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Interpreting Confucius: the Aesthetic Turn and Its Challenges

Chenyang Li

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Peimin Ni's book on *Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu*¹ is remarkable not only because it is lucidly written and rich in information but also, more importantly, because it launches a major shift in interpreting Confucius. In his reading, Confucius's teachings are more about how to lead lives *artistically* than about moral conduct. We may call Ni's shift the "aesthetic turn" in interpreting Confucius. This work deserves serious attention and careful treatment by pertinent scholarly communities.

Ni's book consists of 6 chapters. Chapter 1 "Confucius as a Historic Figure" places Confucius in historic contexts, covering his birth, his life, and his legacy through the two millenniums until contemporary times. It depicts Confucius as a forerunner of a great living tradition that defines China since antiquity. Chapter 2 "Confucius as a Spiritual Leader" introduces the religiosity of Confucius in the light of such key notions as "Heaven" (*tian* 天), "Mandate and Destiny" (*ming* 命), and immortality. It highlights the religious dimension of Confucius's tradition in close connection to its understanding of the meaning of life. Chapter 3 "Confucius as a Philosopher" makes the case that the Confucian tradition should be considered philosophical in the broad sense of the pursuit of wisdom, centering on key issues of becoming human, *ren* and *li*, rectification of names, and *zhongyong*. Chapter 4 "Confucius as a Political Reformer" explicates the political efforts exerted by Confucius and his followers in order to achieve the good society. Chapter 5 is on "Confucius as an Educator," illustrating the education

philosophy and program as initiated by the master. Finally, Chapter 6 “Confucius as a Person” portrays the main character of the book as a historic person in real life and discusses issues related to elitism and sexism. Ni makes explicit the importance of concluding the book this way and writes, “the Master was, after all, human. By portraying Confucius as a real person who enjoyed fine food, liked music and singing, had peculiar personal preferences for clothing, and was liable to make mistakes and encounter awkward situations, the greatness of the Master appears so much more real and accessible to everyone” (151).

In my view, the most significant feature of Ni’s project lies with his tackling of an issue that has long posed challenges to scholars of Confucian philosophy, namely a conspicuous difference between Confucius’s *Analects* and other classic texts of the Confucian tradition. It has been common knowledge, and to some troublesome knowledge, that the *Analects* does not present highly intellectual, theoretical and philosophical—in the sense of studying the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence²--articulations on matters of importance even though it touches upon many of these subjects. Readers often wonder, what do such things as maintaining good body posture, eating fine food and yet not eating too much (*Analects* 10.4, 10.8) have to do with the moral life? In comparison with some other classic Confucian texts such as the *Yijing*, the *Zhongyong*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*, the *Analects* appears rather thin and minimal as a philosophical text. We may call this issue that of the non-philosophical characteristic of the *Analects*. Ni’s solution to the problem is to bite the bullet and argue that the intellectual, theoretical, and philosophical is not what Confucius is about. Confucius, according to Ni, is about how to live a good life;

Confucius is concerned with the “art” of good living. At the core of Ni’s move is the concept of “*gongfu*,” which stands for “the arts of life that require cultivated abilities and effective skills” (xii). “*Gongfu*” serves as a lens through which we can see things in a certain way and understand things from a particular angle. A *gongfu* approach can be better understood by contrasting with a theoretical system of teaching. While a theory usually begins by laying out premises and reasoning to reach a conclusion, a *gongfu* system “starts from the existing condition of the practitioner and, through step-by-step guidance and practice, gradually reaches higher levels of artistic perfection” (xii). In such a system, different constituents are linked together through their practical rather than theoretical implications. Ni notes that such a reading of Confucius is not his own invention. He traces a source of his interpretation to Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi. He writes,

Cheng and Zhu have both pointed out the difference between two approaches to reading—one is intellectual, and the other is the *gongfu* approach. The former requires only intellectual understanding, while the latter requires self-reflection of what is learned and application of it in practice. The former leads only to bookish knowledge, while the latter leads to embodied understanding and holistic growth. The former reader passively receives information from the text, but the latter interacts with the text, making it come alive through personal engagement with it (xiv).

