IV. Confucianism

The First Teacher

If there is one name with which Chinese culture has been associated it is Confucius—Kung Fu-tzu or Kung the Master. Chinese reverently speak of him as the First Teacher—not that there were no teachers before him, but because he stands first in rank. No one claims that he crafted Chinese culture singlehandedly, and he himself played down his originality by claiming to be no more than “a lover of the ancients.” This designation, however, gives him less than his due; it stands as an example of the modesty and reticence he advocated. For though Confucius did not author Chinese culture, he was its supreme editor.Winnowing the past, underscoring here, playing down or discarding there, reordering and annotating throughout, he brought his culture to a focus that has remained remarkably distinct for twenty-five centuries.

The reader who supposes that such an achievement could come only from a dramatic life will be disappointed. Confucius was born around 551 B.C. in the principality of Lu in what is now Shantung province. We know nothing for certain about his ancestors, but it is clear that his early home life was modest. “When young, I was without rank and in humble circumstances.” His father died before Confucius was three, leaving his upbringing to a loving but impoverished mother. Financially, therefore, he was forced to make his own way, at first through menial tasks. The hardship and poverty of these early years gave him a tie with the common people, which was to be reflected in the democratic tenor of his entire philosophy.

Though reminiscences of his boyhood contain nostalgic references to hunting, fishing, and archery, thereby suggesting that he was anything but a bookworm, he took early to his studies and did well in them. “On reaching the age of fifteen, I bent my mind to learning.” In his early twenties, having held several insignificant government posts and contracted a not too successful marriage, he established himself as a tutor. This was obviously his vocation. The reputation of his personal qualities and practical wisdom spread rapidly, attracting a circle of ardent disciples.

Despite these disciples’ conviction that “since the beginning of the human race there has never been a man like our Master,” Confucius’ career was, in terms of his own ambitions, a failure. His goal was public office, for he believed—how wrongly we shall see—that his theories would not take hold unless he showed that they worked. He had supreme confidence in his ability to reorder society if given a chance. Being told of the growth of population in the state of Wei and asked what should be done, he answered, “Enrich them.” And after that? “Educate them,” was his famous reply, adding with a sigh, “Were a prince to employ me, in a year something could be done, and in three years the work could be completed!” Doting biographers, unable to conceive that a man so gifted could remain permanently blocked in his life’s ambition, credit him with five years of brilliant administration in his early fifties, years in which he is pictured as advancing rapidly from Minister of Public Works through Minister of Justice to Prime Minister, during which Lu became a model state. Dissoluteness and dishonesty hid their heads, the romanticized account continues. “A thing dropped in the streets was not picked up,” and loyalty and good faith became the order of the day. The truth is that contemporary rulers were much too afraid of Confucius’ candor and integrity to appoint him to any position involving power. When his reputation rose to the point where the ruler of his own state, who had gained his power through usurpation, felt obliged to ask him perfunctorily for advice on how to rule, Confucius replied, tartly, that he had better learn to govern himself before trying to govern others. The ruler did not have him cut into pieces, as he might have done save for Confucius’ reputation, but neither did he appoint him prime minister. Instead he tossed him an honorific post with an exalted title but no authority, hoping thus to keep him quiet. Needless to say, once Confucius discovered the ploy he resigned in disgust.
Prompted as if by call—"At fifty I perceived the divine mission"—he gave his next thirteen years, with many a backward look and resisting footstep, to "the long trek," in which he wandered from state to state proffering unsolicited advice to rulers on how to improve their governing and seeking a real opportunity to put his ideas into practice. The opportunity never came; a bystander's prediction as he set out that "Heaven is going to use the Master as a bell to rouse the people" turned to mockery as the years slipped by. Once he was offered an official position in the state of Chen, but finding that the official who issued the invitation was in rebellion against his chief, he refused to become a party to the intrigue. The dignity and saving humor with which he carried himself during these difficult years does great credit to his person. Taunted once by a bystander: "Great indeed is Confucius! He knows about everything and has made no name in anything," Confucius responded to his disciples in mock dismay: "Now what shall I take up? Charioteering? Archery?" As state after state disregarded his counsels of peace and concern for the people, recluses and hermits sneered at his efforts to reform society and advised him to join their quest for a self-mastery sufficient to offset the ills of a society beyond redemption. Even peasants criticized him as "a man who knows he cannot succeed but keeps on trying." Only a small band of faithful disciples stood by him through rebuff, discouragement, and near starvation. Once the records give us a picture of them together, Confucius' heart swelling with happiness and pride as he looked at them—Ming Tzu so calm in reserved strength, Tzu Lu so full of energy, Jan Ch'iu and Tzu Kung so frank and fearless.

In time, with a change of administration in his own state, he was invited to return. There, recognizing that he was now too old for office anyway, he spent his last five years quietly teaching and editing the classics of China's past. In 479 B.C., at the age of seventy-two, he died.

A failure as a politician, Confucius was undoubtedly one of the world's greatest teachers. Prepared to instruct in history, poetry, government, propriety, mathematics, music, divination, and sports, he was, in the manner of Socrates, a one-man university. His method of teaching was likewise Socratic. Always informal, he seems not to have lectured but instead to have conversed on problems his students posed, citing readings and asking questions. He was particularly skilled at the latter: "The Master's way of asking—how different it is from that of others!" The openness with which he interacted with his students was likewise striking. Not for a moment assuming that he was a sage himself, sagehood being for him not a stock of knowledge but quality in comportment, he presented himself to his students as their fellow traveler, committed to the task of becoming fully human but modest in how far he had gotten with that task.

There are four things in the Way of the profound person, none of which I have been able to do. To serve my father as I would expect my son to serve me. To serve my ruler as I would expect my ministers to serve me. To serve my elder brother as I would expect my younger brothers to serve me. To be the first to treat friends as I would expect them to treat me. These I have not been able to do.²

At the same time, on the importance of the task on which he was embarked, he was uncompromising. This led him to expect much from his students, for he saw the cause in which he was enrolling them as nothing less than the redressing of the entire social order. This conviction made him a zealot, but humor and a sense of proportion preserved him from being a fanatic. When the skeptic Tsai Wo proposed derisively, "If someone said there is a man in the well, the altruist, I suppose, would go after him," Confucius remarked that "even an altruist would first make certain there really was a man down the well." When someone was recommended to him as "thinking thrice before he took action," Confucius replied dryly, "Twice is sufficient." Confident as he was, he was always ready to admit that he might be wrong, and, when it was the case, that he had been mistaken.

There was nothing other-worldly about him. He loved to be with people, to dine out, to join in the chorus of a good song, and to drink, though not in excess. His disciples reported that "When at leisure the Master's manner was informal and cheerful. He was affable, yet firm; dignified yet pleasant." His democratic attitudes have already been remarked upon. Not only was he always ready to champion the cause of common people against the oppressive nobility of his day; in his personal relations he cut "scandalously" across class lines and never slighted his poorer students even when they could pay him nothing. He was kind, though capable of sarcasm when he thought it deserved. Of one who had taken to criticizing his companions, Confucius observed, "Obviously Tzu Kung must have become quite
perfect himself to have time for this sort of thing. I do not have this much leisure."

It was true, for he remained to the end more exacting of himself than he was of others. "How dare I allow myself to be taken as sage and humane!" he said. "It may rather be said of me that I strive to become such without satiety."6 He remained faithful to the quest. Power and wealth could have been his for the asking if he had been willing to compromise with those in authority. He preferred, instead, his integrity. He never regretted the choice. "With coarse food to eat, water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow, I still have joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness mean no more to me than the floating clouds."

With his death began his glorification. Among his disciples the move was immediate. Said Tzu Kung, "He is the sun, the moon, which there is no way of climbing over. The impossibility of equalling our Master is like the impossibility of reaching the sky by scaling a ladder." Others came to agree. Within a few generations he was regarded throughout China as "the mentor and model of ten thousand generations." What would have pleased him more was the attention given to his ideas. Until this century, every Chinese school child for two thousand years raised his clasped hands each morning toward a table in the schoolroom that bore a plaque bearing Confucius' name. Virtually every Chinese student has pored over his sayings for hours, with the result that they have become a part of the Chinese mind and trickled down to the illiterate in spoken proverbs. Chinese government, too, has been influenced by him, more deeply than by any other figure. Since the start of the Christian era a large number of governmental offices, including some of the highest, have required of their occupants a knowledge of the Confucian classics. There have been a number of attempts, some of them quasi-official, to elevate him to the stature of divinity.

What produced this influence?—so great that until the Communist takeover observers were still regarding Confucianism as "the greatest single intellectual force" among one-quarter of the world’s population. It could hardly have been his personality. Exemplary as this was, it was too undramatic to explain his historical impact. If we turn instead to his teachings, our puzzle only deepens. As edifying anecdotes and moral maxims, they are thoroughly commendable. But how a collection of sayings so patently didactic, so pedestrian that they often appear commonplace, could have molded a civilization, appears at first glance to be one of history's enigmas. Here are some samples:

Is not he a true philosopher who, though he be unrecognized, cherishes no resentment?

What you do not wish done to yourself, do not do to others.

I will not grieve that others do not know me. I will grieve that I do not know others.

