

ROGER T. AMES

What Ever Happened to “Wisdom”? Confucian Philosophy of Process and “Human Becomings”

NATHAN SIVIN: SOME TELLING INSIGHTS

Nathan Sivin has taught us much about making cultural comparisons. In his anthology of essays, *Medicine, Philosophy and Religion in Ancient China*, he describes the impetus behind his own important contribution to our understanding of early China:

What motivated these studies and others is ... an intense curiosity about how people in a civilization very different from that of Europe have gone about understanding Nature (whether external or represented in their own bodies) and defining their relation to it.¹

Insisting that cultures are too subtle and complex to allow for overly heavy-handed assertions, Sivin has prudently cautioned us against the wholesale “rather than” approach to cultural comparisons.² With just such a caution in mind, however, Sivin in his essay “Comparing Greek and Chinese Philosophy and Science” is still given to making some fundamental generalizations that establish a framework and a vocabulary for both associative and contrastive analogies that provide us access to the evolution of Chinese culture. Indeed, in this regard, Sivin’s work, while yielding substantial historical dividends, also has profound implications for philosophical speculation as well. For example, Sivin allows, and I think rightly so, that the Greek “reality-appearance distinction” “has no counterpart in China.”³

I want to begin this essay by rehearsing some of the philosophical implications of this observation. Having borrowed from Sivin’s insights to develop a distinction between Greek substance ontology and Chinese normative cosmology, and as a corollary, between the respective

¹ Nathan Sivin, *Medicine, Philosophy and Religion in Ancient China: Researches and Reflections* (Aldershot, Eng.: Variorum, 1995), p. vii.

² *Ibid.*, p. viii.

³ *Ibid.* 1, p. 3.

importance of knowledge and of wisdom in these traditions, I will then apply this contrast to what Sivin takes to be a starting point in understanding cultural difference: the relationship between human beings and their natural context.

Indeed, the philosophical entailments of Sivin's claim that for early Chinese cosmology the ontological disparity introduced with the reality/appearance distinction has little relevance are legion. Several of such entailments he himself notes in his summary reflections on the comparison between Greek and Chinese philosophy. For starters, Sivin registers the importance of semantics and the relative absence of logic in China. This contrast is another way of saying that the Chinese tradition does not privilege some fixed formal aspect – that is, logic as the “form” of thinking – as being more “real” than what is otherwise in flux (that is, semantics).

Relatedly, Sivin's observation regarding the ubiquitousness in the Chinese tradition of variations on the *zhengming* 正名 theme – “using names properly” – suggests that the function of language used in a processual cosmology must reflect that flux and flow of that cosmos. That is, Chinese cosmology accepts the processual, changing, and hence provisional character of language without appeal to some putatively “reality guaranteed” literal ground.⁴

Sivin makes another important distinction between the dialectical versus consensual expectations of philosophical engagement in the classical Greek and Chinese worlds respectively:

Greek culture in the period that concerns us encouraged disagreement and disputation in natural philosophy and science as in every other field; in China the emphasis remained on consensus.⁵

The contrast here is between Greek dialogue and its assumption that rational analysis will provide access to some exclusive *logos* on the one hand, and a Chinese conversation that requires the ongoing negotiation of an inclusive consensus on the other. While the pursuit of apodictic truth drove the Greek dialogue, the continuing need to negotiate order within the assumed processual experience of Chinese cosmology had far-reaching ramifications. Such ongoing inclusive negotiation would explain why achieved consensus in its many forms – the continuing reauthorization of a moral orthodoxy, a continuing commentary on a shared canonical core, “the art of accommodation” *jianshu* 兼術, and so on – was regarded as having high value in the classical Chinese world.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 1, p. 8.

⁶ Angus Graham develops this same contrast when he observes that dialectical dispute is

DISTINGUISHING GREEK ELEMENTAL
THEORIES FROM CHINESE PHASAL *QI* 氣 COSMOLOGY

If we go back to Nathan Sivin's initial assertion about the absence of some kind of abstract and permanent reality behind appearances in the classical Chinese cosmology, we can isolate an underlying idea that helps to bring this cultural contrast between substance ontology and processual cosmology into clearer focus. The example that Sivin appeals to as the basis of this claim are the early Greek elemental theories that, in positing a hidden reality of minute ultimate parts (*átoma*), demote direct experience to a lower, somewhat less real, status.

Given the fundamental differences between Greek elemental theories and the Chinese *wuxing* 五行 ("five phases") cosmology and the tendency of earlier interpreters of Chinese cosmology to elide them, scholars such as Sivin, Angus Graham, and John Major have in their research sought to correct what had been a misleading designation of the *wuxing* cosmology as an elemental theory. Indeed, "five elements" as a translation for *wuxing* is gone, and the processual "five phases" has taken its place.⁷

It was in fact Sivin in his seminal essay, "The Myth of the Naturalists," who brought considerable light to our previously confused understanding of early *qi* cosmology, tracing out three transitions in the evolution of the *yinyang* and five phases vocabulary:

... at the end of the Chou [Zhou] dynasty, in certain contexts, *wu hsing* [*wuxing*] was a set of moral categories that could plausibly be linked to Mencius [that] ... put individual self-cultivation at the

characteristic of people who would ask, "What is the Truth?" as opposed to those who would ask "Where is the Way?" A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989), p. 3. See also David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany: State U. New York P., 1998), part 2.