In Ni’s view, there is a fundamental difference between the two approaches. One is propositional whereas the other is instructional. These two differ so much that “it might not be too far-fetched to say that using the intellectualist approach to read Confucius is like eating the menu instead of the food” (xiv-xv). In understanding Confucius, we

should opt for the “food,” namely his instructional message in regard to living the good life, instead of the intellectualist “menu.” Ni’s approach gives us a way out of the predicament in making sense of Confucius’s *Analects*. If we can read Confucius the way Ni advocates, we can avoid some serious problems with interpreting Confucius in an “intellectual way.” That argument alone makes Ni’s book noteworthy.

If I understand it correctly, Ni’s view is different from those who read the *Analects* as advocating a moral life by providing two mutually complementing accounts of a moral philosophy. That is, the text not only presents theoretical and moral teachings for the good life but also provides concrete examples of human conduct in practice. Amy Olberding, for example, has argued that an important purpose of the *Analects* is to provide “moral exemplars” to complement and help operationalize Confucius’s moral teachings.³ The various descriptions of Confucius’s demeanor in the text not only provide concrete instances of exemplary behavior but also give readers a strong sense of what it is like to act virtuously in real life. The main difference between this view and Ni’s view is that, for Olberding, although Confucius’s various acts described the *Analects* possess esthetical and artistic value, their real significance lies in fleshing out the theoretical aspect of his moral teachings. For Ni, however, the esthetical and artistic value of Confucius’ s life as depicted in the *Analects* is of primary significance and should be taken as such in our understanding of the text.

Ni’s view may remind us of Kierkegaard’s separation of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious life. For Kierkegaard, the aesthetic life and the ethical life are incompatible and perhaps even incommensurable. The aesthetic is characterized by immersion in sensuous experience, nihilistic boredom, and egotistic flight from it. The

aesthetic is opposed by the ethical; yet both are to be superseded by the religious. In Ni's view, the aesthetic in the *Analects* is far more profound and sophisticated than what Kierkegaard has characterized with the same label. Ni will not see the aesthetic in his Confucian sense as opposed to the ethical; instead it is a different perspective on the good life. If we can use the label of "religious" on Confucianism, Ni's view implies that, rather than being superseded, the aesthetic is also "religious" as it makes life meaningful and significant.

As often is the case with tackling problems in philosophical discourse, however, opting for one solution may give rise to new problems. In Ni's move, cautious readers may sense a danger of anti-intellectual tendency. But this concern may not be as well-grounded as it first seems. If there is anything anti-intellectual in Ni's book, it is against reading Confucius *exclusively* in intellectual ways or it is against overly intellectualizing Confucius' teachings, rather than being anti-intellectual *per se*. It is opposed to an intellectual approach to interpreting Confucius' teachings rather than taking Confucius or his teachings to be anti-intellectual. Others may dispute Ni's argument for rejecting theoretical interpretations of the *Analects* and may insist that there is adequate ground for reading the *Analects* as a theoretical and philosophical work. I will not engage in such dispute here. My concerns with Ni's book are different. While I find persuasive Ni's argument for his interpretation of the Confucius in the *Analects*, I am not fully comfortable with Ni's treatment of the relation between the Confucius as presented in the *Analects* and the Confucius as found in other classic texts of the Confucian tradition, and of the relation between Confucius, "the man," as highlighted in the subtitle of Ni's

book, and Confucianism, the philosophical tradition that has been closely associated with Confucius' name.