Do not wish for quick results, nor look for small advantages. If you seek quick results, you will not attain the ultimate goal. If you are led astray by small advantages, you will never accomplish great things.

Nobler persons first practice what they preach and afterwards preach according to their practice. If, when you look into your own heart, you find nothing wrong there, what is there to worry about. What is there to fear?

When you know a thing, to recognize that you know it; and when you do not, to know that you do not know—that is knowledge.

To go too far is as bad as to fall short.

When you see someone of worth, think of how you may emulate. When you see someone unworthy, examine your own character.

Wealth and rank are what people desire, but unless they be obtained in the right way they may not be possessed.

Feel kindly toward everyone, but be intimate only with the virtuous."

There is certainly nothing to take exception to in such observations. But where is their power?

The Problem Confucius Faced

For the clue to Confucius' power and influence, we must see both his life and his teaching against the background of the problem he faced. This was the problem of social anarchy.

Early China had been neither more nor less turbulent than other lands. The eighth to the third centuries B.C., however, witnessed a
collapse of the Chou Dynasty's ordering power. Rival baronies were left to their own devices, creating a precise parallel to conditions in Palestine in the period of the Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes."

The almost continuous warfare of the age began in the pattern of chivalry. The chariot was its weapon, courtesy its code, and acts of generosity were accorded high honor. Confronted with invasion, a baron would send in bravado a convoy of provisions to the invading army. Or to prove that his men were beyond fear and intimidation, he would send, as messengers to his invader, soldiers who would slit their throats in his presence. As in the Homeric age, warriors of opposing armies, recognizing each other, would exchange haughty compliments from their chariots, drink together, and even trade weapons before doing battle.

By Confucius' time, however, the interminable warfare had degenerated from chivalry toward the unrestrained horror of the Period of the Warring States. The horror reached its height in the century following Confucius' death. Contests between charioteers gave way to cavalry, with its surprise attacks and sudden raids. Instead of nobly holding their prisoners for ransom, conquerors put them to death in mass executions. Whole populations unlucky enough to be captured were beheaded, including women, children, and the aged. We read of mass slaughters of 60,000, 80,000, and even 400,000. There are accounts of the conquered being thrown into boiling cauldrons and their relatives forced to drink the human soup.

In such an age the question that eclipsed all others was: How can we keep from destroying ourselves? Answers differed, but the question was always the same. With the invention and proliferation of weapons of ever-increasing destructiveness, it is a question that in the twentieth century has come to haunt the entire world.

As the clue to the power of Confucianism lies in its answer to this problem of social cohesion, we need to see that problem in historical perspective. Confucius lived at a time when social cohesion had deteriorated to a critical point. The glue was no longer holding. What had held society together up to then?

Before life reached the human level, the answer was obvious. The glue that holds the pack, the herd, the hive together is instinct. The cooperation it produces among ants and bees is legendary, but throughout the subhuman world generally it can be counted on to ensure reasonable cooperation. There is plenty of violence in nature, but on the whole it is between species, not within them. Within the species an inbuilt gregariousness, the "herd instinct," keeps life stable.

With the emergence of the human species, this automatic source of social cohesion disappears. Man being "the animal without instincts," no inbuilt mechanism can be counted on to keep life intact. What is now to hold anarchy in check? In the infancy of the species the answer was spontaneous tradition, or as the anthropologists sometimes say, "the cake of custom." Through generations of trial and error, certain ways of behaving prove to contribute to the tribe's well-being. Councils do not sit down to decide what the tribe wants and what behavior patterns will secure those wants; patterns simply take shape over centuries, during which generations fumble their way toward satisfying mores and away from destructive ones. Once the patterns become established—societies that fail to evolve viable ones presumably read themselves out of existence, for none have remained for anthropologists to study—they are transmitted from generation to generation unthinkingly. As the Romans would say, they are passed on to the youngcum lacte," with the mother's milk."

Modern life has moved so far from the tradition-bound life of tribal societies as to make it difficult for us to realize how completely it is possible for mores to be in control. There are not many areas in which custom continues to reach into our lives to dictate our behavior, but dress and attire remains one of them. Guidelines are weakening even here, but it is still pretty much the case that if a corporation executive were to forget his necktie, he would have trouble getting through the day. Indecent exposure would not be the problem; he would simply have transgressed convention—his profession's assumed (but for the most part not explicitly stated) dress code. This would immediately target him as an outsider; he would be suspected of aberrant, if not subversive, proclivities. His associates would regard him out of the corners of their eyes as—well, different. And this is not a comfortable way to be seen, which is what gives custom its power. Someone has ventured that in a woman's certitude that she is wearing precisely the right thing for the occasion, there is a peace that religion can neither give nor take away.

If we generalize to all areas of life this power of tradition, which we now seldom feel outside matters of attire, we shall have a picture
of the tradition-oriented life of tribal societies. Two things about this life are of particular interest here. The first is its phenomenal capacity to keep asocial acts in check. There are tribes among the Eskimos and the Australian aborigines that do not even have words for disobedience. The second impressive thing is the spontaneous, unthinking way socialization by this means proceeds. No laws are formulated with penalties attached; no plans for the moral education of children intentionally devised. Group expectations are so strong and uncompromising that the young internalize them without question or deliberation. The Greenlanders have no conscious program of education, nevertheless anthropologists report that their children are impressively obedient, good-natured, and ready to help. American Indians are still living who remember a time when in their regions’ social controls were entirely internal. “There were no laws then. Everybody did what was right.”

In early China, custom and tradition probably likewise provided sufficient cohesion to keep the community intact. Vivid evidence of its power has come down to us. There is, for example, the recorded case of a noble lady who was burned to death in a palace fire because she refused to violate convention and leave the house without a chap- eron. The historian—a contemporary of Confucius—who reported the incident glosses it in a way that shows that convention had lost some of its force in his thinking but was still very much intact. He suggests that if the lady had been unmarried, her conduct would have been beyond question. But as she was not only a married woman but an elderly one at that, it might not have been “altogether unfitting under the circumstances” for her to have left the burning mansion unaccompanied.

The historian’s sensitivity to the past is stronger than most; not everyone in Confucius’ day gave even as much ear to tradition as did the reporter just cited. China had reached a new point in its social evolution, a point marked by the emergence of large numbers of individuals in the full sense of that word. Self-conscious rather than group-conscious, these individuals had ceased to think of themselves primarily in the first person plural and were thinking in the first person singular. Reason was replacing social conventions, and self-interest outdistancing the expectations of the group. The fact that others were behaving in a given way or that their ancestors had done so from time immemorial could no longer be relied on as sufficient reason for individuals to follow suit. Proposals for action had now to face peoples’ question, “What’s in it for me?”

The old mortar that had held society together was chipping and flaking. In working their way out of the “cake of custom,” individuals had cracked that cake beyond repair. The rupture did not occur overnight; in history nothing begins or ends on time’s knife-edge, least of all cultural change. The first individualists were probably wild mutants, lonely eccentrics who raised strange questions and resisted group identification not out of caprice but from the simple inability to feel themselves completely one with the gang. But individualism and self-consciousness are contagious. Once they appear, they spread like epidemic and wildfire. Unreflective solidarity is a thing of the past.

Rival Answers

When tradition is no longer adequate to hold society together, human life faces the gravest crisis it has encountered. It is a crisis the modern world should have no difficulty in understanding, for in recent years it has returned to haunt humanity in an acute form. The United States provides the clearest example. A genius for absorbing peoples of varying national and ethnic backgrounds has earned for her the reputation of being a melting pot; but in weakening the traditions that immigrant groups brought with them, the United States has not provided them with a compelling replacement. This leaves the nation perhaps the most traditionless society history has known. As the alternative to tradition, the United States has proposed reason. Educate citizens and inform them, and they can be counted on to behave sensibly—this is the Jeffersonian-Enlightenment faith on which the United States was founded. It has not been fulfilled. Until recently the world’s leader in education, the United States leads likewise in crime, delinquency, and divorce.

With the Enlightenment’s answer to the problem of human coherence having still to vindicate itself, it is of more than antiquarian interest to look at the options that ancient China proposed. One of these was put forward by the Realists. What do you do when people don’t behave? Hit them. It is a classic answer to a classic question. What people understand best is force. Once individuals emerge from the chrysalis of tradition and start to steer their lives by reason, the
pull of passion and self-interest is so strong that only the threat of heavy reprisal will keep them in line. Prate as you please of reason and morality, in the last analysis it is brute force that carries the day. The only way to avoid universal violence in a society composed of self-seeking individuals is to maintain an effective militia that stands ready to bat people back in line when they transgress. There must be laws that state clearly what is and is not permitted, and penalties for violation must be such that no one will dare to incur them. In short, the Realists’ answer to the problem of social order was: laws with teeth in them. It was essentially the answer Hobbes was to propose in the West. Left to the devices of individuals, with no absolute hand to restrain their self-seeking, life is “nasty, brutish, and above all, short.”