⁷ According to John Major, "A Note on the Translation of Two Technical Terms in Chinese Science: *wu-hsing* and *hsiu*," *EC* 2 (1976), pp. 1-2: "The problem with 'five elements' is that the Chinese concept of *wu-hsing* [*wuxing*] ... has none of the sense of 'basic ingredient' or 'irreducible essence' of the Latin *elementum* nor of that term's various Greek conceptual ancestors. ... In contrast, the translation Five Phases, which now is rapidly gaining acceptance, clearly has connotations of change consistent with the Chinese concept of cyclical transformation." I would, however, disassociate myself from Major's claim that "the Chinese concept *wu-hsing* is one of function rather than constituent matter." Major, "Reply to Richard Kunst's Comments on *hsiu* and *wu hsing*," *EC* 3 (1977), p. 69, in a subsequent exchange with Richard Kunst then clarifies what he means by "function" as "categories of relations." My understanding would be that *wuxing*, like *qi* or *dao* or *yinyang*, would resist any severe function/structure distinction. See Judith Farquhar, *Knowing Practice: The Clinical Encounter of Chinese Medicine* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), who makes this same point. See also Graham, *Disputers*, pp. 325 ff.

center of the philosophic quest, and focused its disciplines increasingly on nurturing the “all-encompassing *ch’i* [*qi*]” of the cosmos within oneself... . The second change, equally gradual, adapted this new emphasis to the urgent task of inventing a new political order as the old one collapsed once and for all... . By the end of the first century, yin and yang ... and *wu hsing* ... were ... sets of qualifiers used to describe either two or five aspects of *ch’i*. They shared certain important characteristics: they were dynamic (accounting for change), relational (an attribute is defined by its relation to others within the system of two or five), and aspectual (the choice between yin-yang and Five-phases analysis depends on what aspect of the phenomena one wants to discuss).⁸

Sivin’s main point here is that *yinyang* and *wuxing*, far from being a technical cosmological terminology used to describe physical phenomena, were fundamentally a morally and politically-invested vocabulary from the beginning, and constituted a framework used to understand, explain, and prescribe the human experience broadly. Sivin’s elucidation of *wuxing* has permitted a more nuanced approach to the important and pervasive notion of *qi* that becomes explicit among philosophers in the late-fourth and early-third centuries BC.

The five phases are quite literally a “functional” equivalent of the Greek elements in that, rather than referring to ultimate “parts,” they connote both the functioning and the reforming of the various phases of the changing human world itself as captured in the metaphorical language of “shade and light (*yinyang* 陰陽)” and of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth 金木水火土. The polar opposition symbolized by *yinyang* generates a dynamic tension that drives the ongoing processes of change. These creative processes are parsed into the distinct, though continuous, transitional five phases. Just as spring properly becomes summer, and summer, autumn, so “wood” properly becomes “water,” and “water,” “fire.” It is the correlation of the notion of “phases” to the manifold of processes that allows for these processes to be punctuated into qualitatively distinctive, consummatory “events.” Even though summer is a transition between spring and autumn, we can still treat it as a discrete period of time in any given year, and although particular persons are transitional between progenitor and progeny, they are still uniquely particular persons. Such distinct “events” then serve conceptually as the “functional” equivalent of the quantitatively discrete “things” that we find in a substance ontology.

⁸ Sivin, *Medicine, Philosophy and Religion* 4, pp. 5–6.

The Chinese counterpart to Greek “elemental” theories that had in past been confused with them is the phasal understanding of the autogenerative, animated process of *qi* transformation that provides context for personal cultivation. *Qi* is both *what* experience is, and provides instruction on *how* things should be as they persist and change in their formal and functional aspects. The ineluctable transformations of *qi* provide a normative basis for human flourishing: personal, moral, and political.

But in early Greek metaphysics, the elemental theories were just one among many ways of asserting this unchanging, abstract reality that lies behind appearances. Perhaps the most persistent “idea” in classical Greek metaphysics was “idea” itself, *eidōs* – “form, type, species, idea.” For Plato, these *eidē* as transcendent Forms referenced some suprasensible reality that guaranteed *epistēmē*, or true knowledge. Aristotle, critiquing the independent, subsisting nature of Plato’s *eidē*, interpreted them as a formal cause correlated to matter as the inhering, intelligible essence of things that directs the teleological structure of individual existents. To know something for Aristotle is to know its *eidōs*.

John Dewey, in rehearsing the history of this “logic of the changeless” within the pre-Darwinian Western philosophical narrative, emphasizes both the persistence of *eidōs* and its contemporary role as the shared target of the internal critique that has raged within twentieth-century Western philosophy. Dewey allows that :

[t]here are, indeed, but two alternative courses. We must either find the appropriate objects and organs of knowledge in the mutual interactions of changing things; or else, to escape the infection of change, we must seek them in some transcendent and supernal region. The human mind, deliberately as it were, exhausted the logic of the changeless, the final and the transcendent, before it essayed adventure on the pathless wastes of generation and transformation.⁹

SETTING THE PROBLEM: HUMAN BEINGS AND HUMAN “BECOMINGS”

This contrast that Sivin and Dewey both make between Greek ontological thinking – between metaphysical assumptions about an unchanging reality and process thinking that sponsors a normative

⁹ John Dewey, *The Essential Dewey*, ed. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U.P., 1998) 1, p. 41.

cosmology of generation and transformation – can yield still further dividends in making our cultural comparisons.

At the basis of moral reflection in all cultures lie assumptions about what it means to be a person, and what it means to live a consummatory life. I want to invoke the terminology of “human beings” and “human becomings” in this essay to try to bring into focus a fundamental contrast between the notions of person that predominates with the two philosophical narratives – one derived from classical Greek metaphysics and the other from an enduring Chinese normative cosmology.

In the pre-Darwinian Western narrative, and still a common sense today, there are persistent assumptions about “natural kinds” – that is, reduplicated essential qualities that individuate us and qualify us as “human beings,” whether it be Socrates’s soul or Aristotle’s rationality or Augustine’s individuated will. I will argue that the Confucian person by contrast is understood fundamentally as a process – “person” is what we “do” with our relations rather than what we “are.” It is in this sense that I want to suggest the Confucian person is conceived of as a “human becoming” rather than a “human being.” Human nature is a generalization about ongoing patterns of human conduct, and human potential is the particular relational possibilities that emerge and that are consummated in the transactions that constitute a human narrative.

SETTING THE STAGE: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO “WISDOM?”

For Herodotus, the eloquent Pythagoras and his holistic, practical, and intelligent way of life was aptly described as *philosophia* – “the love of wisdom.” While certainly celebrating the contemplation of abstract, theoretical science, Pythagoras as a person was devoted even more importantly to religious practices based upon assumptions about the immortality of the human soul. Indeed, he was committed to periodical ascetic observances, to a complex program of social and political reform, to sustained ethical reflection, to oratory and the making of music, to a physical regimen, and even to rigorous dietary prescriptions and prohibitions.

