since in direct togetherness the non-verbal carriers of meaning are fully present.”

and led to an unprecedented degree of mobility and exchange.⁵⁴ Rather than disintegrating, China was actually growing together in these centuries, bringing the elites of regional states into ever closer contact with one another.⁵⁵

Confucius and the New Society

Confucius' very biography seems to exemplify the new mobility of Chunqiu times. Traveling for thirteen years through the states of the North China plain, he personally experienced the emergence of a new interstate elite society. In particular, he experienced the emergence of *public* life. This must have been a truly new experience in Confucius' times, since "in segmentary society there is no need to name the public as such and to distinguish it from other, equally possible forms of sociality."⁵⁶ Now, Confucius and his peers found themselves confronted with people, institutions, and situations that were *unknown* to them.⁵⁷ Whereas in segmentary societies the world is a familiar place, a stratified society is infinitely more complex. In order to live in this new society, one first had to recognize the basic fact that most of the world is unfamiliar. In the words of the master:

"To understand what one knows and to understand what one does not know: that is knowledge."⁵⁸

This fundamental awareness of the limits and the contingency of knowledge was a sign of the times. An equally disturbing and stimulating thought, it permeates the *Lunyu* and other Zhanguo-texts.

54 Elvin 1973, 25, reckons that "the average mileage covered by the diplomatic missions sent out by the state of Lu increased from 112 miles per mission in the late eighth century to 454 miles per mission in the late sixth century." For a detailed study, concentrating on the states of Qi and Lu, cf. Stumpfeldt 1970.

55 The much-deplored warfare, rather than being the basic characteristic of the times, appears to have been a secondary phenomenon, attendant on the coalescence of Chinese society. Closer contacts are a precondition not only for mutual understanding, but also for conflicts.

56 Kieserling 1999, 454. Confucius, however, seems to have been well aware of the difference between public and private, as seen in *Lunyu* 2.9, 52: 退而省其私，亦足以發，perhaps also 10.5, 385: 私覲，愉愉如也。

57 Cf. Liu 1998, 90: "One may safely assume that when he stayed in these states, Confucius observed and studied the various customs and usages followed by peoples of the numerous *zu*." Liu goes even further (89) in assuming that Confucius' ancestors, having come from Song to Lu, "must have experienced the conflicts between differing customs and usages of the Shang and Zhou".

58 *Lunyu* 2.17, 61: 知之為知之，不知為不知，是知也。

The most concrete manifestation of the unknown was having to deal with *strangers*.⁵⁹ A stratified society includes many more people than an individual will ever meet. It is full of strangers. Thus for the elite, interaction with the Other writ large grew ever more common, finally becoming the rule. It is no mere coincidence that the problem of being unknown to others is a recurrent theme in the *Lunyu*:

“Is he not a *junzi*, who feels no indignation though men may not recognize him?”

“Do not worry about others not knowing you, but worry about not knowing others.”

“Do not worry if nobody knows you, but seek to be worthy to be known.”

“Do not worry about others not knowing you, but worry about why they should not be able to.”⁶⁰

Evidently, Confucius and his disciples had to reckon with strangers (or people for whom they themselves were strangers). In dealing with strangers, problems of trust and understanding acquired an entirely new dimension. Having grown up in humble, locally restricted circumstances,⁶¹ even the master himself had to learn how to behave toward strangers:

“At first, I would listen to people’s words and trust in their conduct; now I will listen to their words and observe their conduct.”⁶²

If dealing with strangers was a delicate task for Confucius, it certainly was a challenge for his disciples, most of whom do not seem to have been raised in elite families, either. Quite a few of them, surnamed Yan, were probably maternal relatives of Confucius, others apparently came from lowly families. Names like Ran Geng (“Plow”, his style was Boniu: “Elder Ox”), Qidiao (“Lacquer-carver”) Cong, or Gongye (“Ducal blacksmith”) Chang suggest a peasant or craftsman background.⁶³ Confucius himself characterized some of his most prominent followers as outright country bumpkins: “Chai is stupid, Shen is dull, Shi is ordinary, You is crude.”⁶⁴ And Yan Hui, Confucius’ favorite disciple,

59 Not “barbarians,” be it noted. Whereas the “barbarian” is not worth dealing with at all, the stranger certainly is: he is different, but nevertheless to be taken seriously. In fact, through his otherness, the stranger draws attention to the contingency of one’s own customs; the barbarian does not, since his customs are simply beyond consideration.

60 *Lunyu* 1.1, 4: 人不知而不慍，不亦君子乎？1.16, 34: 不患人之不己知，患不知人也。4.14, 150: 不患莫己知，求為可知也。14.30, 589: 不患人之不己知，患其不能也。

61 *Lunyu* 9.6, 329: 吾少也賤，故多能鄙事。

62 *Lunyu* 5.11, 179: 始吾於人也，聽其言而信其行；今吾於人也，聽其言而觀其行。

63 For lists of Confucius’ disciples, cf. *Kongzi jiaoyu yizhu* 9.38, 405–420, and *Shiji* 67, 2185–2226; Creel 1951, 72–83, characterizes the most prominent disciples.

64 *Lunyu* 11.18, 457: 柴也愚，參也魯，師也辟，由也喭。In 13.3, 521, You is again put down as “coarse”: 野哉，由也！

[...] eked out a living in a narrow lane, with a single bowl of rice and a single cup of drink. While others would not have endured this misery, Hui never changed his joyful mood.⁶⁵

These were no cosmopolitans. Yet, it was Confucius' ambition to release his disciples from segmentary society and prepare them for the intricacies of public life which – it needs to be stressed – was *new* in their times. “Wearing worn-out shirts and hemp coats, yet standing with those dressed in furs without being ashamed,”⁶⁶ they were expected to “comport themselves with dignity and, sent out to the four quarters, not to disgrace their ruler’s mandate.”⁶⁷ Confucius’ disciples were meant “to manage the levies,” “to be chancellor,” or “to converse with visitors and guests” at court.⁶⁸ All of this must have meant a radical departure from their familiar surroundings.