The application of the Realists’ philosophy of social order proceeded by way of an elaborate mechanism of “penalties and rewards.” Those who did what the state commanded were to be rewarded; those who did not were to be punished. Given this approach, the list of laws obviously had to be long and detailed—pious generalities, which could be bent out of shape by self-seeking interpretations, would not do. “If a law is too concise,” said Han Fei Tzu, the leading spokesman for the Realists, “the common people dispute its intentions. An enlightened ruler, when he makes his laws, sees to it that every contingency is provided for in detail. Not only must the requirements of law be spelled out; penalties for infractions should likewise be clearly specified. And they should be heavy. “Idealists,” Han Fei Tzu continues, “are always telling us that punishments should be light. This is the way to bring about confusion and ruin. The object of rewards is to encourage; that of punishments, to prevent. If rewards are high, then what the ruler wants will be quickly effected; if punishments are heavy, what he does not want will be swiftly prevented.”

The estimate of human nature from which this political philosophy proceeded was obviously low. It was low in two ways. First, it assumed that base impulses predominate over noble ones. People are naturally lustful, greedy, and jealous. Goodness, if it is to emerge, must be built into them as wood is straightened in a press. “Ordinary people are lazy; it is natural to them to shirk hard work and to delight in idleness.” Many will feign moral attitudes when they think these will enable them to get ahead; indeed, a country may reek with sham morality and faked altruism. But when push comes to shove, self-interest will out.

The second way the Realists’ view of human nature was low was in judging people to be short-sighted. Rulers must envision the long-term good, but subjects are not capable of this. Consequently, they will not voluntarily accept present sacrifices as necessary for future gains. Suppose a baby has a scalp disease. “If the baby’s head is not shaved, there is a return of its malady; if a boil is not lanced, it will go on growing. But while such things are being done to it, though someone holds it close and soothes it and its own mother lovingly performs these operations, the child will nevertheless scream and howl the whole while, not understanding at all that the small pain to which it is being subjected will result in a great gain.” Similarly, the masses “want security, but hate the means that produce security.” If they are allowed to follow the promptings of immediate pleasure, they will soon be victims of the pains they most dread; whereas if they are made to accept some things they currently dislike, they will be brought in the end to the pleasures they want.

This low estimate of human nature in general did not lead the Realists to deny that nobler sentiments exist. They simply doubted that these were in sufficient supply to keep the state in order. Occasional geniuses appear who are able to draw perfect circles freehand, but can wheel-making wait on these? One person in a thousand may be scrupulously honest, but of what use are these few when millions are involved? For the millions, audits are indispensable. One ruler in a thousand might be able to inspire a people to live cooperatively without sanctions; but to tell the Chinese people, caught as they were in the Period of the Warring States, to wait for another model ruler of the order of the legendary heroes of the past, is like telling a man who is drowning in Middle China to hope that a skilled swimmer from the border provinces will materialize to save him.

Life is hard. We may wish that it were not, but wishing does not change realities.

No lake so still but that it has its wave;
No circle so perfect but that it has its blur.
I would change things for you if I could;
As I can’t, you must take them as they are.
The harsh facts of existence call for unwavering realism, for compromises annul action by trying to move two ways at once. “Ice and embers cannot lie in the same bowl.”

Actually, a social philosophy as different from the Realists’ as fire from ice did exist alongside it in Confucius’ China. Known as Mohism after its principal spokesman, Mo Tzu or Mo Ti, it proposed as the solution to China’s social problem not force but love—universal love (chien ai). One should “feel toward all people under heaven exactly as one feels toward one’s own people, and regard other states exactly as one regards one’s own state.”

Mutual attacks among states, mutual usurpation among houses, mutual injuries among individuals, these are [among] the major calamities in the world.

But whence do these calamities arise?

They arise out of want of mutual love. At present, feudal lords have learned only to love their own state and not those of others. Therefore they do not scruple about attacking other states. The heads of houses have learned only to love their own houses and not those of others. Therefore they do not scruple about usurping other houses. And individuals have learned only to love themselves and not others. Therefore they do not scruple about injuring others. Therefore all the calamities, strifes, complaints, and hatred in the world have arisen out of want of mutual love. . . .

How can we have the condition altered?

It is to be altered by the way of universal love and mutual aid.

But what is the way of universal love and mutual aid?

It is to regard the state of others as one’s own, the houses of others as one’s own, the persons of others as one’s self. When all the people in the world love one another, then the strong will not overpower the weak, the many will not oppress the few, the wealthy will not mock the poor, the honored will not disdain the humble, and the cunning will not deceive the simple. And it is all due to mutual love that calamities, strifes, complaints, and hatred are prevented from arising.

Mo Tzu simply disagreed with charges that his emphasis on love was sentimental and impractical. “If it were not useful, even I would disapprove of it. But how can there be anything that is good but not useful?” It may have been the radicalness of Mo Tzu’s position that led him to believe that it was backed by Shang Ti, the Sovereign on High, a personal god who “loves people dearly; ordered the sun, the moon, and the stars; sent down snow, frost, rain, and dew; established the hills and rivers, ravines and valleys; appointed dukes and lords to reward the virtuous and punish the wicked. Heaven loves the whole world universally. Everything is prepared for the good of human beings.”

As love is obviously good, and the God who orders the world is good as well, it is inconceivable that we have a world in which love does not pay. For “whoever loves others is loved by others; whoever benefits others is benefited by others; whoever injures others is injured by others.”

Confucius’ Answer

Neither of these rival answers to the problem of social cohesion impressed Confucius. He rejected the Realists’ answer of force because it was clumsy and external. Force regulated by law can set limits to peoples’ dealings, but it is too crude to inspire their day-to-day, face-to-face exchanges. With regard to the family, for example, it can stipulate conditions of marriage and divorce, but it cannot generate love and companionship. This holds generally. Governments need what they cannot themselves provide: meaning and motivation.

As for the Mohists’ reliance on love, Confucius agreed with the Realists in dismissing it as utopian. A. C. Graham testifies to the decisiveness of Confucius’ victory on this point when he observes that in retrospect “Mohism has the appearance of being foreign, not merely to Confucian thinking, but to the whole of Chinese civilization. No one else finds it tolerable to insist that you should be as concerned for the other man’s family as for your own.” That love has an important place in life, we shall be hearing Confucius insist; but it must be supported by social structures and a collective ethos. To harp exclusively on love is to preach ends without means. Putting it this way helps us to appreciate Confucius’ conviction that the Realists and Mohists were equally mistaken, but in opposite ways. The Realists thought that governments could establish peace and harmony through the laws and force that are their domain. Mohists went to the opposite extreme; they assumed that personal commitment could do the job. This overlooks the fact that different circumstances and relationships
prompt different sentiments and legitimize different responses. When asked, “Should one love one's enemy, those who do us harm?” Confucius replied, “By no means. Answer hatred with justice, and love with benevolence. Otherwise you would waste your benevolence.” Confucius' foremost disciple, Mencius, used this same logic to reject Mo Tzu's call “to love all equally.” In ignoring the special affection members of one's own family inspire, Mo Tzu showed himself to be unrealistic.

The West's current approach to the social problem — through the cultivation of reason — probably did not occur to Confucius. If it had he would have dismissed it as not thought through. Those who hold an evolutionary view of intelligence, seeing it as increasing over the centuries, may argue that this was because he was dealing with society in its immaturity — when, like an adolescent, it was too old to spank but too young to reason with. It is more probable that insofar as this issue entered his consciousness at all, Confucius assumed that the mind operates in a context of attitudes and emotions that are conditioned by the individual's group relationships. Unless experiences in this latter area dispose one to cooperate, upward reason is likely to do nothing but aid self-interest. Confucius was no child of the Enlightenment. He was closer to philosophers and psychologists who recognize that altruism is not much engendered by exhortation.

Taking this for granted, Confucius was all but obsessed with tradition, for he saw it as the chief shaper of inclinations and attitudes. He loved tradition because he saw it as a potential conduit — one that could funnel into the present behavior patterns that had been perfected during a golden age in China's past, the Age of the Grand Harmony. Because mores were then compelling, people conformed to them; because they were finely wrought, the conformation brought peace and happiness. Confucius may have idealized, even romanticized, this period when China was passing from the second millennium into the first and the Chou Dynasty was at its zenith. Unquestionably, he envied it and wished to replicate it as faithfully as he could. Tradition appeared to him to be the device for appropriating from this glorious past prescriptions that could serve his own troubled times.

Current social theorists would commend his line of thought. Socialization, they tell us, has to be transmitted from the old to the young, and the habits and the ideas must be maintained as a seamless web of memory among the bearers of the tradition, generation after generation. . . . When the continuity of the traditions of civility is ruptured, the community is threatened. Unless the rupture is repaired, the community will break down into factional . . . wars. For when the continuity is interrupted, the cultural heritage is not being transmitted. The new generation is faced with the task of rediscovering and reinventing and relearning by trial and error most of what [it] needs to know: . . . No one generation can do this. 17

Confucius spoke a different language, but he was working on this exact theme.

His regard, even reverence, for the past did not make him an antiquarian. He knew that changes had occurred that precluded the possibility of returning literally to the past. The year 500 B.C. was separated from the year 1000 (to use round numbers) by the Chinese having become individuals. They were now self-conscious and reflective. This being the case, spontaneous tradition — tradition that had emerged without conscious intent and had ruled villages without dissent — could no longer be counted on. Its alternative was deliberate tradition. When tradition is no longer spontaneous and unquestioned, it must be shored up and reinforced through conscious attention.