But Pythagoras’s holistic vision of the good life faded in time, and what had been a truly “philosophical” journey – that is, a quest for both practical wisdom and theoretical knowledge – gave way to quite a different pilgrimage, that is, to the search for abstract, apodictic knowledge and its promise of certainty. With the melding of Greek metaphysics and the Christian tradition, increasing reverence for the theoretically and spiritually abstract meant that in the fullness of time, practical wis-

dom, rhetoric, and the aesthetic were relegated to the downside of a prevailing dualism. *Philosophia*, “the love of wisdom,” had for all intents and purposes, become *philoepesteme*, “the love of apodictic knowledge.” “Knowledge” and “truth” became the vocabulary of systematic philosophy, and “wisdom” became and still remains a largely obsolete term in the philosophical corridors of the Western academy.

Richard Rorty is persuaded that this turn away from personal cultivation and the pursuit of wisdom has been a desirable advance in the Western philosophical narrative:

Philosophy in the West started off its career as an answer to the question “What is the good life for the human being?” To gain wisdom was to have learned the answer to that question. ... Most Western philosophers no longer try to be sages, and they are quite rightly suspicious of Eastern philosophers who suggest that wisdom is still the goal of philosophical study.¹⁰

Alfred North Whitehead was not so sure. He diagnoses what he calls the “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” as that error in reasoning committed when the formally abstracted is taken to be what is real and concrete.¹¹ Whitehead rehearses the history and the consequences of this “fatal virus” that has come to inhibit our understanding of the intrinsic, constitutive, and productive nature of relatedness. He accuses Epicurus, Plato, and Aristotle of being “unaware of the perils of abstraction” that render knowledge closed and complete, and that as such, precludes the possibility of attaining wisdom. According to Whitehead, “the history of thought” that he associates with these great men

... is a tragic mixture of vibrant disclosure and of deadening closure. The sense of penetration is lost in the certainty of completed knowledge. This dogmatism is the antichrist of learning. In the full concrete connection of things, the characters of the things connected enter into the character of the connectivity which joins them.¹²

What Whitehead means here by “the sense of penetration” that is compromised by assumptions about certain knowledge is the creative advance made possible by achieving productive relations among unique particulars. Indeed, it is this cultivated, creative application of our

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, “Philosophy and the Hybridization of Culture,” in Roger T. Ames and Peter D. Herschok, eds., *Educations and Their Purposes: A Conversation Among Cultures* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 2007), p. 48.

¹¹ See A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Free Press, 1929), p. 10.

¹² A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 58.

understanding of how things can best relate to each other that is the substance of wisdom.

Whitehead uses “friendship” as an example of a relationship that is constituted by the unique character of the two persons involved, where the continuity of a real meaningful friendship is a matter of vibrant disclosure in which two persons “appreciate” each other in the most “concrete” sense of this term: that is, they enlarge and increase the weight and measure of each other. Importantly, the realization of this vital relationship is not at the expense of their personal uniqueness and integrity, but indeed a consequence of it. Integrity means the persistent particularity of each friend, and the “becoming one together” that is at once the substance of a real relationship and a source of cosmic meaning. In the growth of this achieved friendship, it is ultimately the individual persons that become the abstraction, and it is the shared friendship that has become what is most concrete.¹³

This understanding of relationality as intrinsic, constitutive, and productive is what Whitehead means by an “aesthetic” as opposed to a “rational” order in the sense that any aesthetic achievement aspires to the fullest disclosure of the particular details in the totality of the achieved effect,¹⁴ in this case the “connectivity” of the friendship itself. If the assumption is that “knowledge” is to be found in the rational comprehension of some abstract and universal truth, then “wisdom” is to be found in the pragmatic, aesthetic project of harmonizing concrete relationships and optimizing their productivity. There is for Whitehead real wisdom to be found in this example of “true” friendship.

Whitehead criticizes the classical Greek aesthetic sensibility harshly for losing sight of the balance needed between the particular details and the achieved harmony.

The enjoyment of Greek art is always haunted by a longing for the details to exhibit some rugged independence apart from the oppressive harmony. In the greatest examples of any form of art, a miraculous balance is achieved. The whole displays its component parts, each with its own value enhanced; and the parts lead up to a whole, which is beyond themselves, yet not destructive of themselves.¹⁵

When applied to the human experience, disclosure in our relationships is what makes this family and community meaningful, or said more dynamically, is what makes these relationships a situated case of

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 60–63.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

“meaning making.” Any understanding of harmony that emphasizes an abstracted conformity at the expense of disclosing particularity in so doing sets limits on the possibility of attaining wisdom, and is thus quite literally, life-threatening. As Whitehead observes,

Our lives are passed in the experience of disclosure. As we lose this sense of disclosure, we are shedding that mode of functioning which is the soul. We are descending to mere conformity with the average of the past. Complete conformity means the loss of life. There remains the barren existence of inorganic nature.¹⁶

The point that Whitehead is making here is that the productive harmony achieved by optimizing relationships can only emerge out of the real, shared experience of always unique persons. As such, this emergent harmony – indeed, another name for wisdom – will always be multilateral rather than unilateral, correlative rather than univocal, a case of disclosure rather than closure. Wisdom is intelligent practice that reveals the appropriate balance between the concrete and local on the one hand, and a more abstract, sustained harmony on the other.

An important point to make here before we “essay adventure” into a very different Chinese philosophical tradition is that Whitehead is not advocating a replacement of the abstract by the concrete, but is rather recommending the search for an appropriate, complementary balance between them. After all, Pythagoras had an important contribution to make in mathematics that has served humankind well. Indeed, the teeter-totter between abstract and concrete rose in the opposite direction for Socrates in his attempt to temper the concreteness of a specious “wisdom” represented by the “will of the many” with an appeal to abstract principles as regulative ideals. What we are going to find is that, to the degree that the narrative of Western philosophy has stressed the abstract and impartial as the foundation of ethics, and to the degree that the narrative of Confucian philosophy has emphasized partiality and family feeling as its source of the moral life, they have much to say to each other.

CHINESE COSMOLOGY: IS WISDOM ENOUGH?