But what about familial values? It has often been noted that Confucius modeled his ideal of society after that of the family.⁶⁹ While this is certainly true, one may ask: why did familial values need to be emphasized at all? Apparently, they could not be taken for granted any more. It would seem that Confucius preached them precisely because the family-based segmentary society was giving way to a class-based elite society. In this society, which brought together people of widely different backgrounds, the fundamental contingency of all values became all too visible. Old certainties crumbled. Neither the newly emerging public roles nor the time-honored familial roles could claim self-evident validity, everything had to be re-considered and re-defined.⁷⁰ Members of the elite now had to get to grips with a multiplicity of roles, all of which had become uncertain: this was the problem Confucius and his contemporaries tried to solve. In the *Lunyu*, these roles are often mentioned side by side:

If a man respects worth and disregards appearance, if he exerts himself in serving his parents and devotes himself to serving his ruler, if in intercourse with friends he is true to his words, then though he may be called unlearned, I will definitely call him learned.

65 *Lunyu* 6.11, 226: 賢哉，回也！一簞食，一瓢飲，在陋巷，人不堪其憂，回也不改其樂。

66 *Lunyu* 9.27, 355: 衣敝緼袍，與衣狐貉者立，而不恥者，其由也與？

67 *Lunyu* 13.20, 538: 行己有恥，使於四方，不辱君命，可謂士矣。

68 *Lunyu* 5.8, 172–175: 由也，千乘之國，可使治其賦也 [...] 求也，千室之邑，百乘之家，可使為之宰也 [...] 赤也，束帶立於朝，可使與賓客言也，不知其仁也。

69 Cf. Roger Ames' paper in this volume.

70 Kieserling 1999, 454, points out “the oft-repeated anthropological observation that under these circumstances [i.e., in segmentary societies] there is no or hardly any privacy.” It seems that a real private sphere appeared only as a counterpart of an emerging of a public sphere: this means that *both* spheres were new and had to be organized.

In (serving) the state be without resentment, and in your family be without resentment.

Away from home, to serve rulers and ministers; at home, to serve father and mother; at funerals by all means to exert oneself;⁷¹ not to be overcome by alcohol – which of these can I achieve?⁷²

Indeed, one of Confucius' most famous (and most puzzling) statements, “let the ruler be ruler, and the minister be minister; let the father be father, and the son be son” (cf. fn. 22), may perhaps be adequately explained with reference to this social background. Members of the elite had now to fulfill diverse roles in public and private: they could be ruler and father, minister and son, friend and husband, teacher and relative. The more important it was to keep these roles apart and define adequate conventions for each one of them. Confucius' “role ethics” were the solution to the problem that in an elite society roles had become ambiguous and problematic.

Confucius, then, tried to order a new society – and from where else should he have derived a model for it if not from the old society? Thus, it is not surprising that he routinely refers to kinship terminology in his teachings. However, this does not mean that they were primarily aimed at organizing kinship groups, quite to the contrary. While interaction within kinship groups or small communities certainly engenders squabbles,⁷³ such problems appear insignificant compared to the complexities of public life in a stratified society. The family was not at issue, *society* was. Unlike Laozi (cf. above), Confucius certainly did not advocate a return to homely, self-sufficient kin groups. Significantly, the *Lunyu* records hardly a word about Confucius' family life; and a rare passage which does mention Confucius' son is equally telling:

71 Such lavish funerals, later vehemently criticized by the Mohists, would seem to reflect the culture of segmentary society. Foster (1965, 305, 307) observes that there “is good reason why peasant fiestas consume so much wealth in fireworks, candles, music, and food; and why, in peasant communities the rites of baptism, marriage, and death may involve relatively huge expenditures. These practices are a redistributive mechanism which permits a person or family that potentially threatens community stability gracefully to restore the status quo, thereby returning itself to a state of acceptability. [...] Heavy ritual expenditures, for example, are essential to the maintenance of the equilibrium that spells safety in the minds of traditional villagers.”

72 *Lunyu* 1.7, 19: 賢賢易色；事父母，能竭其力；事君，能致其身；與朋友交，言而有信。雖曰未學，吾必謂之學矣。12.2, 485: 在邦無怨，在家無怨。9.16, 348: 出則事公卿，入則事父兄，喪事不敢不勉，不為酒困，何有於我哉？」 Cf. also 12.20, 507, and 16.1, 649.

73 On these, cf. Foster 1965, 301–302.

Chen Kang asked Boyu: “Have you perhaps heard anything extraordinary (from your father)?” Boyu replied: “Not yet. Once, he was standing alone, when I passed by the hall in a hurry. He said to me: ‘Have you learned the songs?’ On my replying ‘Not yet,’ he said, ‘If you do not learn the songs, you will have nothing to say.’ So I retired and studied the songs. Another day, he was again standing alone, when I passed by the hall in a hurry. He said to me: ‘Have you learned the rituals?’ On my replying ‘Not yet,’ he said, ‘If you do not learn the rituals, you will have nothing through which to become established.’ So I retired and studied the rituals. These two things I have heard.” Chen Kang, upon having retired, happily said: “I asked about one thing and gained knowledge of three: I heard about the songs, about rituals, and about how a *junzi* stays aloof from his son.”⁷⁴

Such “aloofness” from one’s family is a telling indicator of social stratification in which ultimately “between upper class and lower class no kinship relations, not even distant ones, are recognized.”⁷⁵ Confucius’ ideal, the *junzi*, is certainly not a family man. Quite to the contrary, the *junzi* is by definition a *man of public life*. This is crucial: he was not simply a morally “superior man,” but a man who needed to acquire a certain habitus due to his role in public life. It was this habitus that distinguished him from the *xiaoren* who never transcended the petty confines of his village or kin group.

“The *junzi* is catholic and not partisan. The *xiaoren* is partisan and not catholic.”