First, let us look at the relation between the Confucius as presented in the *Analects* and the Confucius as found in other classic texts of the Confucian tradition. In explicating the Confucius as a *gongfu* master, Ni draws heavily not only on the *Analects* but also on other texts such as the *Zhongyong* and the *Yijing*. These are undeniably highly theoretical and philosophical texts that portrait Confucius as a theoretical and philosophical thinker. If we take these portraits and explications of Confucius as reliable, how can we draw only on the “practical” *gongfu* aspect of the Confucius while leaving out the theoretical, philosophical, and intellectual “Confucius”? If we take these portraits and explications as reliable as Ni does, should we also accept a theoretical, philosophical, and intellectual “Confucius” as well? If we accept a theoretical, philosophical, and intellectual Confucius on the basis of a holistic reading of the Confucian classics, would Ni's aesthetic, artistical, and *gongfu* reading still hold?

We may contrast Ni's solution to the issue of the non-philosophical characteristic of the *Analects* to that of Thome Fang's (Fang Dongmei 方东美, 1899-1977). While recognizing the *Analects* as a very good book about Confucius' personal records and his teachings about personal conduct, Fang also recognizes the lack of philosophical sophistication of the text. Fang accepts the *Analects* as a text of wisdom for life and acknowledges its great value in guiding people's lives. In agreement with Ni, Fang maintains that even though moral virtues are discussed, the *Analects* does not form ethical theories. Moreover, it fails to cover such important philosophical topics as cosmology and ontology. Hence, he calls the *Lunyu* a text of “morality (格言學).” In

Fang's view, moralogy is not philosophy, nor is the *Analects* a classic text containing Confucius's general philosophy.⁴ Fang argues, however, it would be a mistake to confine our reading of Confucius merely to the *Analects* and that we must place the Confucius in the *Analects* within the context of other classic texts of the Confucian tradition. Fang uses Confucius' idea of *ren* 仁 in making his point. Fang argues, in the *Analects*, Confucius says that to be *ren* is to "love people." Yet, there Confucius does not say how to love people. It is in such texts as the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*) and the *Yijing* that we find Confucius' philosophical explications of *ren*. On Fang's account, Confucius' idea of *ren* should be understood in both negative and positive ways. Negatively, it is about not to do certain kinds of things to other people. This is what the *Great Learning* refers to as the Dao of *xie ju* (絜矩之道), namely, do not do to others what you do not like. It is similar to Confucius' Silver Rule as recorded in the *Analects* (15.24) and emphasizes empathy in dealing with others.⁵ In addition, Fang argues that there is also a positive way to understand *ren*. This is the idea of the Dao of Heaven and Earth (*Tiandi zhi Dao* 天地之道) as can be found in the *Zhongyong*. It means the human heart that cares for every living thing in the world. We can find similar ideas in the *Yijing*, which states that the *yin-yang* forces of *Qian* and *Kun* (乾坤) are to enlarge and multiply life (是以大生焉... 是以广生焉). The second approach to being *ren* is also found in the *Analects*, where Confucius says that those who wish to establish oneself also (help) establish others and who wish to succeed also help others to succeed (6.30). In Fang's own words, this means that, because I value and respect my own life, I will value and respect the lives of others, extending self-love and self-valuing to loving others and valuing others. This holds also for non-human life forms.⁶ Thus, in interpreting

Confucius's *ren* Fang draws on other texts to supplement what he perceives as lacking or inadequate in the *Analects*. The *Analects* alone may give us an incomplete or even distorted portrait of Confucius; only in conjunction with other classic Confucian texts can we fully understand the *Analects*. In other words, as far as understanding Confucius is concerned, the fact that the *Analects* lacks in the theoretical and philosophical elaboration does not mean Confucius lacks in the theoretical and philosophical, because the latter is to be found in other pertinent texts.

In contrast to Fang's approach, Ni treats the *Analects* as the primary and main text for understanding Confucius and uses it as the foundation for his interpretation of Confucius; when Ni draws on other texts, he does so only to the extent that it reinforces his *gongfu* reading of Confucius. In Ni's interpretation, the *Analects* sets the tone for understanding Confucius. Ni and Fang represent two different approaches to understanding Confucius. These two approaches present two varied portraits of Confucius to us. Which one the real Confucius? Or more accurately, which approach helps us better understand Confucius? If both are grounded in some way, what is the relation between them?