The solution, simple to the ear but in substance profound, embodied the appositeness of social genius. In times of transition an effective proposal must meet two conditions. It must be continuous with the past, for only by tying in with what people have known and are accustomed to can it be generally accepted — “think not that I came to destroy; I came not to destroy but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). At the same time the answer must take clear-eyed account of developments that render the old answer unworkable. Confucius' proposal met both requirements brilliantly. Continuity was preserved by keeping tradition stage center. Don't rush, he seemed to be saying; let's see how it was done in the past — we have heard his claim to being “simply a lover of the ancients.” With the perspicacity of a politician taking his stand on the Constitution, he appealed to the Classics as establishing the guidelines for his platform. Yet all the while he was interpreting,
modifying, reformulating. Unknown to his people, we can feel confident, he was effecting a momentous reorientation by shifting tradition from an unconscious to a conscious foundation.

Unknown to his people, and for the most part unknown to himself, we should add, for it would be a mistake to suppose that Confucius was fully aware of what he was doing. But genius does not depend upon full, self-conscious understanding of its creations. A poet may have less than a critic’s knowledge of why certain words were chosen; the lack in no way precludes the words from being right. Probably all exceptional creativity proceeds more by intuitive feel than by explicit discernment. Clearly, this was so with Confucius. He would not, he could not, have justified or even described his answer in the terms we have used. He merely conceived the answer in the first place, leaving to posterity the secondary task of trying to understand what he had done and why it proved to be effective.

The shift from spontaneous to deliberate tradition requires that the powers of critical intelligence be turned both to keeping the force of tradition intact, and to determining which ends tradition shall henceforth serve. A people must first decide what values are important to their collective well-being; this is why “among the Confucians the study of the correct attitudes was a matter of prime importance.” Then every device of education—formal and informal, womb to tomb—should be turned to seeing that these values are universally internalized. As one Chinese has described the process: “Moral ideas were driven into the people by every possible means—temples, theaters, homes, toys, proverbs, schools, history, and stories—until they became habits in daily life. . . . Even festivals and parades were [in this sense] religious in character.” By such means even a society constituted of individuals can (if it puts itself to the task) spin an enveloping tradition, a power of suggestion, that can prompt its members to behave socially even when the law is not looking.

The technique pivots around what sociologists call “patterns of prestige.” Every group has such patterns. In teenage gangs they may include toughness and outrageous flouting of convention; in monasteries, holiness and humility are valued. Whatever its content a pattern of prestige embodies the values the leaders of the group admire. Followers, taking their cues from leaders whom they admire, come to respect their values and are disposed to enact them—partly because they, too, have come to admire them, and partly to win peer approval.

It is a powerful routine, perhaps the only one by which distinctively human values ever permeate large groups. For nearly two thousand years the first sentence a Chinese child, living in the direct light of Confucius, was taught to read was not, “Look, look; look and see,” but rather “Human beings are by nature good.” We may smile at the undisguised moralizing, but every nation needs it. The United States has its story of George Washington and the cherry tree and the moralisms of the McGuffey Reader. The Romans’ renown for discipline and obedience fed on their legend of the father who condemned his son to death for winning a victory against orders. Did Nelson actually say, “England expects every man to do his duty”? Did Francis I really exclaim, “All is lost save honor”? It doesn’t much matter. The stories express national ideals, and shape peoples to their image. Similarly, the interminable anecdotes and maxims of Confucius’ Analects were designed to create the prototype of what the Chinese hoped the Chinese character would become.

The Master said: “The true gentleman is friendly but not familiar; the inferior man is familiar but not friendly.”

Ts’ui King asked: “What would you say of the person who is liked by all his fellow townsman? “That is not sufficient,” was the reply. “What is better is that the good among his fellow townsman like him, and the bad hate him.”

The Master said: “The well-bred are dignified but not pompous. The ill-bred are pompous, but not dignified.”

Once when Fan-ch’ih was rambling along with the Master under the trees at the Hain Altars, he remarked: “May I venture to ask you how one may improve one’s character, ci, rect one’s personal faults, and discriminate in what is irrational?”

“An excellent question,” rejoined the Master. “If one puts duty first and success after, will not that improve one’s character? If one attacks one’s own failings instead of those of others, will that not remedy personal faults? For a morning’s anger to forget one’s own safety and that of one’s relatives, is not this irrational?”

Confucius was creating for his countrymen their second nature which, to complete the statement of the social analyst that was begun several paragraphs back, is what people receive when they become civilized.
This second nature is made in the image of what [people are] living for and should become... Full allegiance to the community can be given only by a man's second nature, ruling over his first and primitive nature, and treating it as not finally himself. Then the disciplines and the necessities and the constraints of a civilized life have ceased to be alien to him, and imposed from without. They have become his own inner imperatives.

The Content of Deliberate Tradition

Deliberate tradition differs from spontaneous tradition in requiring attention. It requires attention first to maintain its force in the face of the increased individualism that threatens to erode it. This Confucius regarded as the main responsibility of education in its broadest sense. But, second, it requires that attention be given to the content of that education. What is the character of the social life it should engender? The main outlines of Confucius' answer can be gathered under five key terms.

1. Jen. Jen, etymologically a combination of the character for "human being" and for "two," names the ideal relationship that should pertain between people. Various translated as goodness, man-to-man-ness, benevolence, and love, it is perhaps best rendered as human-heartedness. Jen was the virtue of virtues in Confucius' view of life. It was a sublime, even transcendental, perfection that he confessed he had never seen fully incarnated. Involving as it does the display of human capacities at their best, it is a virtue so exalted that one "cannot but be chary of speaking of it."20 To the noble it is dearer than life itself. "The determined scholar and the man of Jen... will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their Jen complete."

Jen involves simultaneously a feeling of humanity toward others and respect for oneself, an indivisible sense of the dignity of human life wherever it appears. Subsidiary attitudes follow automatically: magnanimity, good faith, and charity. In the direction of Jen lies the perfection of everything that would make one supremely human. In public life it prompts untiring diligence. In private life it is expressed in courtesy, unselfishness, and empathy, the capacity to "measure the feelings of others by one's own." Stated negatively, this empathy leads to what has been called the Silver Rule—"Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you,"21 but there is no reason to stop with this negative wording for Confucius put the point positively as well. "The person of Jen, desiring self-affirmation, seeks to affirm as well." Such largeness of heart knows no national boundaries for those who are Jen-endowed know that "within the four seas all men are brothers and sisters.

2. Chun Tzu. The second concept is Chun Tzu. If Jen is the ideal relationship between human beings, Chun Tzu refers to the ideal term in such relations. It has been translated the Superior Person and Humanity-at-its-Best. Perhaps the Mature Person is as faithful a rendering of the term as any.

The Chun Tzu is the opposite of a petty person, a mean person, a small-spirited person. Fully adequate, poised, the Chun Tzu has toward life as a whole the approach of an ideal hostess who is so at home in her surroundings that she is completely relaxed, and, being so, can turn full attention to putting others at their ease. Or to switch genders, having come to the point where he is at home in the universe at large, the Chun Tzu carries these qualities of the ideal host with him through life generally. Armed with a self-respect that generates respect for others, he approaches them wondering, not, "What can I get from them?" but "What can I do to accommodate them?"

With the hostess's adequacy go a pleasant air and good grace. Poised, confident, and competent, she is a person of perfect address. Her movements are free of brusqueness and violence; her expression is open, her speech free of coarseness and vulgarity. Or to switch genders again, the gentleman does not talk too much. He does not boast, push himself forward, or in any way display his superiority, "except perhaps at sports." Holding always to his own standards, however others may forget theirs, he is never at a loss as to how to behave and can keep a gracious initiative where others resort to conventions. Schooled to meet any contingency "without fret or fear," his head is not turned by success nor his temper soured by adversity.

It is only the person who is entirely real, Confucius thought, who can establish the great foundations of civilized society. Only as those who make up society are transformed into Chun Tzu can the world move toward peace.
If there is righteousness in the heart, there will be beauty in the character.
If there is beauty in the character, there will be harmony in the home.
If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.
If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

3. Li. The third concept, *li*, has two meanings.
Its first meaning is propriety, the way things should be done. Confucius thought it unrealistic to think that people could wisely determine on their own what those ways should be. They needed models, and Confucius wanted to direct their attention to the finest models their social history offered, so all could gaze, and memorize, and duplicate. The French, whose culture not only in its regard for cooking but in its attention to the art of life generally is China’s nearest counterpart in the West, have several idioms that capture this idea so well that they have made their way into the Western vocabulary; *savoir faire*, the knowledge of how to comport oneself with grace and urbanity whatever the circumstance; *comme il faut*, the way things should be done; *approprié*, that which is appropriate; and *esprit*, the right feel for things. Confucius wanted to cultivate the Chinese character in precisely these directions. Through maxims (burlesqued in the West by parodies of “Confucius say . . .”), anecdotes (*The Analects* are full of them), and his own example (“Confucius, in his village, looked simple and sincere; when in court he spoke circumspectly”), he sought to order an entire way of life, so that no one who was properly raised would ever be in doubt as to how to behave. “Manners maketh man,” a medieval bishop observed. Confucius anticipated that insight.