“The *junzi* appreciates virtue; the *xiaoren* appreciates his turf. The *junzi* appreciates penal law; the *xiaoren* appreciates favors.”⁷⁶

For the *junzi*, kinship bonds are replaced by a much wider frame of reference. In a remarkable dialogue between Confucius’ disciples Zixia and Sima Niu, the latter sighs:

74 *Lunyu* 16.13, 668: 陳亢問於伯魚曰：「子亦有異聞乎？」對曰：「未也。嘗獨立，鯉趨而過庭。曰：『學詩乎？』對曰：『未也。』『不學詩，無以言！』鯉退而學詩。他日，又獨立，鯉趨而過庭。曰：『學禮乎？』對曰：『未也。』『不學禮，無以立！』鯉退而學禮。聞斯二者。」陳亢退而喜曰：「問一得三，聞詩，聞禮，又聞君子之遠其子也。」 Boyu also appears in 17.8, 690, which may reflect the same situation.

75 Luhmann 1997, vol. 2, 659. The consequence of this is *endogamy*, not within a clan or community, but within a social class. Sinologists have usually treated this well-documented phenomenon as *exogamy*, stressing the necessity to take a wife from another clan, sometimes even considering genetic arguments as the reason (e.g. Lü 1985, 321–324). It would seem that the sociological argument – namely, coherence within an elite class that transcends clans – provides a better explanation for this marriage custom. Thus, *endogamy* appears to be the apt term.

76 *Lunyu* 2.14, 56: 君子周而不比，小人比而不周。 4.11, 148: 君子懷德，小人懷土；君子懷刑，小人懷惠。

“Other men all have brothers, only I do not have any.” Zixia said: “I have heard, ‘Death and life have their mandate; wealth and honor depend upon Heaven.’ If the *junzi* is reverent and without fail, respectful to others and observant of rituals, then within the four seas everyone will be his brother. Why should a *junzi* worry because he has no brothers?”⁷⁷

An elite society in which all men are brothers: this thought would have been unthinkable in a segmentary society. Now it became very real, and the *junzi* would have to be prepared for this new reality. The guiding principle of this new society is no longer local custom but the “decree of Heaven” (*tianming*) which transcends families and regions.⁷⁸

The *junzi* has threefold respect: he respects the decree of Heaven, great men, and the words of the sages. The *xiaoren* knows not the decree of Heaven and does not pay it respect, he is obsequious towards great men, and he defiles the words of the sages.⁷⁹

Transcending his kin group, a *junzi* is “sent out to the four quarters”, his realm is the “ecumene” (*tianxia*), not his family turf.⁸⁰ He is “not partisan,” and “proficient in righteousness,” while the *xiaoren*, sticking to his peasant *egoísmo*, is “proficient in gaining benefits.”⁸¹ The difference between the *junzi* and the *xiaoren* has always been interpreted as one of moral qualities. While this is certainly true, I would argue that the moral difference is only a secondary phenomenon. The *primary* difference between the *junzi* and the *xiaoren* is one of social integration: Confucian morals, as I will argue below, were specifically designed for an elite society. Only the members of this society were moral persons, while the *xiaoren*, remaining in segmentary confinement, had no need for such abstract notions. The very last paragraph of the *Lunyu* might be understood as a summary of Confucius’ program:

77 *Lunyu* 12.5, 488: 司馬牛憂曰：「人皆有兄弟，我獨亡無。」子夏曰：「商聞之矣：死生有命，富貴在天。君子敬而無失，與人恭而有禮，四海之內皆兄弟也，君子何患乎無兄弟也？」

78 On the changing concept of Heaven, cf. Vogelsang 2011.

79 *Lunyu* 16.8, 661: 君子有三畏：畏天命，畏大人，畏聖人之言。小人不知天命而不畏也，狎大人，侮聖人之言。

80 *Lunyu* 13.5, 525: 使於四方，不能專對；雖多，亦奚以為？ 4.10, 147: 君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比。

81 *Lunyu* 2.14, 56: 君子周而不比，小人比而不周。(Cf. 7.31, 279: 吾聞君子不黨，君子亦黨乎？ 15.22, 630: 君子矜而不爭，群而不黨。) 4.16 子曰：「君子喻於義，小人喻於利。」 For the characteristic peasant *egoísmo*, cf. Foster 1965, 304, who plausibly explains this “as a function of an image of Limited Good.”

“Without understanding the decree, there is no way to become a *junzi*; without understanding rituals, there is no way to become established; without understanding words, there is no way to understand men.”⁸²

All of these injunctions are about succeeding in a society where “men” are not familiar by birth but must actively seek mutual acquaintance, where in the absence of tacit understanding words – *logoi* – are necessary to achieve consensus,⁸³ where knowledge of formal rules is necessary to become established. There is no need to “become established” (*li*) within one’s own kinship group, but only in an elite society. Confucius became “established” at the age of thirty, when according to his biography in the *Shiji* he was first asked for advice by a ruler.⁸⁴ “Becoming established” meant entering into *public* life.

Whereas the *xiaoren* stuck to his home territory, the *junzi* was in a position to “travel far” and receive “friends from afar”.⁸⁵ Only for the *junzi* selecting and treating “friends” – perhaps even this was a new concept – became a problem which needed to be treated with great care: “Do not befriend those who are not your equal,” says the *Lunyu*, “bring friends together through culture,” and

[...] speak to them sincerely and lead them well, but if they do not assent, then let it be, lest you disgrace yourself by them.⁸⁶

“Disgrace” always lurked beneath the surface of public life. For the *junzi*, social intercourse was full of pitfalls, it became a delicate problem that required utmost circumspection. This, then, would seem to have been the fundamental problem that Confucius faced in his times.