Now let me examine another relation that I alluded to earlier, the relation between Confucius, "the man," as highlighted in the subtitle of Ni's book, on the one hand, and Confucianism on the other. Ni's book is primarily on Confucius, the man, the teacher, and the thinker. But he also extends his argument to Confucianism, the philosophical tradition that has largely shaped the Chinese culture. Ni writes,

Through the lens of *gongfu* perspective one shall further realize that as a way of *gongfu*, Confucius's teachings are ultimately aimed not at setting up moral rules to constrain people, but rather at providing guidance to enable people to live good, artistic lives. In other words, Confucianism is more aesthetic than it is moralist" (xiii).

Ni's claim that Confucianism is more aesthetic than it is moralist is more radical than claiming that we should read the Confucius in the *Analects* aesthetically than moralistically. It directly contradicts a common view that Confucian philosophy is primarily moral philosophy. To me, such a claim on the whole sounds utterly implausible. It is too large an issue to tackle in this short paper, however. Here I will argue that, technically, Ni's move from "Confucius" to "Confucianism" is problematic. The gap between "Confucius" and "Confucianism" is much larger than can be glazed over by one quick claim. If we say there are two different versions of Confucius in Ni's and Fang's interpretations respectively, there are also varied versions of Confucianism. The question is, what version of Confucianism would allow Ni to make a legitimate move from a claim about Confucius to that of Confucianism.

Elsewhere I have noted that "Confucius's philosophy" and "Confucian philosophy" (儒家哲学) are not the same concept.⁷ Whereas "Confucius's philosophy" undoubtedly denoted the philosophy by Confucius, the "man," "Confucian philosophy" refers to the philosophy of Confucianism, including the philosophies of Mencius, Xunzi, and many others. The term "Confucianism" was coined in the 19th century West after "Confucius," the Latinized name that 16th century Jesuit missionaries gave to Kongzi ("Kong Fuzi"),⁸ to denote the Chinese cultural tradition and philosophy commonly referred to as "*Rujia*

儒家,” as the Chinese counterpart of Christianity in the West. The Chinese term “*Rujia*,” or the “School of the *Ru*,” does not bear Confucius’s name, which is Kong Qiu 孔丘. “*Rujia*” has been used in China to designate the tradition associated with Confucius and his followers. Therefore, the English word “Confucianism” means “Ruism.”⁹ Many of philosophical ideals and ideas promoted by this school, however, were not invented by Confucius or his followers. Confucius evidently took the *Rujia* tradition he inherited seriously. He said, “The Zhou looked downward at the two preceding dynasties. How rich and well developed is their culture! I follow the Zhou”¹⁰ (周監於二代，郁郁乎文哉！吾從周), and he stated it explicitly that he was “transmitting rather than inventing (述而不作)” a philosophy (*Analects* 7.1). The “transmitted” tradition includes not only the large repertoire of the Zhou rites but also such rituals as three-year mourning observance for deceased parents.¹¹ Confucius undoubtedly contributed greatly to the transformation, revival, development and operationalization of the Ru tradition. Considered this way, “Confucianism” is more analogous to “Protestantism” than to “Aristotelianism.” Although all Protestants believe in Jesus as their God (in Trinity), the specific doctrines of each of their denominations, Baptists, Calvinists, Lutherans, and Methodists, are traceable to different historic figures. Although Confucianism is not explicitly divided into various denominations as Protestantism, it is not traced back to a single thinker as Aristotelianism is traced back to Aristotle. Historically, *Rujia* has been understood as the philosophy manifested in a cluster of classic works. The corpus of Confucian classics evolved through time. According to the author of the *Zhuangzi* and Sima Qian’s *Historical Records*, Confucius studied and edited the “Six Classics,” that is the *Book of Poetry*, *Book of History*, *Book of Rituals*, *Book of Change*, *Book of Music*,