Grounded in Confucius’s exhortation to “study what is near at hand and aspire to what is lofty 下學而上達,” the Confucian philosophical project has from earliest times sustained a commitment to the local pursuit

¹⁶ Ibid.

of wisdom by taking personal cultivation in one's family relationships as the ultimate source of an emergent cosmic meaning.¹⁷

The *Great Learning* 大學 as the canonical text that sets the Confucian project asserts that it is only by committing oneself to a regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the comprehensive intellectual and moral understanding that will ultimately change the world. The central message of this terse yet comprehensive document is that while personal, familial, social, political, and indeed cosmic cultivation is ultimately coterminous and mutually entailing, it must always begin from a commitment to personal cultivation. Each person stands as a unique perspective within their family, community, polity, and so on, and through a dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, they are able bring the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within family and community, into clearer and more meaningful focus. That is, cultivating one's own person enlarges the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and in turn, this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of one's own personal cultivation. As the *Great Learning* enjoins, in this singularly important project of becoming morally consummate persons, we must get our priorities right.

There is the important and incidental in things and a beginning and an end in what we do. It is in realizing what should have priority that one gets near to the proper way... . From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy branches when the root is not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly. 物有本末, 事有終始. 知所先後則近道矣 ... 自天子以至庶人, 壹是皆以修身爲本. 其本亂而未治者否矣. 其所厚者薄而其所薄者厚, 未之有也.

The *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) version of this same text concludes this section by declaring that “knowing how” to cultivate one's person consummately is indeed “the utmost wisdom:”

This is called knowing the root; this is called the utmost wisdom. 此謂知本, 此謂知之至也.

¹⁷ *Analects* XIV/35; also VI/30.

OUR UNCOMMON ASSUMPTIONS

We can bring this distinction between the quest for abstract knowledge and the cultivation of wise practices into clearer focus by disambiguating commonsense assumptions about what it means “to be” or “to become” a person. The *Mencius*, selected by the thirteenth-century philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 as another one of the *Four Books* (the first being the *Great Learning* cited above), has been definitive in the articulation of a distinctively Confucian conception of what it means to become a moral person.

We might begin this reflection on Mencius’s notion of what is conventionally translated as “human nature” – *renxing* 人性 – by first registering the unadvertised, default presuppositions we might inadvertently bring to this text in our best attempts to understand it. Persistent and powerful philosophical ideas promoted largely by classical liberal thinkers such as Kant, Locke, and Mill have become the common currency of Western political philosophy, and have influenced the way in which many sinologists have come to their interpretation of the Mencian notion of *renxing*. The vocabulary of our liberal self-understanding – individualism, autonomy, equality, and freedom – often brings with it the humanistic assumption that the liberating of ready-made and omnicompetent individuals from numbing political strictures to pursue their own self-interest will guarantee a functional democracy. Freedom from constraint, so it goes, will allow unencumbered individuals if left alone in their untrammelled state of nature to “manifest” themselves as full-blown participants in a healthy political life. The language of spontaneity, originality, and genius belongs to the belief that an unconstrained humanity has the inborn assets to blossom of its own accord.

These assumptions have a long history. In worrying here over the prejudice of an entrenched commonsense, we might appeal to William James who insists that “our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors.”¹⁸ As the sometimes reluctant heirs to metaphysical realism as a shared commonsense, we find that sedimented into our language is the unannounced and unremarkable notion of repeatable universals subsisting in particular things that individuate things as individual “members” of a kind. And our logic of knowing has been to identify and grasp the intelligible universal as it is instantiated in the particular, and to thus be able to call the objects of knowledge by their own name: individually, specifically, and generically. While we seldom perform such an analysis self-consciously, we certainly

¹⁸ William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2000), p. 76.

do it practically as a matter of course in the way in which we operate in our ordinary experience. It is this long-established habit of thought that makes the quantitative “individuality” of human beings commonsensical in our everyday language of “*someone*” and “*everybody*.” Such is the persistence of old ideas, even in a world in which developments in science have encouraged us think about things differently.¹⁹

AN INTERPRETIVE CONTEXT: *QI* 氣 COSMOLOGY

The *qi* cosmology that is assumed in the *Mencius* is resistant to the ontology of extrinsically related simples and to a kind of epistemology in which a self-contained and solitary knower has isolated contact with external, individuated objects of knowledge. Instead, it begins from the wholeness of experience, and locates things relationally within their contexts. For Mencius, the disconnection of human beings from their social contexts by the enhanced negative freedom usually entailed by notions of “autonomy” would not only fail to produce persons, but would be fundamentally retrogressive. Borrowing Dewey’s language, “no man and no mind was ever emancipated merely by being left alone.”²⁰ Indeed, in this Confucian worldview, where there is only one person, there are no persons.²¹

The associative language of interdependence, intrinsic and constitutive relations, shared values, a common good, group responsibility, hierarchy, the inequality of difference, and socially contingent freedoms underlies the notion of community sponsored by this classical Chinese cosmology. The temporal, developmental process of interdependent human lives requiring discipline, training, effort, and opportunity, and the consequent historicist assumptions of an ever-evolving humanity commits it to a “made” rather than a “manifested” notion of human “becomings.”

To understand the alternative notion of human becomings as something “made,” then, we will need to explore and come to terms with three conditions of classical Chinese cosmology: collateral relationality, growth through realizing meaningful relations, and an achieved harmony among relations as the source of emergent distinctiveness that serves as an alternative principle of individuation.²²

¹⁹ The work in evolutionary biology of Richard Lewontin and Stephen Jay Gould is representative of this organismic development in science.

²⁰ *Essential Dewey*, p. 301.

²¹ Fingarette (1983) develops this point regarding human interdependence.