Propriety covers a wide range, but we can get the gist of what Confucius was concerned with if we look at his teachings on the Rectification of Names, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Five Constant Relationships, the Family, and Age.

“If terms be not correct,” Confucius pointed out,

*language is not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried out to success . . . Therefore a superior man considers it necessary that the names he uses be spoken appropriately, and also that what he speaks may be carried out appropriately. What the superior man requires is that in his words there be nothing that is incorrect.*

This may sound commonsensical, but Confucius was grappling here with a problem that in our time has spawned a whole new discipline: semantics—the inquiry into the relation between words, thought, and objective reality. All human thought proceeds through words, so if words are askew, thought cannot proceed airtight. When Confucius says that nothing is more important than that a father be a father, that a ruler be a ruler, he is saying that we must know what we mean when we use those words. But equally important, the words must mean the right things. Rectification of Names is the call for a normative semantics—the creation of a language in which key nouns carry the meanings they should carry if life is to be well ordered.

So important was the Doctrine of the Mean in Confucius’ vision that a book by that title is central to the Confucian canon. The two Chinese words for mean are *chun yung*, literally “middle” and “constant.” The Mean, therefore, is the way that is “constantly in the middle” between unworkable extremes. With “nothing in excess” as its guiding principle, its closest Western counterpart is the Golden Mean of Aristotle. The Mean balances a sensitive temperament against overdose and indulgence, and in so doing checks depravity in the bud. “Pride,” the *Book of Li* admonishes, “should not be indulged. The will should not be gratified to the full. Pleasure should not be carried to excess.” Respect for the Mean brings harmony and balance. It encourages compromise, and fosters a becoming reserve. Wary of excess, toward pure values “equally removed from enthusiasm as from indifference,” China’s regard for the Mean has typically, but not universally, protected her from fanaticism.

The Five Constant Relationships that constitute the warp and woof of social life are, in the Confucian scheme, those between parent and child, husband and wife, elder sibling and junior sibling, elder friend and junior friend, and ruler and subject. 22 It is vital to the health of society that these key relationships be rightly constituted. None of them are transitive; in each, different responses are appropriate to the two terms. Parents should be loving, children
reverential; elder siblings gentle, younger siblings respectful; husbands good, wives "listening"; elder friends considerate, younger friends deferential; rulers benevolent, subjects loyal. In effect Confucius is saying that you are never alone when you act. Every action affects someone else. Here, in these five relationships, is a frame within which you may achieve the maximum selfhood without damaging the web of life on which your life depends.

That three of the Five Relationships pertain within the family is indicative of how important Confucius considered this institution to be. In this he was not inventing but continuing the Chinese assumption that the family is the basic unit of society. This assumption is graphically embedded in Chinese legend, which credits the hero who "invented" the family with elevating the Chinese from animal to human level. Within the family, in turn, it is the children's respect for their parents that holds the key; hence the concept of filial piety. When the meanings of the parents are no longer meaningful to their children, someone has recently written, civilization is in danger. Confucius could not have agreed more. "The duty of children to their parents is the fountain from which all virtues spring." Accounts of devoted children pepper Confucian literature. They are outlandish stories, many of them, as for example that of the woman whose aged mother-in-law was pining for fish in the depth of winter. The young woman prostrated herself on the ice of a pond and bared her bosom to melt the ice so she might catch the fish that surfaced in the hole.

This regard for one's elders was not to stop with one's parents; it tied in with Confucius' Respect for Age generally. Two points locked together here. On purely utilitarian grounds it would be good to have a society in which (after a certain age) the young would tend the old, for soon enough the young would be old themselves and would need to draw on their investment. But more than this utilitarian argument was at work. Confucius clearly thought that the young should honor and serve the old not simply to repay a contractual debt. He saw age as deserving veneration by reason of its intrinsic worth. For on balance, he believed, years bring not only experience and seasoning, but a ripening of wisdom and mellowing of spirit; on counts that matter most the old are ahead of us. This view is so contrary to the West's, which venerates youth, that it is almost impossible for us to imagine how life would feel if one could look forward to being served and respected more with each passing year. After childhood, in each successive year proportionately more people would jump up from the table to fill the teapot instead of expecting you to do so, and you would be listened to with increasing attention and respect. Three of the Five Great Relations focus on looking up to one's elders.

In the Rectification of Names, the Doctrine of the Mean, the Five Great Relationships, and Regard for Age and the Family we have sketched important particulars of li in its first meaning, which is propriety or what's right. The other meaning of the word is ritual, which changes right—in the sense of what it is right to do—into rite. Or rather, it infuses the first meaning with the second; for when right behavior is detailed to Confucian lengths, the individual's entire life becomes stylized in a sacred dance. Social life has been choreographed. Its basic steps have been worked out, leaving little need for improvisation. There is a pattern for every act, from the way thrice-yearly the Emperor renders to Heaven an account of his mandate, right down to the way you entertain the humblest guest in your home and bring out the tea. Alfred North Whitehead's wife reported a Cambridge vicar who concluded his sermon by saying, "Finally, my brethren, for well-conducted people life presents no problems." Li was Confucius' blueprint for the well-conducted life.

4. Te. The fourth pivotal concept Confucius sought to devise for his countrymen was te.

Literally this word meant power, specifically the power by which men are ruled. But this is only the beginning of its definition. What is this power? We have noted Confucius' rejection of the Realists' claim that the only effective rule is by physical might. How right he was in his judgment, history demonstrates through the one dynasty, the Ch'in, that fashioned its policy on Realist lines. Stunningly successful at the start, it united China for the first time and bequeathed to it its name as "Ch'in" became "China." But it collapsed in less than a generation—vivid witness to Talleyrand's dictum that "You can do everything with bayonets except sit on them." One of the best known of all Confucian stories is of how on the lonely side of Mount T'ai he heard the mourning wail of a woman. Asked why she wept, she replied, "My husband's father was killed here by a tiger, my husband also, and now my son has met the same fate."

"Then why do you dwell in such a dreadful place?" Confucius asked.
“Because here there is no oppressive ruler,” the woman replied. “Never forget, scholars,” said Confucius to his disciples, “that an oppressive rule is more cruel than a tiger.”

No state, Confucius was convinced, can constrain all its citizens all the time, nor even any large fraction of them a large part of the time. It must rely on an acceptance of its will, an appreciable confidence in what it is doing. Noting that the three essentials of government were economic sufficiency, military sufficiency, and the confidence of its people, Confucius added that popular trust is by far the most important, for “if the people have no confidence in their government, it cannot stand.”

This spontaneous consent from its citizens, this morale without which states cannot survive, arises only when people sense their leaders to be people of capacity, sincerely devoted to the common good and possessed of the kind of character that compels respect. Real te, therefore, is the power of moral example. In the final analysis, goodness becomes embodied in society neither through might nor through law, but through the impress of persons we admire. Everything turns on the head of state. If he or she is crafty or worthless, there is no hope for society. But if the leader is a true King of Consent whose sanction springs from inherent righteousness, such a person will gather a cabinet of “unpurchaseable allies.” Their complete devotion to the public welfare will quicken in turn the public conscience of local leaders and seep down from there to inspire citizens at large. For the process to work, however, rulers must have no personal ambitions, which accounts for the Confucian saying, “only those are worthy to govern who would rather be excused.”

The following statements epitomize Confucius’ idea of te:

He who exercises government by means of his virtue [te] may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn toward it.

Asked by the Baron of Lu how to rule, Confucius replied: “To govern is to keep straight. If you, Sir, lead the people straight, which of your subjects will venture to fall out of line?”

When on another occasion the same ruler asked him whether the lawless should be executed, Confucius answered: “What need is there of the death penalty in government? If you showed a sincere desire to be good, your people would likewise be good. The virtue of the prince is like the wind; the virtue of the people like grass. It is the nature of grass to bend when the wind blows upon it.”

Justice Holmes used to say that he liked to pay taxes because he felt he was buying civilization. Where this positive attitude exists, things will go well politically. But how is the positive attitude to be elicited? Among Western theorists, Confucius would have found his spokesman in Plato:

Then tell me, Critias, how will a man choose the ruler that shall rule over him? Will he not choose a man who has first established order in himself, knowing that any decision that has its spring from anger or pride or vanity can be multiplied a thousandfold in its effects upon the citizens?

Confucius would also have seconded Thomas Jefferson, who thought that “the whole art of government consists in the art of being honest.”

5. Wen. The final concept in the Confucian gestalt is wen. This refers to “the arts of peace” as contrasted to “the arts of war”; to music, art, poetry, the sum of culture in its aesthetic and spiritual mode. Confucius valued the arts tremendously. A simple refrain once cast such a spell over him that for three months he became indifferent to what he ate. He considered people who are indifferent to art only half human. Still, it was not art for art’s sake that drew his regard. It was art’s power to transform human nature in the direction of virtue that impressed him—its power to make easy (by ennobling the heart) a regard for others that would otherwise be difficult.