and *The Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chen 1983: 389; Sima 1959: 1936). By editing these orthodox texts passed down from the Zhou dynasty, Confucius made them the classic works of the tradition associated with his name. Regardless of the accuracy of these records, it is without any doubt that during the Western Han period (202BCE - 9AD), the “Five Classics” (without the now lost *Book of Music*) were considered the official Confucian texts when the government elevated Confucianism to be the orthodox philosophy and established the official post of “Master Scholar of Five Classics (五经博士).” Confucius’s *Analects* and, to a lesser extent, the *Mencius*, were probably already influential during the Han dynasty, but neither made to the list of the orthodox Classics (*jing*) of Confucianism, and neither was covered in the job descriptions of the “Master Scholar of Five Classics.” The number of Confucian canonical texts gradually increased during the Tang dynasty (618-902) and the subsequent Five Dynasties (907 - 960), to nine, to eleven, and then to twelve, and, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), to thirteen, which persisted until this day, commonly known as the “Thirteen Classics.”¹² For a long period of time, the *Analects* was not the most prominent in the Confucian *Thirteen Classics*. Therefore, when we interpret Confucianism as the philosophical tradition, we should take into consideration of the whole range of its classical texts associated with it.

On such historical evidence, we cannot equate “Confucius’s philosophy” with “Confucian philosophy,” or equate “Confucius’ism”—if we can coin such a term—with “Confucianism.” The use of “Confucianism” for the *Rujia* tradition is unfortunate, particularly in the context of Western scholarship that has been heavily influenced by individualism, under which scholars tend to trace philosophical ideas to particular

individual thinkers and to organize philosophical systems accordingly. For instance, the well-respected New-Confucian philosopher Liu Shu-hsien has claimed that,

The Confucian message must be traced back to Confucius as the Christian message must be traced back to Jesus the Christ...It is through a study of the ideals Confucius embodied that we may hope to find the continuity between Neo-Confucianism and classical Confucianism.¹³

I take it that by “Confucian” of “Confucian message” Liu means “*Rujia*” rather than “Confucius’s,” for otherwise he would have been stating a meaningless tautology (“Confucius’s message must be traced back to Confucius”). But if he means that the message of the Confucian (*Rujia*) tradition must be traced back to Confucius the person, then the legitimacy of Liu’s statement is by no means beyond dispute. For one thing, the “spiritual” message of the ritual system in the tradition is traceable to the pre-Confucius Zhou era. By Confucius’s own account, the tradition we call “*Rujia*” (“Confucian”) predates Confucius, the man, even though his contribution has greatly shaped the tradition.¹⁴

If my argument holds, even if we grant that Ni’s interpretation of Confucius holds at large, it still does not follow that such an interpretation applies to our understanding of Confucianism without qualification. In this regard, it is illuminating to compare Ni’s approach to interpreting Confucianism with those of some other scholars such as Yong Huang. In Huang’s recent work of *Why Be Moral?: Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*,¹⁵ he chooses to discuss selected ideas of the Cheng Brothers that are considered “philosophical” in Western traditions. Such a project would have not been

possible had Huang chosen to focus on Confucius's *Analects*, as both Huang and Ni would probably agree that there is not much "philosophical" in that sense. Yet, it is hard to deny that Huang's work is on Confucianism and that Confucianism has important things to say about issues that are commonly considered philosophical in the West. My personal approach is to see various classic Confucian texts as covering (or emphasizing) different dimensions of the Confucian philosophy. Evidently Confucius's *Analects* is mainly, though not exclusively, on becoming the good person and living the good life, as Ni abundantly demonstrated in his book. The *Yijing* presents a cosmological view of the Confucian universe and how patterns of that cosmic should influence or should influence human society and human lives. If we study the *Yijing* and the *Zhongyong* chapter of the *Liji*, for example, we cannot but accept that harmony is a key concept that is not only about living an artistic life but also about understanding the cosmic pattern of entire world.