²² I have argued at length for this organic and evolutionary interpretation of the Mencian conception of human nature in various places, most recently in Roger T. Ames, “Mencius

THE COLLATERAL NATURE OF RELATIONALITY

If we begin from the wholeness of experience and the constitutive nature of relationality that is entailed by it, we would have to allow that all activity is contextual and thus necessarily collateral. Nothing happens on its own. Nothing happens unilaterally and in isolation. Breathing is a collaboration between lungs and air, seeing between eyes and sun, walking between legs and ground. Unsurprisingly, we find that all of the terms of art defining of a *qi* 氣 cosmology are collateral and transactionally collaborative: “the numinous and the human” (*tianren* 天人), “forming and functioning” (*tiyong* 體用), “flux and persistence” (*biantong* 變通), “the furthest ultimate and beyond” *taji wuji* 太極無極, *yinyang* 陰陽, *daode* 道德, “coherence and vital energy” (*liqi* 理氣), “determinacy and indeterminacy” (*wuyou* 無有), and so on. There can be no superordinate and independent “one” in this cosmology – no grounding, primordial, foundational principle, no single privileged order, no transcendent Creator God. Indeed, as Marcel Granet and most every other preeminent sinologist, Chinese and Western alike, has told us, “Chinese wisdom has no need for the idea of God.”²³

Just as we have to assume a synchronizing “music” (*yue* 樂) as context when we reference a pattern of distinguishing “ritualized roles and relations” (*li* 禮), so we have to assume “a matrix and manifold of circumstances” (*qing* 情) when we reference the unique and yet incipient “human tendencies” (*xing* 性). These terms *xingqing* 性情 are two nonanalytic ways of looking at the same thing, that is, at particularly and its context. It is this resolute collaterality – what Tang Junyi calls “the inseparability of one and many 一多不分觀” – that precludes the existence of metaphysically grounded natural kinds, and that requires that we begin instead from the always contextualized yet unique particular.²⁴ We generalize from particular instances rather than beginning from an essential formula. There can be no discrete, essential, innate, reduplicated nature independent of a thing’s specific context.

When we acknowledge that cosmological terms such as *xingqing* 性情 are collateral, and that they inform each other, we are really only allowing that the context of something must always be taken into account as integral to its meaning. That is, in order to know someone,

and a Process Notion of Human Nature,” in *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 2002).

²³ Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1934), p. 478.

²⁴ Tang Junyi 唐君毅, *Zhong Xi zhexue sixiang zhi bijiao lunwenji* 中西哲學思想之比較論文集 (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1988), pp. 16–17.

for example, we must understand them in relationship, and “call them by another name” – that is, as “brother,” as “auntie,” as “teacher.” It is only in knowing them in their roles and relationships with others that we really come to know them. This always conditional, “paronomastic” epistemology assumes that the source of meaning is productive relationships, and that these always changing relationships must themselves be the objects of knowledge and the source of wisdom.

While the familiar epistemic vocabulary for “calling something by its own name” – “comprehending, grasping, getting, understanding” – suggests finding the necessary essence behind the accidents and appearances, the vocabulary of “paronomastic knowing” in Chinese cosmology that requires “calling something by another name” is directed at mapping the relational context: to *lijie* 理解, to *liaojie* 瞭解, to *zhidao* 知道, to *tongda* 通達. For *xingqing* 性情, in addition to *xing* 性 that informs us of initial conditions, *qing* 情 provides us with the evolving, concrete, feeling-invested circumstances that in sum tell us what something really is. The perceived fact/value distinction between “circumstances” (*qingkuang* 情況 or *shiqing* 事情) and “feeling (*ganqing* 感情)” collapses, just as it does in an alternative principle of individuation in which we recognize the interdependence of the qualitative and the quantitative. That is, the putatively “objective” quantitative is simply an abstraction from the range of deferential relations that have made something distinctive. Who someone has become and really is (*qing* 情) as a distinguished individual is determined by the qualitative growth in the extensiveness (*zhida* 至大) and the intensiveness (*zhigang* 至剛) of their initial conditions (*xing* 性).

In this Confucian model of constitutive relations, then, we are not individuals who associate in community, but rather because we associate effectively in community we become distinguished as individuals; we do not have minds and therefore we speak with one another, but rather because we speak effectively with one another we become like-minded and thrive as a family; we do not have hearts and therefore are empathetic with one another, but rather because we feel effective empathy with one another we become a whole-hearted, self-regulating community.²⁵ Indeed, paronomasia – defining and realizing a world through associated living – is the Confucian way of making meaning in a communicating community.

²⁵ *Analects* 11/3 contains the gist of this Confucian philosophy as a shame or “face” culture: “The Master said: ‘Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng* 政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing* 刑), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observ-

MENCIUS AND “HUMAN BECOMINGS”:

GROWTH THROUGH REALIZING MEANINGFUL RELATIONS

What is at issue here is how to understand the Mencian conception of what it means to be human. Is *xing* 性 a speculative and retrospective appeal to isolatable causes, or alternatively, is it a prospective account that considers initial conditions as a basis from which the full aggregation of consequent action can be assayed? I will (continue to) argue that the *Mencius* is positing what might be for us a counterintuitive notion of a relationally constituted “human becoming” that requires an alternative gestalt to any persistent conceptions of an essential human nature. I will claim that *Mencius* offers us a processual, transactional, and radically contextual understanding of what it means to become human rather than any retrospective, essentialistic conception of the human being.

The Mencian *siduan* 四端 – the four “beginnings” – that are often misread especially (but not only) in Western interpretations of Mencius as an innate, essentialist understanding of human nature²⁶ – are

ing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.”

²⁶ Perhaps philosophers who regularly teach Leslie Stevenson’s *Seven Theories of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1974), recently revised to “Eleven Theories,” are less inclined to be overwhelmed by this cultural dominant, but our best interpreters of the Chinese tradition would seem to begin from this innatist understanding. See for example, Donald Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: U. Michigan P., 1979), pp. 19–20, 57, in commenting on *Zhongyong* 1: “This means that a person’s nature being so decreed, cannot be altered through human action; it is a ‘given’ that exists from birth. The Neo-Confucians also affirmed the fixed character of man’s essential nature ... The Chinese immediately associate the panhuman with the innate and the innate with the unchangeable.”