By poetry the mind is aroused; from music the finish is received. The odes stimulate the mind. They induce self-contemplation. They teach the art of sensibility. They help to restrain resentment. They bring home the duty of serving one’s parents and one’s prince.23

There is an added, political dimension to Confucius’ notion of wen. What succeeds in international relations? Here again the Realists answered in terms of physical might; it was the answer Stalin echoed in our century when, asked how the Pope figured in a move he was contemplating against Poland, asked in return, “How many battalions does he have?” Confucius’ thrust was characteristically
different. Ultimately, the victory goes to the state that develops the highest wen, the most exalted culture—the state that has the finest art, the noblest philosophy, the grandest poetry, and gives evidence of realizing that "it is the moral character of a neighborhood that constitutes its excellence." For in the end it is these things that elicit the spontaneous admiration of women and men everywhere. The Gauls were fierce fighters, and so crude of culture that they were considered barbarians; but once they experienced what Roman civilization meant, its superiority was so evident that they never, after Caesar's conquest, had any general uprising against Roman rule. Confucius would not have been surprised.

**The Confucian Project**

Let us assume that the deliberate tradition Confucius sought to fashion was in place. How would life appear to a Chinese, set within it?

It would beckon as a never-ending project of self-cultivation toward the end of becoming more fully human. The good man or woman in the Confucian scheme is the one who is always trying to become better.

The project is not attempted in a vacuum — this is not yogis retiring to mountain caves to discover the God within. Quite the contrary; a Confucian who is bent on self-cultivation positions himself or herself squarely in the center of ever-shifting, never-ending cross-currents of human relationships and would not wish things otherwise; saintliness in isolation had no meaning for Confucius. The point is not merely that human relationships are fulfilling; the Confucian claim runs deeper than that. It is rather that apart from human relationships there is no self. The self is a center of relationships. It is constructed through its interactions with others and is defined by the sum of its social roles.

This notion of the self is so different from Western individualism that we need to circle it for a paragraph. Confucius saw the human self as a node, not an entity; it is a meeting place where lives converge. In this it resembles a sea anemone, which is little more than a net through which tides and currents wash, leaving deposits that build what little substance the plant itself possesses. But though it is accurate in ways, this image is too passive; we do better to switch from sea currents to air currents that assail an eagle in flight. Those currents assault the eagle, but the eagle uses them to control its altitude by adjusting the tilt of its wings. Like an eagle in flight, our human life too is in motion, but in its case human relationships are the atmosphere through which it plows. The Confucian project is to master the art of adjusting one’s wings in order to ascend toward the elusive but approachable goal of human perfection. Or as Confucius would have said, toward the goal of becoming more completely human.

In this analogy Confucius' Five Constant Relationships present themselves as relatively stable currents in atmospheric conditions that in other respects can fluctuate wildly. We have seen that all five relationships are asymmetrical in that behavior that is appropriate to one person in each pair is not identical with what is appropriate for the other person. This asymmetry presupposes role differentiation and details its specifics.

The crucial question here is whether the specifics Confucius proposed tilt the relationships, positioning one person in each pair above the other person. In one sense they definitely do. It seemed altogether natural to Confucius that children should look up to their parents, wives to husbands, subjects to rulers, and younger friends and siblings to their older counterparts, for the latter, generally older, are more experienced and provide natural role models. But this is where wingslants must be adjusted precisely, for a hair's-breadth difference puts the Confucian project into a nose dive. The danger is greatest for the "top" partner in each pair, who could be tempted to assume that the position carries built-in perquisites rather than ones that must be merited. Unquestionably, human nature being what it is, the Chinese succumbed to this temptation — to what extent defies calculation, but enough to make this the sinister side of the Confucian scheme. But Confucius himself tried to forestall abuse by insisting that authority — due authority — is not automatic; it must be earned. The loyalty that is due the husband from the wife is contingent on the husband's being the kind of husband who warrants — instinctively inspires — such loyalty, and comparably with the other four relationships, although the nuances of loyalty differ in each case. In the ruler-subject relationship, for example, the ruler retains the Mandate of Heaven — his right to his subjects' loyalty — only insofar as their welfare is in truth his chief concern and he possesses the talents needed to promote it. More than two thousand years before the
Magna Carta and the Rights of Man, two millennia before the West separated divine right from the office of kingship, the Chinese (through Confucius and his disciples) built the Right of Revolution solidly into their political philosophy: "Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven wills as the people will." Far from being enjoined, complicity in the face of unwarranted authority is, in the Confucian project, a human failing.

As a metaphor for the Confucian project, we introduced the image of an eagle adjusting its wings to maneuver the atmosphere—analogue for the Five Constant Relationships—in ways that enable it to ascend. If we round off this metaphor by asking what ascent means here, we find that the answer was begun in the preceding section. It means becoming a chun-tzu, a fully realized human being, through expanding one's sympathy and empathy indefinitely. The Chinese character for this empathy/sympathy is hsin. Pictorially, hsin is a stylized drawing of the human heart, but in meaning it denotes both mind and heart, for in Confucian learning the two go together—sundered from each other, thought runs dry, feeling is rudderless, and the Confucian project gets grounded. As for the increase of this heart-mind that is hsin, it expands in concentric circles that begin with oneself and spread from there to include successively one's family, one's face-to-face community, one's nation, and finally all humanity. In shifting the center of one's empathic concern from oneself to one's family one transcends selfishness. The move from family to community transcends nepotism. The move from community to nation overcomes parochialism, and the move to all humanity counters chauvinistic nationalism.

This broadening process is accompanied by one that is deepening; for when it was suggested above that Confucius saw the self as the sum of its social roles, that overstates the case if it suggests that he denied that the self has an internal, subjective center. His repeated calls to self-examination and introspection generally show that he not only recognized an interior side to the self but considered it important. Confucian learning pivots on the self and is for the sake of the self, though (to be sure) as the self expands, its separation from others attenuates. Interior life grows richer as empathy increases, for it is the breadth and depth of one's hsin that shapes the contours of subjectivity and provides it with its primary food for thought.

So inside and outside work together in the Confucian scheme. The inner world deepens and grows more satisfying and refined as jen and hsin expand and the possibilities of li are progressively realized. The project is never attempted alone. It proceeds in the sea of humanity, alongside others who likewise (with varying degrees of seriousness) are trying to become fully human. Always the practice field is the Five Constant Relationships. In the course of one's training, one finds that mastering a role in one of the five sheds light on the other roles. To improve as a parent throws light on what being a good child (of one's own parents) entails. The nuances of the other roles likewise illuminate one another.

**Ethics or Religion?**

Is Confucianism a religion, or is it an ethic? The answer depends on how one defines religion. With its close attention to personal conduct and the moral order, Confucianism approaches life from a different angle than do other religions, but that does not necessarily disqualify it religiously. If religion is taken in its widest sense, as a way of life woven around a people's ultimate concerns, Confucianism clearly qualifies. Even if religion is taken in a narrower sense, as a concern to align humanity with the transcendental ground of its existence, Confucianism is still a religion, albeit a muted one. For though we have thus far spoken only of Confucius' social concerns, these, while definitely the focus, did not exhaust his outlook.

To see the transcendent dimension of Confucianism in perspective, we need to set it against the religious background of the ancient China in which Confucius lived. Until the first millennium B.C., the unquestioned outlook was a compound of three related ingredients:

First, Heaven and Earth were considered a continuum. The terms referred not primarily to places but to the people who dwelt in those places, as the House of Lords refers to the people who sit in that House. The people who comprised Heaven were the ancestors (ti) who were ruled over by a supreme ancestor (Shang Ti). They were the forefathers who had gone before and soon would be joined by the present retinue of Earth—the whole was one unbroken procession in which death spelled no more than promotion to a more
honorable estate. The two realms were mutually implicated and in constant touch. Heaven held control of Earth's welfare—the weather for example was "Heaven's mood"—while depending on the current inhabitants of Earth to supply some of her needs through sacrifice. Of the two realms Heaven was by far the more important. Her inhabitants were more venerable and august and their authority was greater. Consequently, they commanded Earth's reverence and dominated her imaginings.

Being mutually dependent, Heaven and Earth would have needed to communicate for reasons of need even if not affection. The most concrete way by which Earth spoke to Heaven was through sacrifices. Earth's residents thought it both wise and natural to share their goods with their departed ancestors, and the essences of their earthly goods were carried to Heaven on the ascending smoke of the sacrificial fire. A mound for such offerings was the focus of every ancient village. When the Chinese nation arose, its ruler, the Son of Heaven, affirmed his right to that proud title by overseeing the nation's sacrifices to its ancestors. Even as late as Confucius' day, an administration that lapsed in its worship of the ancestors was considered to have lost its right to rule.

If sacrifice was the principal way Earth spoke to Heaven, augury was the channel through which Heaven responded. As the ancestors knew the entire past of their people, they were equipped to calculate its future. Augury was the device by which the present generation might tap into that knowledge. Being pleasantly disposed toward their descendants, the ancestors would naturally want to share with them their knowledge of things to come. They no longer possessed vocal cords, however, and therefore needed to resort to signs. It followed that everything that happened on Earth fell into two classes. Things people did intentionally were ordinary, but things that "happened of themselves"—we should read that phrase with a tinge of apprehension—were to be noticed with care. They were ominous, for one never knew when they might constitute the ancestors' efforts to get peoples' attention, most urgently to warn them of impending danger. Some of these omens occurred within or to the body: itchings, sneezings, twitchings, stumblings, buzzings in the ears, tremblings of the eyelids. Others were external: thunder, lightning, the courses of the stars, the doings of insects, birds, and animals. It was also possible for people to take the initiative and actively seek out Heaven's presence. They could throw yarrow stalks on the ground and observe their pattern; they could apply a hot iron to a tortoise shell and examine the cracks that appeared. Whatever the occasion—a trip, a war, a birth, a marriage—it was prudent to look for heavenly tips. An ancient record tells of a visitor who was asked by his host to prolong his stay into the evening. He answered, "I have divined about the day. I have not divined about the night. I dare not."