Perhaps, instead of inferring from an "aesthetic" interpretation of Confucius to the same reading of Confucianism as a whole, we should embrace a more holistic and inclusive understanding of Confucius and Confucianism. Confucius and Confucianism do have an "aesthetic" dimension, which is particularly salient in Confucius and his *Analects*. Yet, Confucius's teachings also have theoretical and philosophical dimensions, even though these dimensions are more salient in other Confucian classical texts than in the *Analects*. As a comprehensive philosophy, Confucianism is a lot more than teaching us how to live our lives artistically. It also contributes to human knowledge about metaphysics, epistemology, social and political philosophy, as well as the ethical life. We have Peimin Ni to thank for his work in highlighting a long overlooked and

underappreciated dimension of Confucius and Confucianism. In my view, Ni's aesthetic turn should not be taken as a break-away from the more common reading of Confucius and Confucianism. Rather it is a valuable addition and significant enrichment to it.¹⁶

¹ Peimin Ni, *Confucius: The Man and the Way of Gongfu*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

² Ni uses the term of "philosophical" in more general sense in his book.

³ Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person Is That*, Routledge, 2012. Recently, Karyn Lai offered a somewhat similar yet different view. Lai argues that Confucius' words should be read non-prescriptively, which has the effect of liberating modern readers from their normative grip. With such an approach, the *Analects* offers not only theoretical insights that challenge how we think about moral life, but also resources to develop our moral practice. Reading the *Analects* this way helps readers develop a moral repertoire for the Confucian good life. See Lai's paper on "The Devil is in the Detail: the Significance of the *Analects* for Moral Theory and Practice" presented at the 20th International Conference on Chinese Philosophy at Nanyang Technological University, 4-7 July 2017.

⁴ Fang, Dongmei, 1992, *Shengmin Lixiang yu Wenhua Liexin* [*The Ideal of Life and Cultural Types: Selected Works of Fang Dongmei on Neo-Confucianism*], Beijing: Chinese Broadcasting and TV Press, 454-456.

⁵ In the *Great Learning*, the Dao of *xie ju* seems to also cover the idea of the Golden Rule, namely to do to others what you wish down onto yourself. Fang interprets it merely along the line of the Silver Rule.

⁶ 《方东美先生演讲集》， *Collected Lectures by Thome Fang*. Taipei, Taiwan: Li Ming Cultural Enterprise Co., Ltd. (台湾黎明文化事业股份有限公司) 2005, 230—231.

⁷ Chenyang LI, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, Routledge, 2014, 18.

⁸ According to Lionel Jensen, the term was coined in 1862 (Jensen 1998: 4).

⁹ See Bryan Van Norden's discussion and justification of his use of this term, in Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*, Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press. 2007, xiv).

¹⁰ Ni, Peimin, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY. 2017: 122.

¹¹ See Hu Shi's "On Ru" (胡适：《说儒》), in *Selected Works of Hu Shi* (IV) (《胡适文存》), Huangshan Shushe, 1996, 1-58.

¹² The *Book of Change* 易經, *Book of History* 書經, *Book of Odes* 詩經, *Rituals of Zhou* 周禮, *Book of Rituals* 儀禮, *Book of Rites* 禮記, *The Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋左傳, *The Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋公羊傳, *The Guliang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 春秋穀梁傳, the *Analects* 論語, *Classic of Filial Piety* 孝經, *Erya* 爾雅, and the *Mencius* 孟子.

¹³ Shu-hsien Liu, "The Problem of Orthodoxy in Chu Hsi's Philosophy," in *Chu Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 442.

¹⁴ For more discussion of this matter, readers can see Chenyang Li, “The Evolution and Identity of the Confucian Tradition,” in *Chinese Thought as Global Theory*, ed. Leigh Jenco. Albany, NY: The State University of New York Press (2016) 163-180.

¹⁵ Yong Huang, *Why Be Moral?: Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2014.

¹⁶ I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers of this journal for their valuable comments and suggestions.