See also Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1985), pp. 175, 179, who appeals to this conventional interpretation in describing *xing* as “a ‘heavenly endowed’ or ‘heavenly ordained’ tendency, directionality, or potentiality of growth in the individual,” “an innate tendency toward growth or development in a given, predetermined direction.” Chad Hansen, *A Taoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1992), concerned that “most of Graham’s appreciative herd of Mencius worshipers still think that the problems of moral reform dictate Mencius’ status-quo solution (194),” argues that Mencius’ “innatist” interpretation of *xing* precludes the possibility of moral reform all together. Hansen insists that “The content – the detailed structure of the nature of the moral plant – is not the result of external factors. ... Morality is internal in this sense (174),” and hence “There is an absolutely correct thing to do in each situation (178)” because “Nature programs *xin* to generate that action (177).” Hansen summarizes his innatist interpretation in the following terms (187): “We could understand Mencius as arguing that humans have an entire innate moral grammar. That moral grammar enables them to process any morally neutral external structure and produce the morally right line of behavior. But moral rightness has no metaphysical basis other than its situational production by the heart. That would preserve Mencius’ claim that morality is metaphysically internal rather than external.” P. J. Ivanhoe, *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), acknowledges the merit of Angus Graham’s novel insistence that “*the proper course of development* defines human nature

certainly the initial conditions for becoming human, and in this sense, they are indeed native. Yet at the same time these “beginnings” are informed and performed by the primarily acquired conditions of a radically contextualized, relational, and emergent person where most of their active force and meaning in the first years of life derive not from the native “person” exclusive of family, but from the already developed family side of the collateral roles and relationships that constitute one. By collateral roles I mean that there are no mothers without children, no brothers without siblings, and certainly no babies without a family circle that in loving them, enables them to survive and grow. Indeed, the acquired habits of the family are primary in preserving and educating the life of the infant, and the native conditions of the infant are secondary and are largely dependent upon the interpretation and response of the family. *Renxing* derives largely from the family, and enables humans to grow and become distinctive as individuals and by extension, to become distinctively human.

The always unique person in this collateral sense – this daughter to this mother – does not “have” relationships, or “come into relationships,” but rather is constituted as irreducibly relational by those bonds that locate them as foci within the field of the big family. Indeed, any putative “individuality” is either an abstraction from these concrete native and primarily acquired conditions, or an achieved distinctiveness that makes one in one’s relations the identifiable object of deference for others. Similarly, any notion of “family” is an abstraction from these specific, particular persons who collectively and organically constitute a human matrix. Both particular persons and particular families are concrete configurations of particular relationships, and stand in a focus-field relationship to one another.

In the deweyan version of this relationally constituted person, there must be growth: “We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community.”²⁷ Similarly for Mencius, then, the “beginnings” are not pre-social, inborn qualities of all human beings. Rather, as generalized initial conditions, they are the largely dependent, incipient beginnings of associated living, and need to be cultivated to make us full, active participants in family and community. They describe the particular ethical, aesthetic, cognitive

(34),” but insists that morality is not “existential” in any sense of being dependent upon human choices, but rather is simply “the manifestation of human nature (33).” “Human nature has a specific *content* ... These different parts are arranged in a very special structure and the shape of this structure emerges as an individual matures (47).”

²⁷ *Essential Dewey*, p. 297.

and religious beginnings whence human beings emerge. The Confucian project, then, is to incorporate inchoate yet organically interdependent persons within the family nexus and transform them into eager participants in a flourishing, indeed spiritual, community.

MAKING SENSE OF “POTENTIAL”:
AN ACHIEVED HARMONY AMONG RELATIONS

We might describe this person-in-family another way. The “potential” for becoming human is not simply the first inklings, something inborn “within” the person exclusive of family relations. Rather the “potential” in fact emerges *pari passu* from out of the specific, contingent transactions that, in the fullness of time, eventuate in this particular person assuming increasing significance as *this* individual in *this* particular family. Thus, the only sense we can make of “potential” here is that, rather than being a “front loaded” given, it evolves with the ever-changing circumstances, and rather than being generic or universal, it is always unique to the relational person. As such, unlike an inherent and defining endowment, it can only be known post hoc as an ongoing summary of a particular narrative.²⁸ The argument, then, is that the preponderance of the content of “human nature” – *renxing* 人性 as “consummate conduct” (*ren* 仁), “appropriate conduct” (*yi* 義), “ritualized roles and relations” (*li* 禮), and “wisdom” (*zhi* 知) – is acquired, not given. *Xing* 性 is no more essential and inborn than is “becoming” consummately human (*ren* 仁). Both *renxing* and *ren* are a source and a product, beginning from tentative native conditions and emerging as the robust consequence of transactional living.

What makes the *xing* 性 most variable is the quality of the family into which one is born. If the family is a locus of morally strong, thriving association, much is available for investment in the incipient person. If the family is barren and troubled, it is a more difficult road for the emerging person. But even when Shun 舜 is born into the dysfunctional family of his father, “the Blind Man,” the model of the sage Yao 堯 is still available to him as a cultural resource that enables him to become a sage himself. Shun’s example is a fair demonstration that there are

²⁸ Ibid., p. 224: “The idea that potentialities are inherent and fixed by relation to a predetermined end was a product of a highly restricted state of technology.” Dewey would claim that Lincoln is not Lincoln independent of the circumstances of history, nor are the circumstances of history the making of Lincoln. Lincoln is a collaboration between organism and environment. “[P]otentialities cannot be known till after the interactions have occurred. There are at a given time unactualized potentialities in an individual because and in as far as there are in existence other things with which it has not as yet interacted.” (p. 223)

cultural assets broadly available for everyone to draw upon in aspiring to become a sage. It is the richness of context rather than simply individual endowment that warrants Mencius's claim (IIA.2) that:

Sages are no different in kind from the common people. Although of the same kind, they soar high above them. From the time when humans first appeared, there has never been anyone more magnificent than Confucius. 聖人之於民也，亦類也。出於其類，拔乎其萃，自生民以來，未有盛於孔子也。

In the *Mencius*, the familiar appeal to the horticultural and husbanding metaphors – knowing the “root,” for example – is often thought to reinforce the “essential” assumptions about crops and animals growing to become what they essentially are – they simply actualize their inherent potential. But what makes horticulture and husbanding different from hunting and gathering is precisely the dependence upon the contrived environment and upon concentrated human effort. In fact, without attention to cultivation and context, almost all apples will become compost; almost all acorns will become squirrels; almost all eggs will become omelets.