82 *Lunyu* 20.3, 769: 不知命，無以為君子也。不知禮，無以立也。不知言，無以知人也。

83 In his famous letter to Gu Dongqiao, Wang Yangming explains the genesis of communication by the lack of mutual understanding: a pristine community, he argues, was characterized by “the wonder of tacit understanding” (不言而喻之妙). Only when this sagely learning was lost, there arose a need for “verbal explanations and rhetorical embellishments” (講明修飾) as well as the arts of commentary (訓話), recitation (記誦), and literary composition (詞章). Communication, then, is a remedy for deficient understanding and as such symptomatic of a decadent or, as I would prefer to call it: a complex society.

84 *Shiji* 47, 1910. *Lunyu* 2.4 43: 吾十有五而志于學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。For further evidence pointing to the connection of *li* and public life, cf. *Lunyu* 9.27 (fn. 66), 5.8 (fn. 68), 16.13 (fn. 74), 20.3 (fn. 82).

85 *Lunyu* 4.19, 157: 父母在，不遠遊，遊必有方。1.1, 3: 有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？

86 *Lunyu* 1.8, 22: 無友不如己者，12.24, 513: 君子以文會友，12.23, 513: 子貢問友。子曰：「忠告而善道之，不可則止，毋自辱焉。」 One may contrast this with peasant societies where “true friendship is a scarce commodity, and serves as insurance against being left without any of it” (Foster 1965, 298). For more instances of this widely discussed topic, cf. *Lunyu* 1.4, 1.7, 4.26, 5.25, 5.26, 9.25, 10.22, 10.23, 12.24, 15.10, 16.4, 16.5, 19.15.

Rituals

When dealing with strangers on a regular basis, it was not possible to keep one's emotional distance like in a segmentary society. Instead, new conventions for civilized and peaceful communication were required.⁸⁷ The homegrown rules were no longer self-evident, since they were different for everybody, as the *Lunyu* observes in a famous passage: “By nature, (men) are close to one another, but by their habits, they are distanced from one another.”⁸⁸ This sentence, which later appeared in the opening paragraph of the *Sanzi jing*, has been judged “almost completely content free.”⁸⁹ Indeed, its full import can only be appreciated if one considers the social background: in a segmentary society, people had certainly *not* been “distanced from one another.” The exposure to different habits that came with a stratified society was new to Confucius and his contemporaries. Thus both the observation that habits differ and that people are nevertheless similar by nature were by no means trivial in their original context.

The most immediate reaction to the experience of otherness would seem to be humility and self-effacement. “Strangers are very ‘obviously’ unlike oneself. This natural difference is met by restraint.”⁹⁰ Thus, in unfamiliar or uncertain situations the *junzi* should be cautious and reticent,⁹¹ this is stressed time and again in the *Lunyu*:

The *junzi* aims to be slow in his words and swift in his deeds.

The *junzi* should be cautious about things he does not know.

Firm endurance and inarticulateness are close to benevolence.

The *junzi* is chagrined when his words surpass his deeds.⁹²

But how to proceed from there? Obviously, in dealing with the Other writ large, it became necessary to define generalized and explicit rules of conduct, in other

87 Liu 1998, 54, also points out that it was “social changes which resulted in the transformation of *li*.” She argues (88) that “when the *zu* [i.e. lineages] started to dissolve and individual families appeared as the basic unit of society, people naturally needed moral principles and rules which would assimilate the customs and customary laws of different *zu* and thus be universally applied to all the individual families, despite their differing *zu* origins”.

88 *Lunyu* 17.2, 676: 性相近也，習相遠也。

89 Norden 2002, 23.

90 Giesen and Junge 1991, 263.

91 In fact, the word that was later used for adherents of Confucius' teachings, *ru*, seems to imply just this quality of deference. Cf. the definition in *Shuowen jiezi* 8, 519: 儒，柔也。術士之稱。从人需聲。

92 *Lunyu* 4.24, 159: 君子欲訥於言，而敏於行。13.3, 521: 君子於其所不知，蓋闕如也。13.27, 548: 剛、毅、木、訥近仁。14.27, 588: 君子恥其言而過其行。

words: *rituals*.⁹³ “The ritual texture of Early China” has often been pointed out, and many studies have been devoted to aspects of ritual.⁹⁴ But what *are* rituals, and why exactly were they so important? It would be presumptuous to attempt a decisive definition of ritual, a term for which sociologists and anthropologists have suggested a bewildering array of explanations. But it will be useful to frame the concept in a way that has heuristic value.

I will follow Roy A. Rappaport in taking the term “ritual” to denote “the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by their performers.”⁹⁵ As such, rituals are ubiquitous: in Confucius’ teachings, they range from holy rites to the rituals of everyday life and simple rules of propriety. Rituals “are requisite to the perpetuation of human social life,” in a word: they are “the social act basic to humanity.”⁹⁶ Rituals address the fundamental problem of social interaction that Talcott Parsons called “double contingency”: the actions of ego are dependent on those of alter – and vice versa.⁹⁷ How can this highly indeterminate circularity be resolved? One answer is: through *rituals* – through a handshake, a bow, a sermon, an offering. Such pre-determined “formal acts” serve to structure a social encounter. Through their performance, social order is created and – Rappaport emphasizes this point – the performers themselves accept and become part of the order created by the ritual.⁹⁸ In short, rituals serve to create order and achieve group cohesion in indeterminate situations.

It follows from the above that rituals become the more important the less determined social settings and the less cohesive groups are. Little need for formalizing rituals among family members and intimate friends, where there is unspoken understanding and one feels the freedom to “be oneself.” Indeed, the crucial function of ritual is “to create the *experience* of solidarity in the absence of consensus. It is precisely the fact that people cannot agree that makes rituals of solidarity necessary.”⁹⁹ This brings us back to the Chinese case: for the transformation from a

93 On the difference between “the highly variable local customs” (*fengsu* 風俗) and *li* “that constitute the resilient and enduring fabric of Chinese culture,” cf. Roger Ames’ paper in this volume.

