

Confucius the Shi: The Search for the Historical Confucius by Way of His Class Interest

Christopher Schwartz
La Salle University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Christopher () "Confucius the Shi: The Search for the Historical Confucius by Way of His Class Interest," *The Histories*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol7/iss2/4

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarship at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Histories by an authorized editor of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

IV.

Confucius the *Shi*:

The Search for the Historical Confucius by Way of His Class Interest

By Christopher Schwartz (Graduate Student)



INTRODUCTION

The historical Confucius was a member of the *Shi* (knightly) class. As such, he was subject to the socioeconomic transformations that affected his class during the Spring and Autumn Period—transformations that eventually evolved them into the basis for China's original intelligentsia, the *Rujia*. Therefore, I will focus upon the philosopher's social rank and profession as the key to understanding the man he may have actually been. Specifically, my question is whether Confucius's philosophy of "sagehood" or "authoritative personhood" (Pinyin: *ren*; Wade-Giles: *jen**) was reflective of his class conditions and interests, and if so, in which ways? I argue that his condition as a member of the *Shi* class was a crucial factor, for his class interest informed, if not led to, his philosophy of intersubjective "person building."

A statement of rationale is in order, for our Platonic heritage tends to bias we Westerners against the notion that fundamentally worldly concerns can and do motivate abstract moral inquiry. This bias results from our very vocabulary of "worldly" and "otherworldly," alongside related oppositionals "theory" and "practice," "being" and "non-being," and so on. Such vocabulary, imbued as it is with unconscious connotations of moral hierarchy, predisposes us to disdain the historical conditions of philosophical thought. "The dichotomy of theory and practice has so long been presupposed in our tradition that the philosophical categories that form the inventory of our speculative notions are themselves constructed with reference to this dichotomy."¹ Historical conditions such as class interest, ever morphing and contingent though they are, are as much at the root of the question, "What is the good life?" as any other motivating force.

In saying this, my intention is not to engage in Communist reductionism, or reductionism of any other variety. I am simply looking for a historical condition that could help elucidate the historical Confucius. I believe class interest is one such historical condition, and an important one. The salient point to keep in mind is that even if Confucius' motivation began with narrow class interest, his philosophy was such that any and all human beings could and should partake in its prescriptions.

Philosophical investigation is conditioned by historical circumstances. For example, no less a Western intellectual giant as Aristotle professed the aim of living to be the attainment of sufficient leisure time for the purpose of involving oneself in political activity without distractions (such as toiling for food or money). His vision of the good life was consistent with

¹ Hall, David L. and Ames, Roger T. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987. p. 38.

post-Homeric Greek culture.² The difference between Aristotle's vision of the good life and that of, say, Marx, is proof enough that the historicity of philosophy—that is, the place and time in which a philosopher is thinking—is just as important as the ideas themselves. More to the point, analyzing the socioeconomic and political contingencies underlying those ideas will tell us a great deal about the evolving nature of humanity's quest to answer the riddle of existence.

My procedure will be as follows:

(1) I will meditate upon the difficult nature of the extant sources and establish my own position with regards to which evidence to use.

(2) I will then propose a historiography for the era and use it to explicate the situation in China during the Axial Age.

And finally, (3) I will explain the connection between *Shi* and the *Rujia* via the philosophy and person of Confucius.

I identify three ironies in the history of Confucius and the *Shi*:

(A) The *Rujia* were the result of the *Shi*'s adaptation to "feudal" circumstances.

(B) This adaptation was both necessitated and aided by the rivalries within the leadership of the feudal aristocracy.

And, (C) the connection between *Shi* and the *Rujia* was prefigured by the philosophy and person of Confucius:

(C-a) *Defining "ren" as an educational model of the self*: Confucian *ren* was fundamentally a philosophy of education. It thus prefigured the *Shi*'s turn to education as their main vocation during the Warring States Period.

And, (C-b) *the life of Confucius as prototype for the Rujia*: Confucian *ren* reflected the *Shi*'s state of intense socioeconomic and compositional fluidity. More importantly, it was symptomatic of larger historical energies sweeping through ancient Chinese history. As such, it also provided an ideological framework suitable for the *Shi* to adapt to the disruptive realities of the feudal order.

I will address Ironies (A) and (B) in the section entitled, "Distinguishing the *Shi* from the *Rujia*," and Irony (C) in the section entitled, "*Ren* and the *Shi*." The foundation for my analysis of Confucius is the exegesis of David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames in *Thinking Through Confucius*. Like them, my perspective will be macroscopic. However, where they ask how may we compare, contrast, and cross-fertilize the intellectual history of the West with original Confucian philosophy? I ask what are the major underlying patterns or themes of his era, and how do these relate to the *Shi* and the historical Confucius? Their aim is to get inside the head of Confucius and see the West through his eyes. My aim is to get inside the world of Confucius to get inside his head.

My position is that classical China underwent a monumental shift toward social and political consolidation with heavy aspects of centralization. The loose agrarian affiliations of the immediate post-Western Zhou period evolved into organized "fiefdoms" with urban centers of political power and culture. Those fiefdoms, in turn, evolved (and in evolving, succumbed to) the Qin Empire. This transition was itself symptomatic of a massive process seen all throughout

² Even after Socrates, ancient Greek values were distinctly Mycenaean. Athenian citizenship retained a conception of the good (*agathos*) from the Homeric past, specifically, that a good man was he who acquired enough resources to preserve or augment his household. The pre-Socratic conception of *eudaimonia* ("the good life," "the felicitous existence"), which persisted right through the Peloponnesian War and beyond, consisted of inheriting an estate prosperous enough to render a man as nearly self-sufficient as possible. The goal of self-sufficiency was to become free enough to devote himself to politics, that is, the management and cultivation of the state.

the Axial Age civilizations, and I adopt the term “rectification,” from the Confucian expression *zheng ming* (Wade-Giles: *cheng ming**, translated by Legge: “rectification of names”; Hall-Ames: “ordering names” — *An.* 13:3), to explicate its patterns and themes as it occurred in China. This massive “rectificational” sweep toward centralized consolidation was particularly manifest in ancient Chinese society in Confucian philosophy. Thus, in answering my question, I must ask the additional questions:

(1) What was the class structure of the Spring and Autumn Period?

And, (2) how did the Confucian personality emerge from that structure?”

Finding answers will require serious revisionism on my part. Revisionism in this case is defined as a concerted act of stepping outside the constraints of traditional Chinese historiography and hagiography, and even previous Western interpretations, and attempting to approach my subject mind-to-mind. In doing so, I am acting upon the assumption that real people, even monks, exist in communities, and are as much defined by their communities as their communities are defined by them. Essentially, I will be trying to approach my subject through a viewpoint consistent with the Confucian vision of the human person as a perpetual act (*li*) of self-recreation and signification (*yi*), and in doing so apply the highest standard of Confucianism to Confucius himself. “It may be a mistake to think of him as finding his message first and attracting disciples afterwards... his disciples learn more from his, as from an inspiring schoolmaster, much more than is on the curriculum,”³ and so, too, will we.