In each of these great features of early Chinese religion—its sense of continuity with the ancestors, its sacrifice, and its augury—there was a common emphasis. The emphasis was on Heaven instead of Earth. To understand the total dimension of Confucianism as a religion it is important to see Confucius shifting his people's attention from Heaven to Earth without dropping Heaven from the picture entirely.

The first of these twin aspects of Confucianism can be documented easily. On a much debated issue of his day—which should come first, the claims of earthly people or those of the spirit world through sacrifices?—he answered that though the spirits should not be neglected, people should come first. The worldliness and practical concern by which the Chinese were later to be known was coming to the fore, and Confucius did much to crystallize their this-world orientation.

"I do not say that the social as we know it is the whole," wrote John Dewey, "but I do emphatically suggest that it is the widest and richest manifestation of the whole accessible to our observation." Confucius would have agreed. His philosophy was a blend of common sense and practical wisdom. It contained no depth of metaphysical thought, no flights of speculation, no soul-stirring calls to cosmic piety. Normally, he "did not talk about spirits." "Recognize that you know what you know, and that you are ignorant of what you do not know," he said. "Hear much, leave to one side that which is doubtful, and speak with due caution concerning the remainder. See much, leave to one side that of which the meaning is not clear, and act carefully with regard to the rest." Consequently, whenever he was questioned about other-worldly matters, Confucius drew the focus back to human beings. Asked about serving the spirits of the dead, he answered, "You are not even able to serve people. How can you serve the spirits?" Asked about death itself, he replied, "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" In short: one world at a time.
One specific illustration of the way in which Confucius shifted the focus from Heaven to Earth is seen in his change of emphasis from ancestor worship to filial piety. In ancient China the dead were actually worshiped. True to the conservative component in his nature, Confucius did nothing to interrupt the ancestral rites themselves. He did not deny that the spirits of the dead exist; on the contrary he advised treating them “as if they were present.” At the same time his own emphasis was directed toward the living family. He stressed that the most sacred tie is the tie among blood relatives. For him the obligations of present members of a family to one another were more important than their duties to the departed.

The extent to which Confucius shifted emphasis from Heaven to Earth should not lead us to think that he sullied Earth from Heaven entirely. He did not repudiate the main outlines of the worldview of his time, composed of Heaven and Earth, the divine creative pair, half physical and half more-than-physical, ruled over by the supreme Shang Ti. Reserved as he was about the supernatural, he was not without it; somewhere in the universe there was a power that was on the side of right. The spread of righteousness was, therefore, a cosmic demand, and “the Will of Heaven” the first thing a chun tzu would respect. Confucius believed that he had a mandate to spread his teachings. When during the “long trek” he was attacked in the town of Kwang, he reassured his followers by saying, “Heaven has appointed me to teach this doctrine, and until I have done so, what can the people of Kwang do to me?” Feeling neglected by his people, he consoled himself with the thought: “There is Heaven—that knows me!” One of the most quoted religious sayings of all times came from his pen. “He who offends the gods has no one to pray to.”

This restrained and somewhat attenuated theism enables us to understand why a contemporary Confucian scholar can write that “the highest Confucian ideal is the unity of Man and Heaven,” adding that in the *Doctrine of the Mean* this is described as “man forming a trinity with Heaven and Earth.” With this unity or trinity established as the consummating goal of the Confucian project, we can pick up on its successive steps, which in our earlier enumeration stopped short of the final goal. The project of becoming fully human involves transcending, sequentially, egoism, nepotism, parochialism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinistic nationalism, and (we should now add) isolating, self-sufficient humanism. To continue with the words of the Confucian scholar just quoted:

*To make ourselves deserving partners of Heaven, we must be constantly in touch with that silent illumination that makes the rightness and principle in our heart-minds shine forth brilliantly. If we cannot go beyond the constraints of our own species, the most we can hope for is an exclusive, secular humanism advocating man as the measure of all things. By contrast, Confucian humanism is inclusive; it is predicated on an “anthropocosmic” vision. Humanity in its all-embracing fullness “forms one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things” and enables us to embody the cosmos in our sensitivity.*

**Impact on China**

In his book *The Next Million Years*, Charles Galton Darwin notes that anyone who wishes to make a sizable impact on human history has the choice of three levels at which to work. The agent may choose direct political action, or create a creed, or attempt to change the genetic composition of the human species. The first method is the weakest because the effects of political action seldom outlast their agent. The third is not feasible, for even if we had the knowledge and technique, a genetic policy would be difficult to enforce for even a short period and would almost certainly be dropped before any perceptible effects were achieved. “That is why,” Darwin concludes, “a creed gives the best practical hope that man can have for really controlling his future fate.”

History affords no clearer support for this contention than the work of Confucius. For over two thousand years his teachings have profoundly affected a quarter of the population of this globe. Their advance reads like a success story, for the unbelievable upshot of Confucius’ outwardly undistinguished career was the founding of a class of scholars who were to become China’s ruling elite and the emergence of Confucius himself as the most important figure in China’s history. In 130 B.C. the Confucian texts were made the basic discipline for the training of government officials, a pattern that continued (with interruption during the political fragmentation of A.D. 200–600) until the Empire collapsed in 1905. In that same Han
Dynasty Confucianism became, in effect, China's state religion; in A.D. 59 sacrifices were ordered for Confucius in all urban schools, and in the seventh and eighth centuries temples were erected in every prefecture of the empire as shrines to him and his principal disciples. China's famous civil service examinations, which democratized public office centuries before the rest of the world dreamed of doing so, had the Confucian corpus at their heart. The Sung Dynasty (late tenth through late thirteenth centuries) perfected that system, which remained in place into the opening years of our own century.

Darwin follows his general point about the power of "creed" by saying that "the Chinese civilization [which Confucius' creed did so much to shape] is to be accepted as the model type to a greater degree than any of the other civilizations of the world." We shall not go this far. As there is no measure by which to rank-order civilizations qualitatively, we shall content ourselves with quantity, where numbers do tell an objective story. Unlike Europe or even India, China held together, forging a political structure which at its height embraced a third of the human race. The Chinese Empire lasted under a succession of dynasties for over two thousand years, a stretch of time that makes the empires of Alexander, Caesar, and Napoleon look ephemeral. If we multiply the number of years that empire lasted by the number of people it embraced in an average year, it emerges quantitatively as the most impressive social institution human beings have devised.

It is not easy to say what Confucius contributed to this institution, because in time Confucian values merged with the generic values of the Chinese people to the point where it is difficult to separate the two. What we shall do here, therefore, is take note of some features of the Chinese character that Confucius and his disciples reinforced where they did not originate them. The features we shall mention pretty much blanket East Asia as a whole, for Japan, Korea, and much of Southeast Asia deliberately imported the Confucian ethic.

We can begin with East Asia's emphatic social emphasis, which Confucius helped to fix in place. Virtually every sinologist has remarked on this emphasis, but two verdicts will suffice here. "All Chinese philosophy is preeminently social philosophy," Etienne Balazs observed, and Wing-tsit Chan concurs: "Chinese philosophers have been interested primarily in ethical, social, and political problems." To catch an immediate glimpse of how this social emphasis translates into practice, we can note that though China is as large as the continental United States, it has a single time zone. Apparently, the Chinese feel that it is more important that they be synchronized among themselves in their time sense than that their clocks conform to impersonal nature.

This is a small point, to be sure, but small signs can reflect deeplying attitudes, and in any case larger evidence is at hand. Confucius' social emphasis produced, in the Chinese, a conspicuous social effectiveness—a capacity to get things done on a large scale when need arose. Historians have speculated that the social emphasis we are looking at may have gotten its start in China's early need for massive irrigation projects on the one hand, and titanic dikes to contain her unruly rivers on the other; and we should not overlook the fact that social effectiveness (as we are calling it here) can be wrongly applied; there has been a lot of despotism in China. But, for good or for ill, effectiveness seems to be a fact. Facing up to its population problem in the third quarter of this century, China halved her birthrate in a single decade. And in the thirty years from 1949 to 1979, she put famine, flood, and epidemic disease behind a quarter of the world's population, seemingly forever. As the Scientific American pointed out in its September 1980 issue, "this is a great event in history."

Directly related to the subject of this book is the way, unique among the world's civilizations, that China syncretized her religions. In India and the West religions are exclusive, if not competitive—it makes no sense to think of someone as being simultaneously a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew, or even a Buddhist and a Hindu simultaneously. China arranged things differently. Traditionally, every Chinese was Confucian in ethics and public life, Taoist in private life and hygiene, and Buddhist at the time of death, with a healthy dash of shamanistic folk religion thrown in along the way. As someone has put the point: Every Chinese wears a Confucian hat, Taoist robes, and Buddhist sandals. In Japan Shinto was added to the mix.