94 For recent works, cf. McDermott 1999, Kern 2005, Wei 2010.

95 Rappaport 1999, 24. For an overview of definitions of “ritual,” cf. Rappaport 1979, 173–221.

96 Rappaport 1999, 31.

97 Cf. Parsons and Shils 1951, 16: “There is a double contingency inherent in interaction. On the one hand, ego’s gratifications are contingent on his selection among available alternatives. But in turn, alter’s reaction will be contingent on ego’s selection and will result from a complementary selection on alter’s part.” Cf. Vanderstraeten 2002.

98 Rappaport 1999, 118–119. Rappaport calls this “ritual’s first fundamental office.”

99 Muir 1997, 4, referring to David Kertzer.

homey segmentary society to a stratified society implies a precipitous drop in consensus. The emerging elite society is necessarily more diverse, and this seems to be the reason why formalized rituals came to achieve such overriding importance.

The *junzi*, being a man of public life, mainly interacted with people whose background was unlike his own. Whereas *xiaoren*, whose world was inhabited by their own kind, “are alike without harmonizing,” the *junzi* faced the fundamental problem of “harmonizing, without being alike,”¹⁰⁰ This is exactly what rituals serve to do: “In the practice of rituals, harmony is of utmost value,” says Youzi.¹⁰¹ Rituals were necessary to harmonize the disparate elements of a stratified society. This would seem to be the sociological explanation for the archaeological observation that “the ritual system idealized by Confucius and his followers” was not old, but actually very new.

It has often been stated that in Confucius’ times the word *li* was transferred from the context of ancestral worship to the realm of social intercourse.¹⁰² If this was so, it is highly significant. Rituals were necessary in dealing with the *unknown other*. In a segmentary society, only the spirits qualified for this designation; but as society widened its boundaries, the unknown others were no longer just spirits, but increasingly human strangers. Dealing with strangers involves considerable uncertainty: the other being largely unpredictable, theoretically anything could happen. In this highly indeterminate situation, rituals serve to reduce social complexity by *restraining* the options for action.¹⁰³ They ensure that anything *cannot* happen, but only certain highly restricted forms of behavior are acceptable. The restraining function of rituals is repeatedly pointed out in the *Lunyu*:

The *junzi*, widely learned in cultural matters, if restrained by ritual, can manage to be without transgression.

He broadened me through culture, and restrained me through ritual.

However deliberately one may harmonize – if it is not restrained through ritual, it cannot be done.¹⁰⁴

100 *Lunyu* 13.23, 545: 君子和而不同，小人同而不和。

101 *Lunyu* 1.12, 29: 禮之用，和為貴。

102 It should be noted, however, that the evidence for the religious context of *li* is slim: apart from the form of the *character* (not the word!), only some odes of the *Shijing* testify to the religious origins of the word; cf. Pines 2002, 276–277, n. 8.

103 Müller 1986, 256–257, characterizes rituals as protective measures which serve to ward off the evil influence of strangers.

104 *Lunyu* 6.27, 243: 君子博學於文，約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫 (repeated almost verbatim in 12.15, 504). 9.11, 338: 博我以文，約我以禮 (says Yan Yuan about his master’s teaching). 1.12, 29: 知和而和，不以禮節之，亦不可行也。

In an increasingly complex society, in which dealing with strangers becomes not the exception but the rule, restraint would seem to be good advice: “Those who fail, although they restrain themselves, are rare, indeed.”¹⁰⁵ On unfamiliar ground, one has to reckon with infinitely more pitfalls than in familiar surroundings, and the *junzi*, being a man of public life, is under constant observation:

If the *junzi* commits a mistake, it is like an eclipse of the sun or the moon. If he makes a mistake, everybody sees it; if he corrects it, everybody looks up to him.¹⁰⁶

Hence, he is well advised to retain his composure, keep his own counsel and carefully inquire about social conventions that may apply. The master, “when coming to a given country, always asked about its government;”¹⁰⁷ and upon entering the grand temple, he is said to have asked about everything.

Someone said: “Who could say that the son of the man of Zou knows the rituals? Upon entering the grand temple, he asked about everything.” The master, hearing this, retorted: “This *is* a ritual.”¹⁰⁸

In highly indeterminate situations where new rules of conduct must be explored, every detail may acquire great importance.

“Everything that happens in such a situation, every action, every gesture, every expression, appears as a relevant, meaningful selection.”¹⁰⁹

This explains Confucius’ care to acquaint himself with everything in the grand temple – not a familiar ancestral shrine, be it noted –, and it also explains the meticulous observations his disciples seem to have made about his own behavior:

When Confucius was in his town and among his kind, he was gentle and polite and appeared as if he could not speak. When in the ancestral temple or in court, he spoke clearly and fluently, but respectfully. At court, when speaking with lower officials, he was straightforward, and speaking with higher officials, he was succinct. In the presence of the ruler, he was anxious and reverent, but self-composed.¹¹⁰

When entering the ducal gate, he would be bent over as if it would not contain him. He would not stand in the middle of a gateway nor step on the threshold. Passing by

105 *Lunyu* 4.23, 158: 以約失之者，鮮矣。

106 *Lunyu* 19.21, 749: 君子之過也，如日月之食焉：過也，人皆見之；更也，人皆仰之。

107 *Lunyu* 1.10, 24: 夫子至於是邦也，必聞其政。

108 *Lunyu* 3.15, 103–104: 子入太廟，每事問。或曰：「孰謂鄴人之子知禮乎？入太廟，每事問。」子聞之，曰：「是禮也。」 Cf. 10.18, 429: 入太廟，每事問。

109 Vanderstraeten 2002, 87.

110 *Lunyu* 10.1, 363–367: 孔子於鄉黨，恂恂如也，似不能言者。其在宗廟朝廷，便便言，唯謹爾。朝，與下大夫言，侃侃如也；與上大夫言，誾誾如也。君在，踧踖如也，與與如也。

the ruler's seat, his looks were agitated, his legs appeared hampered, and his voice seemed to fail him. When ascending the hall, holding his robe with both hands, he would be bent over and hold his breath as if he didn't breathe. Departing, he would descend one step and then relax his countenance, appearing cheerful. At the bottom of the stairs, he would advance swiftly, as if on winged feet. Back on his seat, he would appear anxious and reverent.¹¹¹

There are many more descriptions of the master's every move in the *Lunyu*.¹¹² These would seem extremely pedantic unless one appreciates that all of this was previously unheard of. Publicity and the encounter of strangers were a new experience for an entire social class, the *shi*. The more important it was to get everything right.