ANSWERS FROM THE *ANALECTS*

Though archeology has uncovered a wealth of data on ancient China, conditions are still such in the subject area of the ancient world that historians remain reliant upon texts, scant and flawed though these are. When I first set about writing this essay, I intended to recount the life of Confucius. I now realize that to do so would be folly, for I have only a limited amount of time and ink to spend here. It would be more efficacious for you and I that I stay focused upon my central question. In order to reconstruct his biography in any meaningful detail, I would have to go about the arduous task of collating and digesting for you the vast literary materials which identify him as their author.

For the following reasons, I have chosen the *Analects* to be my source:

(A) It appears that the *Analects* were written over a period of 30 to 50 years, beginning in the Spring and Autumn Period and finishing either during or after the Warring States Period. James Legge believed, “It is best to rest in the general conclusion, that it was compiled by the disciples of the disciples of the sage, making free use of the written memorials concerning him which they had received, and the oral statements which they had heard, from their several masters.”⁴ Modern textual and philological evidence has confirmed that the *Analects* were almost certainly not the direct work of Confucius’ own pen, but of someone or some group intimately influenced by him.

And, (B) according to Benjamin Schwartz, “the consensus among modern scholars is that our most reliable source for the early Confucian school, if not for the vision of the Master

³ Graham, A.C. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1989. p. 10. See also: the introduction to Graham, A.C. *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1986. pp. 1-6.

⁴ Legge, James. *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean. Chinese Text: Translation with Exegetical Notes and Dictionary of all Characters*. New York City: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971. p. 16.

himself, is the collection of brief dialogues and gnomic utterances in the collection called in Chinese the *Lun-yu* [*Analects*].⁵

Though modern scholars think highly of the *Analects*' usefulness, Michael Nylan points out that for a significant period of time the text was neglected, remarkably by the Chinese themselves.

Today, a student seeking to understand the basic tenets of Confucius and Confucianism would most likely turn to the *Analects*, [but] until relatively late in the history of Confucian classicism, during the Sui-Tang period (581-907), the *Analects* was considered far less important as a source of Confucius's ideas than the Five Classics, especially the *Chunqiu* or *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a text widely believed to have been written by Confucius.⁶

Scriptural status was awarded to the Five Classics, not the *Analects*. This situation was reversed with the introduction of Song thinker Zhu Xi's Cheng-Zhu school, which treated the Five Classics "on the model of anthologies, whose selection might vary in worth," and their shifted concentration to the *Analects*.⁷ The Cheng-Zhu school "claimed to have rediscovered an inner-oriented hermeneutics devoted more to questions of human nature than the old Han learning [the Five Classics-based education], which had sought to define shared patterns of sympathetic interaction operating in the political, social, and cosmic realms."⁸ Analogous time-wise to the Scholasticism going on in Europe, this change in focus had far-reaching ramifications for Chinese history: "[a] dramatic turn that Chinese thought took during the Song dynasty, which represented a virtual reassessment and reinvention of the Confucian message, as sweeping in its own way as the Protestant Reformation of Catholicism."⁹

Legge argued that the "books" (or chapters) comprising the *Analects* are grouped by individual themes or common characters, though the chapters are not arranged in any way so as to carry a continuous train of thought or idea.¹⁰ For the most part, Legge's observation carries to today. Dissenting voices do exist. One comes from E. Bruce and Taeko Brooks, who suggest an alternative interpretation of the chapters' organization based upon patterns of language usage within the text. In their view the received text is heavily accreted by interpolations from later schools.¹¹ Schwartz identifies other likeminded scholars, notably Tsuda Sokichi, "a radical and iconoclastic critic of the text," who "finds the work so shot through with contradictions and anachronisms that it is unusable as a source of the thought of Confucius."¹² For their part, Hall and Ames do not make the claim that the historical Confucius is to be solely or necessarily found in the *Analects*. Rather, their goal is "to explicate the thought of Confucius *as it appears in the Analects*"¹³ (my italics). However, I find their exegesis to be so convincing in its humanity and cogency as to lead me to believe that the mind they describe as inhabiting the *Analects* must in

⁵ Schwartz, Benjamin I. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985. p. 61.

⁶ Nylan, Michael. *The Five "Confucian" Classics*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001. p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Legge, *Confucius*, pp. 12-13.

¹¹ See: Brooks, E. Bruce and Taeko. *The Original Analects*. New York City: Columbia University Press, 2001.

¹² Schwartz, *Thought in Ancient China*, p. 61.

¹³ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 11.

fact be the mind of the man himself. Even were it not Confucius himself but some anonymous philosopher or a "corporate personality"¹⁴ of several different thinkers, the name has been so long attached to this philosopher or philosophers that pushing that distinction very far would be nonsensical.

For a Western mind constructed upon the discursive tradition founded by the ancient Greeks, the haphazard arrangement of the chapters both within themselves and between each other indicates a want of reasoning in Confucius. However, Bryan van Norden counters,

...as anyone who has been through an introductory philosophy class knows, recognizing and reconstructing an argument in a piece of text is a far from straightforward matter. One of the reasons for this is that most arguments in ordinary language are enthymemic. That is, the conclusion, or some of the premises, are not stated explicitly. It may have been superfluous to state the implied conclusion or premises for the original audience, to whom they would have been obvious. But to an audience separated from the original author by gulfs of culture and time, the loss of background knowledge of key premises may make even the most powerful argument seem a tangle of sophistries and non-sequiturs.¹⁵

To this I add my own argument: Confucius was in fact a philosopher, as much as by Western standards (*phila+sophia*) as by Chinese (*zhejia*).

(A) If you and I minimally define "philosophy" as the "love" and/or "pursuit of wisdom," then the Master certainly meets the criteria. He is fundamentally concerned with questions which can be re-constructed into English as, "What is the good life?" and "What must I do to be good?" as well as definitions of justice, virtue, and truth, all of which are the key concerns of ethical philosophy. "The Chinese compound that most frequently translates *ethics* is *dao-de* [Pinyin: *tau-te*; translated by Hansen: 'way-virtue'; Hall-Ames: 'road-focus']. Classical thinkers used the component terms separately through most of the period... [The] compounding accompanies the emergence of a dominant position. Any complete ethical stance requires both *dao* and *de*."¹⁶ The connotations may be different—"Dao differs from duty ethics in not having sentential form. It also lacks the axiomatic or theoretical structure of Western systems. *Dao* guides discourse in general"¹⁷ and "*De* does not simply consist in favorable attitudes, feelings, or motivations. It is a hypothetical structure of dispositions essential to the proper performance of any *dao*. It is the ability to recognize, interpret, and perform a *dao*"¹⁸—but at base we're dealing with the same thing: "This unfamiliar conceptual structure with its background assumptions generates a fresh dynamic. The dominant position... is that any plausible ethical stance requires both *dao* and *de*. The reasons, however, are not the familiar Western points that we must do moral actions 'for the right reasons' or 'with the right attitude.' We require *de* to vouch safe correct performance of a *dao*."¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁵ van Norden, Bryan. "What Should Western Philosophy Learn from Chinese Philosophy?" in Ivanhoe, Philip J., ed. *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and his Critics*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996. p. 235.