In Confucianism, as in Dewey, the process of communal development is driven by communication. To cite Dewey:

Everything which is distinctively human is learned, not native, even though it could not be learned without native structures which mark man off from other animals. To learn in a human way and to human effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities. To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community; one who understands its beliefs, desires, and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values.²⁹

The project is through effective communication to enchant the ordinary, to ritualize the routine, to invigorate the familiar, to inspire the everyday habits of life, and to commune in what is common. A major issue in effective communication that distinguishes virtuosic orchestration from manipulation, ethical exhortation from propaganda, liberating intimacy from an invasion of privacy, inspiration from sensationalism, is genuineness. Throughout classical Confucianism, the

²⁹ John J. McDermott, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (Chicago: U. Chicago P., 1981), pp. 626–27.

contention is that the proper and effective use of language (*zhengming* 正名) is basic to the flourishing community in all of its overlapping dimensions. “Proper” is what is appropriate and hence meaningful (*yi* 義), and is what guarantees “genuineness” as irreducibly relational.

We might take one of these Mencian “beginnings” as an example of how potential is “achieved” rather than “fulfilled:” “the observance of ritualized roles and relationships” (*li* 禮). On the side of an infant, born within the context of familial life forms, there is certainly a predisposition to develop increasingly into a responsive and hence responsible member of this social unit. But a distorting limitation in our thinking arises when we locate the discussion of *renxing* exclusively within the abstracted individual rather than within the concrete familial context. Regardless of how we describe a human nativity that is initially responsive to the institutions and structures of communal living, it is this articulated cultural locus of otherwise inchoate persons – an invested and meaningful body of beliefs, skills, interests, values, occupations – that is the predominant creative source out of which persons grow, and to which grown persons ultimately contribute their particular meanings.

Infants have a predisposition to communicate, but it is the world of cultural meanings into which they are born that provide them with the communicative resources necessary to participate effectively in their specific communities. If there is proof needed that the weight of *renxing* as defining of what is distinctively human lies in the concrete social situation of which the individual is a part rather than in the inchoate individual itself, we simply have to reference the vast diversity of human beings within the vastly diverse human cultures. On the other hand, negative proof would be the phenomena of remarkably similar (often urban) feral children that seem to be the inevitable product of disconnected, dysfunctional, and dislocated “human beings.”

“FAMILY” AS THE GOVERNING METAPHOR

Tang Junyi makes much of one profound difference between the Western and Chinese philosophical narratives, namely how Chinese culture is grounded in the everyday lives of the people and the natural deference that pervades family living.³⁰ For Tang Junyi, the meaning and value of family relations is not simply the primary ground of social order – it has cosmological and religious implications as well. Family bonds properly observed are the point of departure for understanding

³⁰ Tang Junyi, *Complete Works* (Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, 1988) 4, pp. 219–302.

that we each have moral responsibility for an expanding web of relations that reach far beyond our own localized selves.³¹ The family is the center of cosmic order, and as we see in the *Great Learning*, all order ripples out in concentric circles from and returns to nourish this primary source. In the *Zhongyong* – a canonical text included along with the *Great Learning* and the *Mencius* as another one of the *Four Books* – we are told explicitly that family feeling is the source of the civility fostered by our ritualized roles and institutions:

Consummate conduct 仁 means conducting oneself like a human being 人, wherein devotion to one's kin is most important. Appropriateness 義 means doing what is fitting 宜, wherein esteeming those of superior character is most important.³² The degree of devotion due different kin and the degree of esteem accorded those who are different in character is what gives rise to the observance of ritual propriety 禮.

Indeed, in deference to family as the putative ground of moral sensibilities, in our translation of this work we have challenged the conventional yet inappropriate rendering of the title “Zhongyong” as “Doctrine of the Mean” and instead used “Focusing the Familiar.” In contrast with the Chinese narrative, “family” as an institution has not been a significant inspiration for order within the broad sweep of Western philosophy and culture. We are indeed hard-pressed to find any family-centered philosophical notion that is comparable to and has had the vital importance that “family deference” (*xiao* 孝) has for Confucian philosophy. If we rehearse the contributions of our principal philosophers, few indeed invoke family as a productive model for organizing the human experience. Plato’s rejection of the family in the *Republic* and Aristotle’s denigration of the “household (*oikos*)” as a source of privation are fairly representative. Even John Dewey whose relational cosmology offers frequent analogy with Confucian assumptions, true to the mainstream of his own tradition, thinks China has to get past the traditional family system as a precondition for democratization.³³

Perhaps this disinterest in the always partial relations that emerge from family feeling is due to the centrality of impartiality as a neces-

³¹ Ibid., pp. 210–15.

³² Note the paronomastic definitions for *ren* and *yi*: that is, definition by semantic and phonetic association.

³³ John Dewey, *Middle Works*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University, 1976–83) 13, pp. 103, 230. See our forthcoming Rosemont and Ames, *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence*, for a discussion of the role of “family” in the Western philosophical narrative, and for the development of a theory of what we call “role ethics.”

sary condition for ethical conduct pervasive among those philosophers who would look to moral reasoning as the ultimate source of moral order. Such disinterest in family as a measure of order in our narrative contrasts starkly with the Confucian worldview in which family is *the* governing metaphor, and in which in fact *all* relationships are familial. The signature of Confucianism is that human morality is an expression of immediate family feeling – what Tang Junyi calls “the natural life-force” (*shengli* 生理).

At the very beginning of the *Analects* – the fourth then of the *Four Books* – we read:

It is a rare thing for someone who has a sense of family reverence and of fraternal deference 孝弟 to have a taste for defying authority. And it is unheard of for those who have no taste for defying authority to be keen on initiating rebellion. Exemplary persons concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way will grow therefrom. As for family reverence and fraternal deference, it is, I suspect, the root of consummate conduct 仁.