One thing that Confucius wanted to get right in particular were *names*. The "rectification of names" (*zhengming*) was a central concern reiterated several times in the *Lunyu*. It was the central task of "government." When asked what he would do first if entrusted with a government office, Confucius famously answered: "Of course, I would rectify the names!"¹¹³

This concern for names has been interpreted as the *restoration* of an old nomenclature which through abuse had become void of meaning.¹¹⁴ From the perspective outlined above, this makes little sense. A radically changed society would be in need not of old, but of *new* terminology. Confucius' problem was that in a segmentary society every group quite literally acted on its own terms. In a stratified society, this was no longer feasible. The task at hand cannot have been to reinstate old terms (whose terms?), but to denominate new universal concepts valid for a stratified society. Indeed, many of Confucius' terms are new: *ren*, *yi*, *zhong*, *shu*, *xin*, indeed the entire semantic inventory of morality.¹¹⁵ It is no accident that so many *Lunyu* entries record questions about these key words. Morals themselves were a new concept.

111 *Lunyu* 10.3, 373–378: 入公門，鞠躬如也，如不容。立不中門，行不履闕。過位，色勃如也，足躩如也，其言似不足者。攝齊升堂，鞠躬如也，屏氣似不息者。出，降一等，逞顏色，怡怡如也。沒階，趨進，翼如也。復其位，蹞蹞如也。

112 Especially in *Lunyu* 10. Brooks and Brooks 1998, 59, reckon that "it was presumably a useful guide for newcomers to official life." I would argue that this can be said of the entire *Lunyu*.

113 *Lunyu* 13.3, 517–522: 子路曰：「衛君待子而為政，子將奚先？」子曰：「必也正名乎！」[...] 名不正，則言不順；言不順，則事不成；事不成，則禮樂不興；禮樂不興，則刑罰不中；刑罰不中，則民無所措手足。故君子名之必可言也，言之必可行也。君子於其言，無所苟而已矣。」

114 For a magisterial treatment of the problem, cf. Gassmann 1988.

115 It may be noted that the earliest inscriptional occurrences of terms like *ren*, *zhong*, and other moral concepts date to the late 4th century BC (Zhongshan *wang Cuo ding*); cf. Mattos 1997, 104–110.

Morals

In a striking passage, Confucius is said to have told his disciple Sima Niu that “benevolence means being reluctant about words.” This statement may seem puzzling not only to Confucius’ disciple Sima Niu: “simply being reluctant about words, is that what you call benevolence?”¹¹⁶ Indeed, this question may lead us to the core of Confucius’ teachings, the concept of *ren*, which is commonly translated as “benevolence,” “humaneness,” “compassion” and the like. It is at the center of Confucius’ moral teaching.

But why was Confucius so concerned with morals?¹¹⁷ The moral discourse is far from trivial, let alone self-righteous. Rather, it seems to have been fundamentally new in Confucius’ times. Again, increasing social complexity may be detected as its underlying cause. Moral principles become necessary when

[...] the living conditions in a differentiated society are too disparate as to be handled with recourse to examples and precedence.”¹¹⁸

They are intimately linked to the institution of rituals, which connection is especially conspicuous in the case of *ren*:

“A man without benevolence, what has he to do with rituals?”

“To overcome oneself and revert to rituals: that is benevolence. If for a single day, one overcomes oneself and reverts to rituals, then all under heaven will thereupon turn to benevolence.”¹¹⁹

Morals and ritual are related, or, to put it pointedly: morality is “intrinsic to ritual’s structure.”¹²⁰ As mentioned above, by performing rituals, the performers themselves accept and become part of the social order created by the ritual. Accepting a social order, the performers of rituals are then obliged to comply with this order. Rappaport emphasizes that

[...] failure to abide by the terms of an obligation is universally stigmatized as immoral. To the extent, then, that obligation is entailed by the acceptance intrinsic to the performance of a liturgical order, ritual establishes morality as it establishes con-

116 *Lunyu* 12.3, 486: 司馬牛問仁。子曰：「仁者，其言也訥。」曰：「其言也訥，斯謂之仁矣乎？」子曰：「為之難，言之得無訥乎？」

117 The answer, “that to be moral is joyful” (Huang 2010) does not seem sufficient from a socio-historical point of view.

118 Tenbruck 1986, 322.

119 *Lunyu* 3.3, 81: 人而不仁，如禮何？ 12.1, 483: 克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉。

120 Rappaport 1999, 132. Significantly, morals and ritual coincide in the German term “Sittlichkeit.”

vention. The establishment of a convention and the establishment of its morality are inextricable, if they are not, in fact, one and the same.¹²¹

This interconnection of rituals and morals would explain their co-occurrence in the teachings of Confucius. It is no coincidence that China's first teacher was also her first moralizer. Whereas in segmentary societies, moral codes "rested heavily on enculturation, internalized sanctions, and ridicule";¹²² they were no longer tacitly understood in a stratified society. Now, just like rituals, they had to be made explicit. Rituals *and* morals gained importance when dealing with strangers. What I would like to suggest, then, is that *ren* became relevant not in village or family life, but in the realm "under Heaven", when "living in a given state."¹²³ In short, *ren* was called for in the public arena, when dealing with the Other writ large.

But is not *ren* explicitly associated with the "neighborhood" (*li*), that is the familiar surroundings of one's hometown?