¹⁶ Hansen, C. "Duty and Virtue" in Ivanhoe, Philip J., ed. *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and his Critics*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996. p. 175.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 175.

(B) Even if we include in our definition of philosophy the requirement of rational demonstration, Confucius still passes muster. “It is commonplace that even in the Axial Age rational demonstration had a much smaller place in Chinese than in Greek thought... [The] analysis of Chinese concepts, identification of technical terms, uncovering of the presuppositions behind apparent gaps in argument, not to mention the grammar of the language itself, has revealed that most of the ancient Chinese thinkers are very much more rational than they used to look.”²⁰ Hall and Ames explain,

The dynamics of “thinking” in Confucius can be explicated as a continuing interplay among “learning” [Pinyin: *xue*; Wade-Giles: *hsüeh*] and “reflecting” [Pinyin: *si*; Wade-Giles: *ssu, szu*], the consequence of which is “realizing” [Pinyin: *zhi*; Wade-Giles: *chih*] through “living up to one’s word” [Pinyin: *xin*; Wade-Giles: *hsin**]. The “learning”/“reflecting” polarity might be roughly construed as the functional equivalent of reasoning in the dominant Western paradigm, “realizing” would correspond to “knowing,” and “living up to one’s word” would correspond to at least one meaning of “truth.” [...] Thinking for Confucius is not to be understood as a process of abstract reasoning, but is fundamentally *performative* in that it is an activity whose immediate consequence is the achievement of a practical result. Far from being a means for lifting oneself out of the world of experience, thinking for Confucius is fundamentally integrative, a profoundly concrete activity which seeks to maximize the potential of the existing possibilities and the contributing conditions. Thus, in place of any activity that merely assesses an objective set of facts and/or values, thinking for Confucius is *actualizing or realizing* the meaningfulness of the world.²¹ [Italics in original.]

Thus, in his eudaemonist concerns and his deployment of rationality—something revolutionary for his time and place, regardless of whether he realized it or not—Confucius was very much an Axial Age thinker, equal to Socrates.

THE AXIAL AGE IN CHINA

The Axial Age was a global phenomenon of human development first identified by Karl Jaspers. In his book, *The Origin and Goal of History*, he points out a number of key thinkers in ancient Greece, the Middle East, India, and China, during the time span 800-200 BCE, who shared strikingly similar intellectual projects that profoundly influenced the history’s classical civilizations. A.C. Graham writes, “China, like other civilizations of the Old World, draws its basic ideas from [this] time of awakening... The creative thinking of that era seems everywhere to have sprung up amid the variety and instability of competing states; in China it begins towards 500 BCE, in a time of political disunion, and may be judged to lose its impetus with the reunification of the empire in 221 BC.”²² My position is that Graham, who is working with a traditional Chinese historiography that began with the *Tso Chuan*, is correct in the overall picture he paints, but incorrect in certain details: the Spring and Autumn Period was not a “disunity,” nor was the founding of the Qin Empire a “reunification,” but rather that the two represented phases in a monumental sweep toward centralized consolidation.

Spring and Autumn society was the result of the transition ancient China underwent from

²⁰ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 7. Note his reflection on p. 8.

²¹ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, pp. 43-44.

²² Graham, *Disputers*, p. 31.

the advanced chieftainships of the Xia/Shang/Western Zhou “sage-kingdoms” era to Qin/Han monarchism via Eastern Zhou *Fengjian* (“feudalism”).²³ I call this transition the process of “rectification.” My usage of the term is derived from the Confucian concept *zheng ming*. The concept makes its first explicit appearance in the famous passage *An*. 13:3, and is tacitly referred to throughout the text, for example “Is it a ritual goblet that is not a ritual goblet really a ritual goblet? Is it a ritual goblet?” (*An*. 6:25) and “Duke Ching of Ch’i asked Confucius about effecting sociopolitical order, and Confucius replied, ‘The ruler ought to be ruler, the subject subject, the father father and son son’” (*An*. 12:11). Hall and Ames dispute the standard translation of “rectification of names” and propose “ordering names” as more fitting to the spirit of the text:

In so construing this concept... we must be give full account to the performative force of naming. The prevailing interpretation of ordering names as the ‘rectification of names’ fails to do so. It tends to treat names in terms of some theoretical schema that has been inherited out of the tradition, and that can be hypostatized and hence rectified by behaviors that satisfy the standing theoretical construct. [...] The standard interpretation of *zheng ming* has it that there is an established definition—characteristics and function—of what it means to be a ritual goblet or a ruler, and that any breach between theoretical definition and actual performance is a source of disorder.²⁴

²³ Were the views of established historiography, both traditional Chinese and Western, accurate, we should understand the three dynasties as actually having been *kingdoms* at all. However, archeological evidence shows that, at best, they weren’t so much monarchies as highly evolved agrarian chieftainships, and that the peace and stability they established was far from tranquil and absolute—in fact, the later Spring and Autumn feudalism seems its natural, logical outgrowth, not its Frankensteinian mutation. Even the traditional chronology is deceptive. Schwartz points out (*Thought in Ancient China*, p. 16) that the sage-kingdoms “may not have simply been sequential in time, but may have existed for long periods as ‘overlapping entities.’ Here, again, there may have been no one pristine state originating at one center but the simultaneous evolution of several more or less developed ‘state formations’ over a wide area.”

How can we account for the traditional perspective? One explanation is that it was the result of the political and ideological interests of the Han dynasty. Since scholarship and religious sensibility have long been entwined in China, insight can be gained by looking at the editorial history behind the Five Classics. Nylan points out (*Classics*, pp. 42 and 47), “The very concept of a sacred canon or scripture had spring from the imperial desire to impose tighter connections between the central state and local traditions of scholarship.” Just as the Western Zhou regime probably appropriated certain Shang concepts (notably, the *tian ming*, “mandate of heaven”) to give itself legitimacy, so too did the Han Empire appropriate Confucius for its own purposes. Part of that process of appropriation was to establish continuity between the sage-kingdoms and themselves. Logically, then, the interceding period of the Eastern Zhou had to be derided as an era of decay and catastrophic detour. Ironically, the historiographers of the next dynasty repeated this process for the Han, and so too for the next, and on and on in various forms. To some extent, even the Communists utilized this technique in the 20th Century.