The importance of the family in China—three of Confucius' Five Constant Relationships pertain to it—scarcely requires comment. Some sinologists argue that when ancestor worship and filial piety are included, the family emerges as the real religion of the Chinese people. The family surname comes first in China; only thereafter are
given names added. The Chinese extended family survived well into the twenty-first century, as the following report attests: “A single family may embrace eight generations, including brothers, uncles, great-uncles, sons, nephews and nephews’ sons. As many as thirty male parents with their offspring, each with their ancestors and offspring even unto grandparents and grandchildren, may live in a single joint family home comprising but one single family.” The Chinese vocabulary for family relationships is equally complex. A single word for brother is too clumsy; there must be two words to designate whether he is older or younger than the sibling who speaks. Likewise with sister, and with aunt, uncle, and grandparent, where different words are required to indicate whether these relations are on the father’s or on the mother’s side. In all, there are titles for one hundred fifteen different relationships in the Chinese extended family. Strong family bonds can smother, but they also bring benefits, and these work for East Asians right down to the present. One thinks of low crime at home—the burglary rate in Japan is 1 percent of that in the United States—and the impressive record of East Asian immigrants to other lands; their delinquency rate is low, and achievement and upward mobility are high. Relatives regularly pitch in to further the education of even distant kin.

The upward tilt toward the elder partner in three of Confucius’ Five Constant Relationships helped to elevate East Asia’s respect for age to an attitude that borders on veneration. In the West when someone confesses to being fifty, the response is likely to be, “You don’t look a year over forty.” In traditional China courtesy would have reached for a response more like, “You look every bit of sixty.” In the mid-1980s an elderly visitor to Japan was asked by a Japanese friend how wise he was. The confusion the question generated caused the Japanese to realize that he had made a mistake. Apologizing for his faulty English, the Japanese explained that he had intended to ask how old his friend was. When we compare this with the Western attitude toward age—“You’re over the hill at forty, and over the hill you pick up speed”—the contrast is glaring. Facing up to the inevitability of the body’s decline, China created social structures that buoyed the spirit. With each passing year one could count on more solicitude from one’s family and associates, and (as we have noted) more attentive, listening respect.

Confucius’ Doctrine of the Mean continues to this day in the Chinese preference for negotiation, mediation, and the “middle man” as against resorting to rigid, impersonal statutes. Until recently, legal action has been regarded as something of a disgrace, a confession of human failure in the inability to work things out by compromises that typically involve family and associates. Figures are not available for China, but in the mid-1980s Japan in ratio to its population had one lawyer for every twenty-four in the United States. The issue of negotiation is in with the peculiar oriental phenomenon of “face,” for in the win/lose context of a legal verdict the party the judgment goes against loses face. This is serious, because if you are going to have to live on intimate terms with your associates, no long-term good can come from muchasping them psychologically.

And there is wen: Confucius’ conviction that learning and the arts are not mere veneer but are powers that transform societies and the human heart. China honored his conviction here: She placed the scholar-bureaucrat at the top of her social scale and soldiers at the bottom. One wonders whether anywhere other than Tibet, and during the brief early years of Islam there has been such an attempt to effect Plato’s ideal of the philosopher king. It was only an attempt, yet here and there, now and again, it bore fruit. There have been golden ages in China when the arts have flourished as nowhere else in their time and deep learning was achieved: calligraphy, Sung landscape painting, and the life-giving dance of tai chi chuan come quickly to mind. Paper was invented. Four centuries before Gutenberg, movable type was discovered. A fifteenth-century encyclopedia, climax of the research of two thousand scholars, reached a total of 11,095 volumes. There has been great poetry, magnificent scroll painting, and ceramics, which “because of the fineness of their material and decoration, and because of the elegance of their shapes, may be considered the best pottery of all countries and of all times.”

Blending with the Confucian art of life itself, these objects of wen produced a culture with a flavor all its own. A compound of subtlety, brilliance, and restrained good taste, it endowed the Chinese with a power of assimilation that at its peak was unrivaled. Having the most open frontier of all the great civilizations, China was subject to wave after wave of invasions by cavalry barbarians who were always ready to fall on the Earthbound agriculturalists. To their gates came the Tartars, whose one long-range raid inflicted a mortal wound on the Roman Empire. But what the Chinese could not fend off, they absorbed. Each wave of invaders tended to lose its identity through...
voluntary assimilation; they admired what they saw. Time after time an illiterate invader, entering solely for plunder, succumbs. Within a few years his foremost hope is to write a copy of Chinese verse that his teacher, who is likewise his conquered slave, might acknowledge as not altogether unworthy of a gentleman, and his highest hope is to be mistaken for Chinese. Kublai Khan is the most striking example. He conquered China but was himself conquered by Chinese civilization, for his victory enabled him to realize his lasting ambition, which was to become an authentic Son of Heaven.

The magic did not last. In the fifteenth century Chinese civilization was still unrivaled throughout the world, but stagnation then set in and the last two centuries must be discounted because the West, armed with superior military technology, snatched China’s fate from her own hands. There is little point in discussing Confucianism in the context of a Western-instigated war that forced opium on the Chinese and the subsequent division of China into European spheres of influence. Even the twentieth-century importation of Marxism must be seen as an act of desperation to regain a lost autonomy.

For the enduring constructive Confucian influence we must look not to China’s twentieth-century politics but to the East Asian economic miracle of the last forty years. Taken together, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, all shaped by the Confucian ethic, constitute the dynamic center of economic growth in the latter twentieth century—impressive witness to what can happen when scientific technology links up with what might here be referred to as the social technology of East Asians. A single statistic, followed by a reporter’s account of a routine episode, provide clues to what makes that social technology work. In 1982 Japanese workers took an average of only 5.1 of the 12 vacation days they were entitled to, for (by their own accounts) “longer vacations would have imposed burdens on their colleagues.”35 As for the report, it reads as follows:

Six o’clock on a spring morning. In front of the Kyoto Central Station six men are standing in a circle singing. They are all dressed in white shirts, black ties, black pants, and shiny black shoes. One of them reads a pledge in which they affirm their intention to serve their customers, their company, the city of Kyoto, Japan, and the world. They are taxi drivers beginning their work day as usual.36

It does not relate to the issue of productivity, but another report from Kyoto points up the courtesy for which orientals have been famous: “In the cyclonic mess of Kyoto traffic, two cars scrape bumpers. Both drivers leap out. Each bows, apologizing profusely for his carelessness.”

These are lingering echoes of the Confucian spirit, but one must wonder if they are not fading ones. In a Westernizing world, what is the future of this religion?

No one knows the answer. It may be that we are looking at a religion that is dying. If so, it would be appropriate to close this chapter with the words Confucius applied to himself when on his deathbed his eyes rested for the last time on the majestic dome of T’ai Shan, China’s sacred mountain:

The Sacred Mountain is falling, 
The beam is breaking, 
The wise man is withering away.

On the other hand, prophets have a way of outlasting politicians. Gandhi has outlasted Nehru, and it appears that Confucius will outlast Mao Tse-tung.

Suggestions for Further Reading

For translations of the most important Confucian texts, Arthur Waley’s The Analects of Confucius (New York: Random House, 1989), and D. C. Lau’s Mencius (New York: Penguin Books, 1970) can be recommended. For the philosophically inclined, A. C. Graham’s Disputers of the Tao (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1989) offers the best general history of Chinese thought during its formative period.

The section on “The Confucian Project” in this chapter was prompted largely by the writings of the contemporary Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming, especially his Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), and Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought (Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing, 1980).
I did not single out Neo-Confucianism for separate treatment in my presentation. As an important movement that recast Confucianism in the light of Taoist and Buddhist influences, it began in the eighth century, flourished vigorously in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and has produced notable interpreters right down to the present. Specifically, the Neo-Confucian scholars worked out a world view that paralleled the Buddhist cosmology, and a system of moral philosophy to explain Confucian ethics in metaphysical terms. Their story is presented in overview in Carsun Chang, The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1957).

*Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* by Herbert Fingarette (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) is exceptional in being written by a ranking contemporary philosopher who discusses Confucius' ideas not for reasons of their historical importance, but because (in Fingarette's own words) he is "a thinker with an imaginative vision of man equal in its grandeur to any I know."

**Notes**

5. As reported by Ruth Benedict.
7. The position of the Realists I shall present comes to us primarily through the eyes of orthodox Confucian historians. Scholars wonder if their characterization slips into caricature at times, but the general thrust of their depiction is not disputed.
11. Though love is the literal meaning of *ai*, A. C. Graham uses "mutual concern," or "concern for everyone," to translate the phrase, arguing that this fits better with Mohism's pragmatic, utilitarian bent.
15. I am treating these answers schematically rather than chronologically. Only after Confucius' death were the answers that he rejected put forward systematically. It remained for his disciples, following their master's guidelines, to argue explicitly against them.
22. I have broadened Confucius' "father/son," "elder-brother/junior-brother" wording to make it fit better with modern sensibilities. I do not think this violates Confucius' actual intent.