In a neighborhood, benevolence is to be prized. If, selecting (a residence), one does not choose to dwell on benevolence, how can one be considered wise?¹²⁴

Perhaps this is so. Yet, it seems strange that one should have to *select* a place to live in the community where one had been living all along. Choosing a home becomes necessary in a mobile society in which people move away from their home to *unfamiliar* places.¹²⁵ The *Erya* defines *li* as a *town*,¹²⁶ and maybe a *li* was indeed

121 Rappaport 1999, 132. This seems compatible with the definition of Luhmann (1984, 318): "All morals refer to the question of whether and under which circumstances men esteem or disesteem one another. Esteem is meant to signify a generalized recognition and appreciation which rewards the fact that someone else fulfills the expectations that are thought to be a precondition for the continuation of social relations." If such expectations are established through a ritual order, then adherence to this order is the fundamental moral act.

122 Fried 1960, 721, with reference to legal principles that "required formal statement" only with the transition to a stratified society. Laws, of course, are functionally equivalent to ritual and morals insofar as they define rules of conduct.

123 *Lunyu* 17.5, 683: 能行五者於天下，為仁矣。15.10, 621: 子貢問為仁。子曰：「工欲善其事，必先利其器。居是邦也，事其大夫之賢者，友其士之仁者。Indeed, morals may even serve to get by in "barbarian" countries; cf. 15.6, 616: 言忠信，行篤敬，雖蠻貊之邦行矣。言不忠信，行不篤敬，雖州里行乎哉？

124 *Lunyu* 4.1, 139. There is another reading of this passage, interpreting *li* as a verb: "It is best to dwell in *ren*" (e.g. *Lunyu yizhu* 4.1, 35, Brooks and Brooks 1998, 13). Understood this way, *ren* would not be associated with a neighborhood at all.

125 Cf. *Xunzi jijie* 1, 6, where choosing a place of residence is associated with the *junzi*: 故君子居必擇鄉，遊必就士，所以防邪僻而近中正也。The famous story of Mengzi's mother moving thrice immediately comes to mind; but this, of course, is later lore from the *Lienü zhuan*.

a ward within a town. As such, it would have been a place where *different* people come together, creating new forms of social order.¹²⁷ The palaces and temples, halls and academies in which the elites of Chunqiu and Zhanguo times converged were all located in newly emerging cities. These cities were the place where a public sphere emerged and where strangers had to get along with each other. They were the place where rituals thrived, and with them, the discourse of morals.

Confucius taught his disciples to be *civil* in a double sense: courteous and fit for city life.¹²⁸ In the context of public life, Confucius' central moral precept, far from being banal, becomes a useful rule of conduct: "Do not do to others what you do not wish for yourself."¹²⁹ This is the essence of *ren*. It consists in accepting the Other writ large as having the same qualities as oneself: this would hardly have to be emphasized in societies with a low level of differentiation, but it is crucial for social order in a stratified society. Confucius did not simply appeal to his contemporaries to all be nice to each other again, but he first pointed out the fundamental necessity of accepting the other as an equal partner. In his times, this was a fundamentally new insight. In a society that was just making the transition to stratification, it became the central quality of the *junzi* to recognize the Other not as dangerous, vile and contagious, but as essentially the same as himself. Only thus the unknown could become known and be adequately judged: "Only the benevolent are capable of loving others and of hating others."¹³⁰ For those who are not benevolent, the Other remains incomprehensible, beyond love or hate, in short: beyond morals.

Education

The aspiring *junzi* were confronted with roles for which there were no precedents, roles they needed to *learn*. In fact, the very idea of learning, in the sense of active, conscious and more or less formal acquisition of knowledge, was very likely new in their times. It is no mere coincidence that Confucius is generally considered

126 *Erya yishu* 2, 53a [457]: 里邑也。 *Hanshu* 24A, 1121, describes a whole system: 在壑曰廬，在邑曰里。五家為鄰，五鄰為里，四里為族，五族為黨，五黨為州，五州為鄉。鄉，萬二千五百戶也。

127 Cf. the statement in *Zhuangzi jishi* 25, 909: 丘里者，合十姓百名而以為風俗也，合異以為同，散同以為異。

128 A similar observation could, of course, be made for the epithet "political," which is so often applied to Confucius' teachings. In fact, in 18th-century Europe "political" designated any kind of behavior outside the home, equating "political" with "public" (Kieserling 1999, 455).

129 *Lunyu* 12.2, 485: 仲弓問仁。子曰：「出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。」 Cf., for similar statements, 5.13, 182, and 15.24, 631.

130 *Lunyu* 4.3, 141: 惟仁者能好人，能惡人。

China's first teacher.¹³¹ Arguably, there was no need for teachers in a segmentary society. In such kin-based societies, knowledge and norms of behavior are transmitted not through education but through *socialization*, that is through “a process which is detached from the intention of teaching and learning,” in which not so much the formalized elements of culture are transmitted, but “deep-rooted, characteristic beliefs, feelings, values and norms, in short, an image of the world and of oneself which cannot be contained in the cognitive realm.”¹³²

Socialization is the informal, intuitive, often non-verbal transmission of social norms. Practiced *en famille* and *en passant*, it is virtually inseparable from everyday life. Education, on the other hand, is *intentional* socialization: formal, conscious and explicit transmission of cultural knowledge. As such, it claims an autonomous realm apart from everyday communication. There can be no professional “socializers” (except in a very different sense), but only professional teachers. By the same token, nobody in society can escape socialization, but one can certainly eschew education.¹³³ Education only becomes necessary under certain historical circumstances, namely when society significantly outgrows family life in terms of complexity.

Education increases the possibility to imagine what is going on in other people's minds [...] even if one knows the other not or not good enough. [...] Education [...] makes this possible even in non-standardized situations, whereas socialization remains very strongly tied to its original context.¹³⁴

In all these respects, education caters to the requirements of an elite society, where dealing with strangers in heterogeneous, unfamiliar contexts is everyday business.