I do not believe the explanation is so simple. Rather than *invention*, the dynastic historiographers were actually tapping into a sentiment already widespread by the end of the Warring States Period, namely, a profound nostalgia for an idealized past age of peace and tranquility. The destruction of the Western Zhou capital in the Eleventh or Tenth Centuries BCE created the bundle of memories, trauma, and experiences that helped form Chinese identity. Clearly, then, the traditional historiography was molded by its contemporary circumstances: just as the Medieval European painters rendered Jerusalem a French or German town, so too do the imperial historians render the Chinese past into something more Han than Zhou. As with their Western counterparts, for the dynastic historiographers the past was not passive, a mere slag of plastic that they shape, but was itself active, a reagent in their imaginative process.

²⁴ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 270.

Though Confucius obviously evinced a profound awe for the institutions of the past, Hall and Ames argue that he did not believe a Xerox reconstruction of the sage-kingdoms world and culture would have actually sufficed. “Our interpretation of ‘ordering names’ argues against the priority of formal constructions by rejecting the suggestion that Confucius simply uses names reductionistically to organize the process of human experience into some preestablished pattern that is held to define the meaning, value and purpose of life.”²⁵ In Confucius’ mind, then, salvation was to be found in creatively re-interpreting and re-applying the Western Zhou world and culture to present circumstances. “For Confucius [the] doctrine of ‘ordering names’ is the starting point of sociopolitical order.”²⁶

I use the term with purposeful irony:

(A) On the one hand, from the viewpoint of traditional Chinese historiography and Western interpreters like Graham, the transition of the Eastern Zhou era would logically represent a gradual process of “matching theory with practice,” “practicing what you preach,” etc. The Eastern Zhou regime proclaimed themselves an *empire*, but the reality of their government was the contrary. According to this perspective, it was not until the Qin and the Han dynasties when true imperialism was (re)attained—in other words, a “*rectification of names*” on a grand scale.

And, (B) on the other hand, what happened during the Eastern Zhou era was consistent with the Hall and Ames interpretation of *zheng ming*: “A full explanation of Confucius’ doctrine of ‘ordering names,’ in addition to reflecting his appreciation for the way in which language conveys past realizations of the world, must provide some account of how naming can be used creatively to realize new worlds appropriate to emerging circumstances.”²⁷ The vying aristocrats and warlords of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, and even the future Yellow Emperor himself, were unknowingly realizing a new world from their circumstances, namely, Imperial China—an “*ordering of names*” on a grander, subtler, profounder scale.

There is a catch: Chinese civilizational “rectification” is one of those historical processes, like its contemporary counterpart synoecism in ancient Greece, or broader processes like technological invention and the spread of religious ideas, that, once begun, is pulled by its own logic toward a final end—centralized consolidation. Atoms are crushed together into molecules, and molecules stitched together into tissue, and tissues compiled into organs, and organs connected into physiological systems, and physiological systems arranged into bodies, all brought about by the simple, necessary, and nearly invisible romance of positive and negative charges at the subatomic level. So, too, for ancient China: the very conditions that gave birth to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States fiefdoms also brought about their absorption into the Qin Empire. These conditions were the ambitions of elites, the need to amass, control, and safeguard resources and trade routes, and the need to regulate class conflict within ducal domains, all within the framework of *Fengjian* feudalism.

Rectification is therefore neither a symptom of the gradual “collapse” of the Zhou regime, nor of a long and grueling recovery. Rather, rectification itself *is* the change from the Zhou to the Qin, and all other things from the era, even war and rationalism, are its symptoms. It is a human process resulting from the expression of certain human traits when put under certain geo-psychological conditions. Events from the era can all be re-understood within this interpretation. The Zhou royal court’s flight eastward both threatened and spurred on

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

rectification, and the Spring and Autumn Period injected more energy into the process—Confucius' grandfather, the warrior Ho, fought for something far greater than he ever realized. The catastrophic contest between the fiefdoms was neither a detour from the process, as Confucius and his peers unconsciously interpreted it, nor the decline and calamitous fall of imperialism, as scholars such as Graham interpret it. Instead, the Warring States Period can be re-constructed as an intermediary step between chieftainship and empire. The same is true for the fiefdoms themselves.

According to this interpretation, the Spring and Autumn Period was a “chapter” in the epic of the geographical and psychological expansion of the Zhou world toward its peripheries. While the direction of their expansion was rectificational, the engine driving this movement was a cultural trilectic very conspicuous within Chinese history:

(A) The interaction of the “civilized” fiefdoms in the Yellow River interior with the “barbarians” beyond the frontier and the “semi-barbarian” societies which arose between them.

(B) The gradual absorption of the “barbarians” and “semi-barbarians” into the *Zhongguo* (“Central States”) core cluster.

And, (C) the cluster's continual re-creation as a consequence of their absorption.

The Spring and Autumn chapter of this epic, then, is what archeological and linguistic evidence suggests was an aggregation of several independent ethnicities and cultures in the region into a large, multi-fiefdom, multicultural system of *Fengjian* feudalism and, to some extent, the *Ba* (“hegemony”) system of feudal alliances.²⁸

An advisory on the use of the term “feudal”: Schwartz explains,

The fact that many Western scholars have described the major features of the system as “feudal” encourages doubt. Our own associations with this troublesome word is generally that of the disintegration of power rather than of stability and order. It suggests fragmentation and strife... [Yet] if we define the term in a minimalist “system of government in which a ruler delegates limited sovereignty over portions of his territory to vassals,” we may apply it to the early Chou [sic] situation. We must simply add the commentary that feudalism presupposes the notion of an inclusive political framework in which a superior ruler confers power from above and that if the term is applied to China, we must stress that the “vassals” on whom the power is conferred are very often members of the royal lineage. Conceiving of feudalism in this simple way, one may disassociate it completely from the notion of a preexistent highly centralized state in disintegration.²⁹

Schwartz's definition of “feudalism” is consistent with my theory of rectification. It also helps resolve the puzzle of why ancient Chinese feudalism instigated the development of professional intellectuals, whereas medieval European and Middle Eastern feudalism stifled it. The answer is that latter nearly put society into a kind of hypostasis, in China it dislocated society, and thus fostered the type of conditions necessary for professional intellectuals:

²⁸ Schwartz, *Thought in Ancient China*, p. 16

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42 and 44: “The high officials of the royal court are often ‘feudal lords.’ The names of offices are vague and fluctuating. The holders of office do not necessarily perform the functions associated with their titles. Offices usually are hereditary within what might be called the lower official nobility [*Shi*]. The remuneration of office holders was the reward of appanages, which while not necessarily hereditary in principle often became hereditary in practice.”