CONFUCIAN “ROLE ETHICS”

This fundamental importance of family as ground for moral sensibilities is sedimented into the modern Chinese language. In English we might say “*everybody* or *everyone*, please stand up,” using the “body” and its discreteness (“one”) as an indexical for “person,” therein reinforcing an assumption that the “indivisible” individual is the lowest unit in social organization. In Chinese, however, we would say “*dajia*, *qing zhanqilai* 大家請站起來,” literally, “*big family*, please stand up,” suggesting that family relations are constitutive of our persons, and that indeed it is our specific family rather than any single individual that is the lowest social unit. In the Chinese case, one might reason that I am certainly incarnate and live my life as an embodied individual, but at the same time I am Bonnie’s husband, and Austin’s father, and Henry’s collaborator, and Sor-hoon’s professor, and Gail’s next-door neighbor – and that these roles and relationships as I have grown them and they have grown me over a lifetime are arguably more real and enduring than my sometimes tenuous and increasingly disappointing body. In fact, for the distinguished person, roles and relations persist long after the inevitable demise of their physicality. Growth for Confucianism takes place not primarily in our physical persons, but in the opportunity for enchanted living that our roles and relationships provide each one of us.

There is an anecdote in the Confucian text *Xunzi* 荀子 that gives us a starting point for clarifying the difference between the unilateral integrity of the “human being” and the collaterality of the “human becoming” as embedded within the “big family.” As the story goes, Confucius, having developed the notion of *ren* 仁 himself as a major moral category in his philosophy, is holding court with his protégées on the meaning of this key term. His first student allows that *ren* is a kind of altruism meaning “to love others” – *airen* 愛人. Confucius is not particularly impressed. His second student reverses the direction, insisting that *ren* means setting a bar in one’s conduct that “causes others to love themselves” – *shiren aiji* 使人愛己. Better, says Confucius. Then his favorite student, Yan Hui takes his turn, stating flatly that *ren* means “self-loving” – *ziai* 自愛. Confucius is delighted.

Of course, among discrete human beings, Yan Hui’s seeming narcissism would hardly be a virtue. But the point in this passage is that with the collaterality of the “human becoming,” “self-loving” is neither the one-directional altruism of loving others nor the one-directional concern that inspires others to a quality of self-esteem. Indeed, such Yan Hui’s self-regarding love with its embedded sense of “me” is bi-directional, assuming intrinsic rather than extrinsic relations, and constitutive rather than contingent roles. “Self-loving” then is to cherish those specific roles and relationships that I am committed to nourishing as the very source and substance of my own personal realization – it is to love me in my relations with my spouse, my children, my students, my colleagues, and so on. It is quite literally “to love one’s neighbor as oneself.” In this model of what I am calling a “human becoming” as opposed to a “human being,” one’s personal realization and the realization of the thriving family are isomorphic and mutually entailing.

The underlying wisdom in this Confucian tradition is that family is the single human institution to which persons are most likely to give themselves utterly, and without remainder. To transform the world into a family, according to the Confucian sensibility, is to promote the model that will best accomplish the goal of getting the most out of your constitutive relations by applying the logic that when your neighbor does better, you do better. This sinic cosmology promises us a moral wisdom born of personal cultivation within the concrete institutions of family and community. The modern translation of “ethics” as “the study of the patterning of human relations” (*lunlixue* 倫理學) and the rendering of “morality” as “this focus and its field” (*daode* 道德) is indicative of a persistent assumption that morality is nothing other than the optimization of constitutive relations.

But this practical, virtuosic relationality that personal cultivation seeks to produce is grounded in concrete family feeling, and while offering us moral discipline and a liberating intimacy, suffers from the limitations of always belonging to a specific place and time. Such wisdom to break free of its parochialism and ethnocentrism needs to be guided by an impartiality and transparency that can only be derived from higher, more general regulative ideals.

THE SEARCH FOR IMPARTIALITY

We began from some cultural contrasts made available by excavating and developing further some insights into classical Chinese cosmology provided by Nathan Sivin. This contrast is not just interesting; it has immediate relevance for the contemporary world. My argument has been that the two traditions under discussion have much to say to each other. We must allow that there is a recognition within the Confucian tradition itself that an ethics of partiality is not enough. Beginning with the distinction between “appropriateness” (*yi* 義) and “personal advantage” (*li* 利) that we find as early as the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, the Confucian tradition too struggles with the seemingly necessary relationship between ethical conduct and impartiality. But rather than invoking some transcendental moral standard or the functioning of an impersonal reason as a strategy for claiming such impartiality – a strategy that is always hobbled by the contingencies of circumstances – the Confucian tradition remains true to the family metaphor. Impartiality is served practically by extending one’s range of concern from “the master’s-eye view” (*zhuguan* 主觀) that is self-serving personal advantage (*li* 利) to “the guest’s-eye view” (*keguan* 客觀) that seeks what is most appropriate for all concerned (*yi* 義). The Confucian formula of “putting oneself in the other’s place” (*shu* 恕) and then, having made a determination based on one’s own best judgment, “to do one’s best” (*zhong* 忠) is another variation on this attempt to broaden one’s range of concern in determining what is moral (*Analects* 1V/15).

But this need for standards of impartiality as a seeming necessary condition for a functioning civil society has been an obstacle to overcome in China’s recent process of democratization. In this respect, the Confucian appeal to family as the organizing metaphor for the human experience is not altogether benign. Some (including me) might suggest that family reverence (*xiao* 孝) might have an important role in grounding a real democracy, and might occasion a reconsideration of some of our own liberal assumptions. But it must also be admitted with

ROGER T. AMES

so much invested in intimate and informal familial relationships, the Confucian tradition has been slow to produce the formal, more “objective” institutions necessary to sustain a Confucian version of democracy, and when it has produced them, these same institutions are often compromised and ultimately eroded by the excessive intervention of personal relationships. China has in recent years been on a long march from “corruption (*fubai* 腐敗)” to civil society.

While the familiar appeal to universals might suffer from the ambiguity of practical applications, the Confucian attempt to extend consideration to all involved is handicapped by the need for more abstract regulative ideals such as fairness and justice that provide direction for what is a legitimate claim for consideration and inclusion. Indeed, as democracy emerges in China, the cure for the ills of Confucian democracy will increasingly be an appeal to rule of law and the formal institutions of democracy to contain the excesses of family feeling.