There is more to the story. In a society that transcends localities, it is no longer possible to stabilize social order through regular face-to-face interaction. Rather, the abstract rules of a stratified society need to be systematically de-contextualized. The solution for this problem was provided by *writing*, a medium that made the kind of abstraction possible that an elite society needed. Chinese writing, though available for centuries before, had so far remained in an epigraphic stage.¹³⁵ Now it developed

131 On Confucius as a teacher, cf. Chen 1990; Creel 1951, 84–109.

132 Tenbruck 1986, 102. Cf. also Luhmann 2002, 54–62.

133 In Confucius' view, such people were the most despicable (*Lunyu* 16.9)

134 Luhmann 2002, 81. Note that Luhmann (*ibid.*, 69) associates an increased demand for education with the emergence not of stratified, but of functionally differentiated society. In any case, growing social complexity is at the root of the matter.

135 This is not to say that there were no writing materials other than bronze, stone and bones in use; there most certainly were. However, they do not seem to have exerted decisive influence on textual production. Writing still remained highly restricted in

its full potential. It is no coincidence that the age of Confucius saw the beginning of Chinese manuscript culture, nor is it an accident that the master is credited with the compilation of the canonical texts. Confucius certainly does not deserve the credit personally, but the society he lived in could not have developed without the medium of writing. Writing was the concomitant of a stratified society.

Confucius' life straddled the move from an oral to a literate culture,¹³⁶ and just like the transition from a segmentary to a stratified society, this is reflected in the *Lunyu*. The text itself, consisting almost entirely of dialogues and lacking traces of literary craft, clearly betrays an oral context. Notably Confucius' much-praised way of "conveying his teachings according to the talent" of the student (*yincai shijiao* 因材施教), adjusting his explanations to changing needs and situations, is typical for oral, context-bound instruction.¹³⁷ Such flexibility is hardly possible when using textbooks. Yet, writing was definitely a medium to be reckoned with. "One need not necessarily have read writings in order to be called learned," as Zilu put it, but this implies that one certainly *could* learn by writings.¹³⁸ Indeed, this seems to be implied when Confucius told his son to go and learn the "songs" and the "rituals": note that Boyu "retired and studied the songs" (cf. fn. 74), that is he studied them in private, which would seem to imply that he read them. And what, exactly, was to be learned from the "songs?"

With the songs, you can stimulate, contemplate, congregate, and express resentment. Keeping them close, you may serve your father, taking them further, you may serve your ruler. And you will get acquainted with many names of birds, beasts, herbs and trees.¹³⁹

In other words, the songs imparted knowledge necessary for partaking in elite society: they conveyed social skills, and they contained practical information. The "many names of birds, beasts, herbs and trees" to be learned from them very likely do not refer to one's regional flora and fauna (which should be well-known,

scope: virtually the only extant sources are bronze inscriptions, containing ritual or documentary texts. Writing remained lapidary in a very literal sense.

136 This, of course, refers only to elite culture. Just like the majority of the populace remained rooted in segmentary groups (fn. 47), this majority also remained illiterate.

137 "This concreteness and situational dependence," writes Giesen (1991, 26), "imparts to the elements of knowledge a fragmentary character that makes sense only in practical usage."

138 *Lunyu* 11.23, 464: 何必讀書，然後為學？ Here, *shu* certainly does not mean "books" in a physical sense nor in the sense of a coherent *œuvre*; but it does seem to imply texts meant to be read and re-read.

139 *Lunyu* 17.8, 689: 詩，可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。邇之事父，遠之事君，多識於鳥獸草木之名。

anyway) but to those of foreign states. The “Guofeng” section of the *Shijing* as we have it today would have been ideal for this purpose, arranging all the “names” in regional contexts.

This example may illustrate the connection between writing and the emergence of a trans-local society. Writing enables communication that transcends local borders. It makes it possible to convey just the kind of abstract, decontextualized information that is needed for interaction in such a society: information that cannot be obtained by direct observation or experience, but must be learned.

It is stated in several passages in the *Lunyu* that the object of learning was *wen*. A disciple should devote his spare energy to “learning *wen*,” the *junzi* is called “widely learned in cultural matters,” Ziyou and Zixia are singled out for their “learning of *wen*.”¹⁴⁰ Whereas the word *wen* should probably be translated as “cultural matters” or the like in these contexts, it is perhaps no mere coincidence that this key term eventually acquired the meaning of *writing*. In an increasingly complex elite society, cultural knowledge must have been transmitted through writing. This was just beginning in Confucius’ times. Writing, just like rituals, morals, and learning, took on an entirely new function in these centuries.

Edward Hallett Carr has advised us: “Before you study the historian, study his historical and social environment.”¹⁴¹ In the present paper, I tried to heed this counsel and apply it to the study of Confucius. The analysis of the society that he lived in and the socio-historical reading of the *Lunyu* offered above suggest a new interpretation of Confucius’ teachings: an interpretation based on the assumption that Confucius was not a sage who conveyed timeless wisdom but a social being who reacted sensitively to his times. It appears that these times are best understood not as a period of decline but of increasing social complexity, that Confucius’ teachings were not ancient but brand new, and that they were directed not so much toward organizing the family but toward ordering an emerging public. His ideal, the *junzi*, was not primarily a morally “superior man” but a person of public life. Universal rules of propriety, abstract moral terminology, the formalization of teaching and learning, the medium of writing: all these must have been excitingly novel possibilities in Chunqiu and Zhanguo times. Confucius’ achievement lay in the fact that he recognized and promoted these features of a society that was beginning to take shape before his eyes. Seen from this perspective, many of Confucius’ or his disciples’ sayings that may seem enigmatic or banal at first sight make very good sense. True, many problems remain. Being a first step on a rather untrodden avenue of investigation, the present paper likely gen-

140 *Lunyu* 1.6, 18: 行有餘力，則以學文。 6.27, 12.15 (cf. fn. 104), 11.3, 441: 文學：子游，子夏。

141 Carr 1990, 44.

erated more questions than it answered. Indeed, that was its intention. Exploring the historical and social circumstances that may have led to the thoughts expressed in the *Lunyu*, it wanted to draw attention to the questions that emerge when one looks beyond Confucius.

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