Historically, creativity has been most in evidence under two prevailing conditions. There is a creativity that is sponsored by a sense of strength and authority in the state where the country feels that it can extend itself into parallel traditions and entertain external influences without threatening its cultural stability. There is also a creativity in periods such as that of the Warring States where conditions are in such turmoil that there is no cultural edifice to resist foreign influence. These influences infiltrate the society to be grafted onto the culture as the tradition again rises and reasserts itself.³⁰

The evacuation of the Zhou regime eastward—the event which terminated the era of the “sage-kingdoms” and began the rectificational era of the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods—precipitated the formation of feudalism, which itself was cause and consequence of the Axial Age in China. Additionally, the *Ba* hegemon was the institutional and conceptual forerunner of the oncoming Qin Empire. Together, these two institutions reached their climax in the Warring States Period, and gave violent birth to Imperial China. Yet, when one takes the long view of history, “casting a long glance backward” as it were, their imperial future was strongly hinted at during the Spring and Autumn Period. Even then, the main culprit was always feudalism, for the hegemony arose as a response to it.

It is ironic that feudalism had been intended to maintain order, when in reality the system gave expression to the forces of disruption, namely, the selfishness and unbridled ambitions of the aristocracy. The result was war of ever escalating scope and brutality. The fiefdoms’ ceaseless conflicts reached several fever pitches before finally petering out: the Battles of Chengpu, Bi, and Yanling, recorded in the *Tso Chuan*; the devastating conflict between the “Three Jins” in the opening phase of the Warring States Period; and the century-long contest between Qi and Qin that closed the Eastern Zhou era. Confucius’ lifetime happened to coincide with a period of relative peace—In 579 BCE the fiefdoms Qi, Qin, Jin, and Chu finally met for a disarmament conference in 579 BCE, and in 546 BCE Jin and Chu signed a second truce-but even then small wars continued to erupt. Two notable conflicts from the lifetime of Confucius were a civil war in Wei, during which a favorite disciple, Tsze-lu, was slain, and a major confrontation in the coastal zone between the fiefdoms Wu and Yue. Indeed, the Wu-Yue conflict, which occurred in the waning years of the Master’s life, was prophetic: in style and substance it was a prototype for the maelstroms of the Warring States Period. Yet, amidst all this death, important conditions were created that formed and forged the character of, the Chinese’s original intelligentsia, the *Rujia*.

DISTINGUISHING THE *SHI* FROM THE *RUJIA*

There is no term for “Confucian” or “Confucianism” in Chinese. The terms we find instead is *Ru* and *Rujia*, used in ancient texts to describe the self-identified followers of Confucius, or more precisely, those committed to the “Way” of ethical behavior that they believed originated with the sage-kingdoms and which was “transmitted” by the Master. However, the term was also used to describe a type of intellectual who made the study of antiquity his profession: a classicist. In Warring States and Han texts a distinction is made between “ethically-minded” and “career-minded” *Ru*, but in none of the texts from any period are the two fundamental senses of the term (*Ru*-philosopher and *Ru*-classicist) ever separated. Two questions arise:

³⁰ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 312.

(1) Did “*Ru*” identify the same type of professional, or conflate two different types?
And, (2) who were the *Ru*?

Question (1): What type of professional(s) did the term “Ru” signify?

Philology supports the argument that the term *Ru* was used to identify the same type of professional. Because *Ru* in its original usage meant “soft,” “first applied perhaps by men who rule and fight to the softies who merely teach” quips Graham,³¹ the *Ru*-classicists probably understood the act of studying to also be the act of teaching. Teaching in this sense meant “thinking” as described by Hall and Ames: learning and reflection toward realization, which was both intellectual cognition and “living up to one’s word.” Here we find a crucial overlap between *Ru*-classicist and *Ru*-philosopher which indicates that the original “Confucians”—the philosophers who subscribed to the “Way of Antiquity”—were the classicists. The later post-Han distinction was likely not a division between two entirely professional types as it was between different personality types within the same profession.

The *Rujia* were therefore philosophers who operated within a classical framework and who were *simultaneously* classicists who went about their study philosophically. In fact, their self-conception possessed no distinction between classicist and philosopher—to have been a classicist was also to have been a philosopher. Their prototype was Confucius, for like him, these professional intellectuals understood their mission to be the “transmission” (re-creation)³² of the customs, values, and ethics of the sage-kingdoms.

Whereas in imperial times, the pronounced aspect of the *Ru* mission was civil service, in pre-imperial times the pronounced aspect was education. “The rise of Confucianism [*Rujia*] might then be seen as a pervasion of the class of teachers, who discover through Confucius the ‘one thread’ uniting the diverse disciples [the Six Arts and Five Classics] which they teach...” explains Graham.³³ “If you wanted your son to have a more than practical education you always had to send him to the [*Ru*], however you might grumble that they were stuffing the lad’s head with a lot of nonsense.”³⁴

Question (2): Who were the Ru?

To re-state, I perceive three ironies:

(A) The *Ru* were the result of the *Shi*’s adaptation to feudal circumstances.

(B) This adaptation was both necessitated and aided by the rivalries within the leadership of the feudal aristocracy.

And, (C) the connection between *Shi* and the *Rujia* was prefigured by the philosophy and person of Confucius.

³¹ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 31.

³² Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 25: “one must avoid the temptation to interpret Confucius’ thought from a strictly historical rather than a traditional perspective [i.e., agency-centered vs. continuity-centered perspective]. To do so would make of him an originator, a ‘great man,’ instead of the ‘transmitter’ that he understood himself to be. On the other hand, unless one remains sensitive to the meaning of creativity in Confucianism, the understanding of Confucius as a transmitter of tradition will lead one to mistake him for a mere transmitter, and not the sage that he indeed is.” A useful metaphor would be a clay pot. When a pot is tipped and pours out its contents, say, water, it cannot be said that the pot created the water; rather, it held it for a period of time. However, at the chemical level, the water has been irrevocably changed by its stay in the pot, for trace elements of the clay have now been mixed into it.

³³ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

I will now address Ironies (A) and (B) in order to answer the question, “Who were the *Ru*?” I will address Irony (C) in the next section, “*Ren* and the *Shi*.”

The original demographic of the *Ru* arose from the *Shi*. The *Shi* were a “protobureaucratic”³⁵ element within the nobility who “composed and handled an impressive array of documents, were experts in the protocols of ritual, ceremonial, and penal law, and manned the lower ranks of the military organization.”³⁶ Essentially, they were analogous to the Athenian *Hippae*. Think of Xenophon: the *Hippae* were not hoplites (citizen-soldiers), nor helots (slave-soldiers), nor conscripts, but lesser gentry, or literati-knights, who held both administrative and military posts. Like Xenophon, who was as comfortable with the pen as he was the sword, and who sold his martial and mental services to both Persia and Sparta, the *Shi* served as officers and officials, paid in the currency of property and honor. Like Xenophon, who was distantly related to the old monarchical line of Athens, the *Shi* descended from the outer edge of the Zhou royal family tree. And like Xenophon, whose fortunes were pegged to the wars of elites, the *Shi* experienced intense fluctuation in their fortunes as the power of their various feudal lords rose and fell. Indeed, as the officers and officials of the clashing fiefdoms, there were times in which they literally died by the legion. During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Periods, an individual *Shi* could rise to the heights of power and prestige, as well as meteorically plummet to destitution.

Beginning in the Spring and Autumn Period, canny dukes and barons realized that effective competition meant more than just an arms race, but also a minds race.

The first step in transforming the role and status of the *Shi* was the appearance of functionaries who served their lords in various capacities, such as sheriffs, stewards, judges, and advisors. As Zhou feudalism underwent tremendous changes after the collapse of Western Zhou, competition both among and within states made it necessary for leaders to gather the best and the most capable persons as assistants. The term *xian* (worthy; i.e., one combining intellectual ability and moral integrity), was introduced as a criterion in selecting these functionaries.³⁷

Naturally, they first looked to the *Shi*, but the gates for change had been opened: “This shift from consideration of status to that of competence eventually ushered in a new criterion of social preference. The term *shih* [sic] thus acquired a new definition, now referring to a person of excellence, one with high capabilities as well as character; it came to refer to a cultural status rather than a social grouping.”³⁸ The composition of the *Shi* became more open—in a sense, more meritocratic, if unwillingly or so gradually as to be unconscious by the class’ original constituents. They absorbed into their membership both the wayward or downwardly mobile noble seeking a rebound, as well as the upwardly aspirant working man, even the occasional

³⁵ Schwartz, *Thought in Ancient China*, p. 44: “Another aspect of this feudalism which differentiates it clearly from medieval Western feudalism is that the protobureaucratic elements [in the] Shang are also very much present in the literature of the Chou [sic]... To be sure, in the Chinese case, the use of the term ‘bureaucracy’ should perhaps be avoided, and one wonders whether Balazs’s term ‘officialism’ might not be appropriate for this period.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁷ Hsu, Cho-yun. “The Spring and Autumn Period” in Loewe, Michael and Shaughnessy, Edward L., eds. *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. 583.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 584.

gifted peasant.³⁹

As the definition of *Shi* broadened, a wider variety of personalities and skill sets were inducted into the ranks. Schools of thought quickly emerged and conflicted. This process went on right through the Warring States Period. Graham explains,

During the last centuries of disunion, with the bureaucratization of the competing states, the at least partially literate knightly class had become increasingly open to the talents and freer to serve whichever ruler offered the best terms. The thinkers of the Axial Age are all in or on the edge of this now fluid class... Although one could get rich by trade, it remains the common assumption that the road to wealth and power is through high office; consequently, nearly all of them are preoccupied with such questions as when it is morally right to accept office in these degenerate times (the Confucians), who deserves appointment (the Mohists), whether it is better to avoid employment for the benefits of private life (Chuang-tzu). Their whole thinking is a response to the breakdown of the moral and political order which had claimed the authority of Heaven; and the crucial question for all of them is not the Western philosopher's 'What is truth?' but 'Where is the Way?', the way to order the state and conduct personal life.⁴⁰

By virtue of their eventual preponderance in educational positions, the *Shi-cum-Rujia* was able to outlast their competitors the Mohists, Yangists, Taoists, et al.

Thus, it was as scholars that these swordsmen were able to adapt to feudal circumstances and secure a future for themselves. In addition, they were both the victims and beneficiaries of the feudal lords' machinations. Born and raised for a life of service in both military and civil capacities, expected to be educated in the Six Arts of ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics, and cultivated in courage, etiquette, and wit, the *Shi* responded to the troubles of their time with an investigation into the inner meaning of their responsibility to serve the world. "It was a mentality that nurtured many of the best minds of the time to devote themselves to the task of defining and disseminating ideas."⁴¹ It is here when the sword is put down and the pen taken up, when the knight becomes the philosopher—and it is here where we finally meet Confucius.

REN AND THE SHI

My quote from Graham above is in reference to the so-called Hundred Schools, during which time the *Shi* completed their evolution into the *Rujia*. My position is that their evolution was actually prefigured beforehand, in the Spring and Autumn Period by Confucius and his philosophy. I identify two prefigurements of which I will elucidate in this section:

(1) *Defining "ren" as an educational model of the self*: Confucian *ren* was fundamentally a philosophy of education. It thus prefigured the *Shi*'s turn to education as their main vocation during the Warring States Period.

And, (2) *the life of Confucius as prototype for the Rujia*: Confucian *ren*, as described by Hall and Ames, reflected the *Shi*'s state of intense socioeconomic and compositional fluidity. More importantly, it was part of the rectificational sweep moving through ancient Chinese history. As such, it also provided an ideological framework suitable for the *Shi* to adapt to, and

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 583.

⁴⁰ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 3.

⁴¹ Hsu, *Cambridge*, p. 584.

participate in, the new civilization emerging around them—and *from* them.

Prefiguration (1): Defining “ren” as an educational model of the self

Hall and Ames define *ren* as “authoritative personhood,” meaning, “one who not only extends his sphere of concern to embrace and serve the interests of his community, but who literally extends himself to take in his community.”⁴² A crucial factor in Confucius’ conception of *ren* is “the coextensive and correlative nature of personal, social, and political development.”⁴³ In the large scheme, this means:

The concern that Confucius has for the relational self and the communication that effects it is a major theme throughout the *Analects*. The identification and articulation of interests and importances is the basis for person building and the inclusion of others in one’s field of selves. The authoritative person inherits the values and significance of his culture and contributes to it in a process of symbolic exchange dominated by the medium of language. This language is performative in the sense that, for the authoritative person, saying requires the enactment of what is said in order to be true.⁴⁴

Hall and Ames’ definition of *ren* can be broken down into its constituent parts:

(A) *The “relational self”*: This concept has at its core the idea that the human being is a combination of instrumental and aesthetic elements. We exist for each other, supplying resources and companionship, and even more importantly, generating meaning in an otherwise axiologically neutral universe. In this respect, “relational selfhood” is much like how a blacksmith forges a sword from raw ore and fire for use in ceremony or combat. In return; the sword—as a product of the man’s efforts and as his source of income—qualifies him as a member of the blacksmithing profession. The man is a blacksmith because he makes the sword, and the object is a sword because it was made by a blacksmith.

Understanding the concept of relational selfhood requires a ground shift in our post-industrial, Platonically-informed, and instrumentalist-tending grammar. For Confucius, a human being is not a *thing*, an “it” or “what,” with a necessary static nature; rather, a human being is an *organism*, a “him,” “her,” or “who,” whose nature is, in effect, an open question. So, too, is existence an open question:

If we are no longer searching out the Mind of God or the inexorable laws of nature, we must search out one another. For, once the myth of objective knowledge has been laid to rest, the world ceases to be construed as an objective datum for dispassionate investigation and becomes the (relatively) articulated expressions of enviroing others. In other words, it becomes culture. And culture is rife with the personal creativity of the best representatives of the human community.⁴⁵

(B) *“Person building” or “person making”*: This concept is to the individual human animal what *zheng ming* is to human society. If a person is in reality a relationally constructed entity, then his or her life’s project should be re-creation of themselves and their constituent

⁴² Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 182.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

relations. This articulation of the self is performed via his or her setting among other human beings. The goal is that both individual and community are “transmitted” into something that is breathtaking and heretofore unthought-of, yet also contiguous with previous formulations. There is no “thinking outside the box” for Confucius. What he finds more interesting and *useful* is whether the contours of that box can be re-shaped in ameliorative ways. (Indeed, the most extreme end of his logic would be to ask whether a box need be a box to be a box.)

Therefore, intersubjectivity is absolutely key to person building. Self-articulation is an imperative for each and every person, lest we risk deformation into “retarded individuality” [Pinyin: *xiao ren*; Wade-Giles: *hsiao jen*]. Indeed, the entire project of Confucius’ philosophizing was built around finding the Way toward achieving *ren*! The Way he “transmitted” was one in which articulation could only be achieved through communal means:

(1) Using the inherited tradition of their community as a conceptual framework for their articulation.

(2) Using the community as it exists in that specific historical time and place as an ethical framework for their articulation.

And, (3) working toward re-creating the community as it *could be*, which is the actual act of articulation.

Hall and Ames explain, “*Jen** [sic] is the integrative process of taking in and subsuming the conditions and concerns of the human community in the development and application of one’s own personal judgment.”⁴⁶ The blacksmith decides the way in which ore and flame are to be united; he does so operating within certain conceptual guidelines as to the *relative* nature and *relative* use of a sword; and he does so fully cognizant of those guidelines and of himself as a forger of swords. His freedom comes in the form of playful yet serious delight he brings to his task, and the originality that erupts thereof.

(C) *Consciousness as “blacksmithing”*: I chose the metaphor of the blacksmith both for its historical appropriateness (the Spring and Autumn Period was a period of widespread bronze use) and its utility in explaining Confucius’ conception of human consciousness. To the Master, human consciousness is *cultural* consciousness, for the development of the mind represents the “forging” of meaning in a cosmos that, as the Stoics experienced it, is indifferent to human endeavor, yet is metaphysically plastic in our hands. Existential blacksmithing is at the heart of the relational self: each and every one of us is “the passage from nature to culture... The human being as a maker of meaning has as his initial product, his self, his person.”⁴⁷

Consciously to bring into being what is not is the purpose of action. This entails the freedom of the human being, for without a sense that bringing into being what is not is a real possibility, no intentionality is possible... That is to say, human consciousness is born out of a recognition of a state of affairs that are not the case, and human freedom underlies the intentional acts that seek to bring into being what is not.⁴⁸

Therefore, in the most profound way, to be fully human is to *be action*, or, as Hall and Ames put it, to live in recognition of your essential performativeness.

(D) *Language as performative action*: The spoken or written word is itself an act which generates meaning—blacksmithing that uses ink and paper or breath and thought instead of raw

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

ore and fire. Language in this sense necessarily entails “the enactment of what is said in order to be true,” or in other words “realizing” [*zhi*] via “living up to one’s word” [*xin*]. Additionally, it is directly connected to cultural consciousness, for language becomes both product and producer of *li* (ritual action) and *yi* (personal signification).

Li in Confucian terminology has several connotations, the most important of which is its “disclosing and displaying function.”⁴⁹ Be they the rules of religious rites or the rules of interpersonal etiquette, rituals are not divinely commanded nor are they socially normative; rather, they are the channels through which a man or woman may embody their community as well as act positively and constructively in their historical setting. *Yi* in Confucian terminology is shorthand for the goal of achieving “a self-realizing person-in-context”⁵⁰:

It is objectified in that, no longer asserting merely one limited perspective in its interpretation of experience, it does not make any final distinction between self and other in construing the world. To express this another way, the person-in-context understands “self” as a dynamic and changing focus of existence characteristically expanding and contracting over some aspect of the process of becoming, the interpretation of which is grounded in and involves reference to the environing whole.⁵¹

Li and *yi* are, then, the fundamental building blocks to “authoritative personhood,” for the *ren* person, in exercising his or her sense of appropriateness and carefully selecting the way in which they invest their innate dynamism into social relations, “authors” a renewed, rejuvenated, recreated culture for himself, his contemporaries, and future generations.⁵² In total, to be *ren* is to live, in mind and deed, *zheng ming*.

We can now see how Confucius’ philosophy was reflective of his class conditions. To re-state, the *Shi* were entering into a state of intense socioeconomic and compositional fluidity, which necessitated a major re-conception of themselves as a class. The Master’s approach to the question of the human person was, fundamentally, one of cultivation and edification, rather than inculcation and obedience. The goal of his approach was self-articulation rather than subservience. In other words, *education* rather than *indoctrination*, and his model for the self was one in which the human person was malleable, capable of being shaped and shaping itself so long as it had right knowledge.

Such a philosophy of personhood called for radical flexibility, not only with regards to external (historical) conditions of constant flux and upheaval, but also radical flexibility for interior (psychological) conditions within oneself. For Confucius, to measure one’s value as a human being on socioeconomic conditions would be to beg disaster. Agreeable a statement though this may be to a Westerner, the Master did not mean what we expect: whereas we, schooled in Platonic dichotomies, would define the conflation of socioeconomic standing with personal worth as “debasement” through “materialism,” Confucius defined it as *undermining* oneself through excessive focus upon the individual self rather than the relational self. “The process of becoming an exemplary person in Confucian thought entails both the dissolution of a delimiting and retarding distinction between self and other, and the active integration of this

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 180-182.

liberated self into the social field through the disclosure of *yi*.⁵³ Too stringent an imagining of one's interior world through any means—and certainly through socioeconomic means, which by their very nature fix people into niches would have the same effect upon a person's self-conception—would result in the inability to adapt to new circumstances, to *rejoice* in the adaptation, and to flourish, however humbly in material terms, as a result of the adaptation. Thus, Confucian philosophy simultaneously provided the ideological framework for the *Shi*'s new vocation as educators, as well as the values the individual *Shi* needed to cope with feudal circumstances.

Prefiguration (2): The life of Confucius as prototype for the Rujia

Turning to the question of Confucius' life, when the Five Classics are used in conjunction with the *Analects* and the other Four Books, in total the Confucian canon provides the few relatively sturdy biographical facts that can be said about Confucius:

(1) He was a member of the *Shi* class in the fiefdom of Lu, a stronghold of Zhou high culture. His family the Kungs were likely to have been descended from the military wing of the class rather than the civilian, and that like many of the *Shi* during the Eastern Zhou era, they suffered from declining fortunes.

(2) His youth and young adulthood were spent in "genteel poverty" and he was forced by circumstances to hold menial jobs in the areas of accounting, grain distribution, and/or penal law.

(3) His middle age was spent in itinerancy, wandering from administrative job to administrative job, from fiefdom to fiefdom. He experienced severe privation, to the point of near starvation, and was also attacked by brigands and peasants. He ultimately returned to his homeland, impoverished and undistinguished.

(4) Sporadically throughout his life he also worked as an educator. He settled upon this as his final profession during his elderly years.

These facts are roughly consistent with his own autobiographical statement: "At fifteen my heart-and-mind were set upon learning; at thirty I took my stance; at forty I was no longer of two minds; at fifty I realized the *ming* of *tian* [the will of heaven]; at sixty my ear was attuned; and at seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the mark." (*An.* 2:4) I add the following comments:

(1-a) During the Spring and Autumn Period, "although one could get rich by trade, it remains the common assumption that the road to wealth and power is through high office; consequently, nearly all of [ancient China's intelligentsia, the *Shi-cum-Rujia*] are preoccupied with such questions as when it is morally right to accept office in these degenerate times (the Confucians)... [etc.]"⁵⁴ (I will return to this in a moment.)

(2-a) The texts vary radically about the jobs he worked throughout his life. For the most part they agree that he never made it higher than superintendency or similarly low management (for example, *An.* 2:4 and 4:6). This is opposed to the traditional historiography, which would have us wrongly believe that he had attained incredibly high position within Lu, all the way to the prime ministry.

(3-a) It was his travels that familiarized him with the political and cultural conditions of the other Spring and Autumn fiefdoms. Additionally, the variety of his experiences probably contributed to his popularity among the young men who became his students.

(4-a) It was in his capacity as educator that he actually achieved his greatest success,

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁵⁴ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 3.

though not materially. He was never pleased with this fact, and perished disappointed in himself. Legge reports Confucius saying to his students,

“[...] last night I dreamt that I was sitting with offerings before me between the two pillars. No intelligent monarch arises; there is not one in the kingdom that will make me his master. My time has come to die.” So it was. He went to his couch, and after seven days, expired. Such is the account which we have of the last hours of the great philosopher of China. His end was not unimpressive, but it was melancholy.⁵⁵

It is an incredible irony that he went to his death believing himself a failure, only to in time become China’s “uncrowned emperor.”

Returning to Comment (1-a), the question of whether “it is morally right to accept office [in] degenerate times” was a question unlikely to have occurred to an aristocrat, and almost certainly would not have been of interest to a born and bred peasant. However, logically it would have been a question of extreme interest to a *Shi*. That he attracted so many students—all told seventy-seven, not including the eighty or so others in orbit—tells us something, too. Who were they? Textual evidence indicates that they were, for the most part, of *Shi* background (Graham suggests that working men would have been more attracted to the philosophy of Mozi).⁵⁶ They must have been drawn to him because the historical Confucius—not the Confucius transmitted/re-created by later generations into the universal religion of “Confucianism”—was probably very concerned with the ethical and spiritual well-being of his fellow *Shi*. As it happened, he would have been in a unique socioeconomic position to do so: his family history “reflected the downward social mobility of many noble houses of the Spring and Autumn Period. He retained a memory of the past glory, but had the experience of a life of service.”⁵⁷

We can now see how Confucius’ life served as a prototype for the *Rujia*. His fluctuating socioeconomic position was the reason and resource for his philosophizing and teaching. And what of the vocation he finally settled upon? “Hardly any information survives about a teaching profession *before Confucius*, but we have noticed how natural it is to see his thought as springing from the preoccupations of such a profession,”⁵⁸ (my italics). That the Master had to turn to teaching to earn a living is the crowning irony of his life, for so, too, would a great many of his fellow *Shi* have to make the same decision not long after his death. Indeed, more than he may have realized, Confucius showed them the Way to their salvation.

CONCLUSION

Confucius experienced and embodied the existential and dynamic tensions in what it meant to be a *Shi* during the Eastern Zhou era. From his family background, he inherited an intimate knowledge of the sage-kingdoms’ world and culture. Meanwhile, his actual life of scraping together enough meager funds to survive, all the while wandering state to state for frustratingly fruitless employment, inspired him to imagine a society in which individuals were capable of transcending class limitations.⁵⁹ Thus, in Confucius, biography, philosophy, and the

⁵⁵ Legge, *Confucius*, p. 87.

⁵⁶ Graham, *Disputers*, pp. 34,-36, 45.

⁵⁷ Hsu, *Cambridge*, p. 585.

⁵⁸ Graham, *Disputers*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Hsu, *Cambridge*, pp. 585-586.

broader brush strokes of history came together in a trilectical process that prefigured the rise of the *Rujia*.

We can now see how his philosophy emerged from the rectificational process at work in ancient Chinese history. Ironically, the "Confucian trilectic" was analogous to the trilectical development of Chinese civilization, that is, the interaction of the Zhou world with the "barbarians" and "semi-barbarians" on its ever-expanding periphery. So, too, was the philosophy the Master developed ever-expanding. It was the eventual transformation of the *Shi* into the *Rujia* that initiated the change of "Confucianism" from a philosophy designed to address the needs and concerns of a particular class, into a universal creed. Just as China grew outward to encompass, centralize, and consolidate its constituent fiefdoms and much of the continent of Asia, "Confucianism" grew outward to encompass, incorporate, and appropriate the sea of individual minds that constituted the ancient Chinese people, devouring, absorbing, and re-contextualizing its competitors in Mohism, Legalism, Yin-Yangism, and even Taoism as it went.

What was this teacher's most salient lesson for you and I today? We may have in Confucius and "Confucianism" one of those rare instances in which the Adam Smithian notion of enlightened self-interest came true. His program was essentially this: that a life of compassionate service to virtue and state meant service to the very real flesh and blood human beings of one's social circle, and by extension, all of society. A life lived in this manner meant the realization of the individual's relationality in mind and deed. Thus, Confucius discovered the secret of the *Shi*'s moral and professional elevation as lying in the harmonization of "self" and "other." These ideas represented something very revolutionary in the context of ancient China. Consider his peer and *bete noir*, Laozi, who, like the monks of Christianity, sought salvation in nature, away from people. Confucius refused to believe that salvation was to be found in isolation. His most basic article of faith—and his greatest lesson—was that salvation was to be found in civilization, *among* people.

Bibliography

Graham, A.C. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1989.

Hall, David L. and Ames, Roger T. *Thinking Through Confucius*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987.

Hansen, C. "Duty and Virtue" in Ivanhoe, Philip J., ed. *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and his Critics*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996.

Hsu, Cho-yun. "The Spring and Autumn Period" in Loewe, Michael and Shaughnessy, Edward L., eds. *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Legge, James. *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean. Chinese Text; Translation with Exegetical Notes and Dictionary of all Characters*. New York City: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971.

van Norden, Bryan. "What Should Western Philosophy Learn from Chinese Philosophy?" in Ivanhoe, Philip J., ed. *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and his Critics*. La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Company, 1996.

Nylan, Michael. *The Five "Confucian" Classics*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.

Schwartz, Benjamin I. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985.