

Philosophy and the Early Chinese World View

An Interview with Roger Ames



EDITOR'S NOTE: Roger Ames is both a highly productive scholar and a master teacher. We are extremely grateful to EAA Editorial Board member Professor David Jones for procuring this interview, and to Professor Roger Ames for his comments.

David Jones: Roger, it is indeed an honor, and a pleasure, to be asked by EAA to interview you concerning the important inclusion of Chinese Philosophy in the curriculum, especially in World History courses.

You are a distinguished scholar of Chinese philosophy, author of many books in the area of Chinese philosophy and studies, and translator of classical Chinese texts. However, you have also found the time and invested energy in the development and unremitting nurturing of the Asian Studies Development Program, a joint program between the University of Hawai'i and the East-West Center, which is now in its thirteenth year. The program was in large part your idea. Could you elaborate on why you felt the program was necessary and how the goals of the program resonate with the larger project of Asian Studies in the US and Canada?

Roger Ames: ASDP was established as a considered response to what we believe is a continuing crisis in American education—the growing importance of Asia for the future lives of young Americans, and the need in our tertiary level institutions for the kind of faculty development that would enable educators to infuse Asia into the undergraduate core curriculum. It has been an ongoing collaboration among many generous people, where the shared goal has been to produce the resources to enable our educators. Over the thirteen years of the program, we have had an overwhelming response by faculty and by administrators who recognize this changing worldscape, and who want to be able to provide their students with the education they will need to thrive in a new international order. The program has grown enormously, with five or six major residential institutes and field seminars every summer, with workshops and speakers programs throughout the year, and with a veritable avalanche of applications for these opportunities.

There are other groups in the country who have been working in different ways and with different constituencies to achieve the same goal. AsiaNetwork and the Columbia University program come immediately to mind, and foundations such as Freeman, Luce, and NEH have been generous supporters. Slowly, one faculty member at a time, America is waking up to Asia.

David Jones: *Could you please comment upon how ASDP has been a model for, and has been instrumental in, the advancement of Asian Studies in the US?*

Roger Ames: From the outset, we at ASDP have been convinced that culture matters. Our programs usually begin with philosophy, art, literature, and religion, and then we engage the hot contempo-

rary issues that are often the province of our social science colleagues. We are persuaded that pressing issues of the day such as environment, human rights, gender parity, security, economic development, democratization, and so on, have to be located within different cultural frameworks in order to anticipate and to appreciate the different responses they receive in different cultural sites.

David Jones: *Much of the exposure students will have of Asia occurs in survey courses in both high schools and in the universities or colleges. Normally, philosophy as a discipline, for good or bad, is not taught at the high school level. Although I know you have been instrumental in rectifying this situation in your home state of Hawai'i through the "Philosophy in the Schools" program, how imperative do you think it is to teach Chinese philosophy in secondary education through courses such as World History? In other words, could you comment on the general role of Chinese philosophy in these sorts of courses?*

Roger Ames: If, at the beginning of the third millennium, the most crucial international relation in the world is now between the world's most developed economy and the world's fastest growing economy, our students in order to be successful will need to know how China thinks about things. Since philosophy is not a subject taught in high school, it falls to teachers to educate students about the historical foundations of Chinese culture, and the history of its philosophy. China with almost one quarter of the population of this planet is not a country—it is a continent, like a Europe or an Africa. And China is coming.

When we ask the question: what is Confucian philosophy? we need to provide a narrative rather than an analytical explanation. It has a great deal to do with biography and genealogy and lineage, and is not exhausted by theoretical and conceptual explanations. Chinese philosophy is about the self-cultivation of historical exemplars and the particular world they were able to achieve in consummating themselves as exemplary human beings. The *Analects of Confucius* is the story of the way that one person lived a meaningfully moral and religious life that can serve others by analogy. There is no moral law or categorical imperative. History and civilization are inseparable from this kind of philosophy.

David Jones: *Let's focus more specifically on various aspects of Chinese philosophy. What is the importance of teaching Confucius, especially the text of the Analects, which you and Henry Rosemont have so masterfully translated for Ballantine Books, in courses that cover the vast range of time from 1000 BCE–300 CE in Chinese history.*

More than likely, the candidate for delivery of such material will be the World History survey. Do you think it sufficient to just teach what Confucius maintained, or do you believe that subsequent Confucian philosophy should also be taught to high school and university students in these survey courses?

Roger Ames: Alfred North Whitehead undoubtedly overstates the case when he claims that all of Western civilization is a series of footnotes to Plato, but Plato's way of organizing the human experience as it is appropriated by Augustine and the Church Fathers has been a hugely powerful force in the narrative of Western culture. Whitehead, although a self-conscious critic of Platonic thinking, is certainly not free of Plato himself. It is not that Plato as an isolated philosopher is alive and well in the modern world, but rather that Platonic thinking has been appropriated, disputed, and certainly reinterpreted in every generation. If possible, we can say that Confucius has had an even greater impact on the evolution of Chinese culture. The Chinese philosophical tradition has been largely canonical and commentarial rather than systematic. Every generation is telling us what the canons "really" say, and in the process of doing so, reauthor and reauthorize Confucianism for their own time and place.

My own preference in teaching the history of philosophy is to spend a big piece of time with a careful reading of one seminal figure or text—some excerpt selected from a Plato, Aristotle, Descartes or Kant—and then having laid that foundation, use the remaining time to explore the philosophical framing and superstructure that is built up from this ground. I don't think a series of philosophical vignettes is very useful. I follow the same pattern in teaching Chinese philosophy, where a solid understanding of the *Analects of Confucius* makes the ensuing tradition coherent.

The virtue of going beyond any one figure to engage later philosophical extensions, whether they be elaborations or counter-currents, is to present the narrative as a living stream that has major, often competing currents. The persistence can be understood within the nuanced process of change. This works against the unfortunate tendency to essentialize cultures. In this same spirit, when making comparisons, I generally try to "triangulate" rather than "compare," thinking that we are better off with "one among several" rather than "either/or."

David Jones: *To what extent do you believe, or think it is relevant, for other significant movements in Chinese Philosophy such as Daoism and Legalism, and even the introduced Buddhism, to be represented in these types of general courses such as World History that give students an entrée into the Chinese World View?*

Roger Ames: The argument that many sinologists and comparative philosophers have made over the past century is that the Chinese worldview is dominated by correlative rather than dualistic thinking—there is no ontological distinction between reality and appearance in classical China that would generate dualisms such as subject/object, good/evil, reason/rhetoric, mind/body, and so on. Said another way, Chinese cosmology subscribes to an assumption that Whitehead has called "the ontological principle:"—the notion of an ontological parity of finitude that gives all things an equal claim on being real—what we might alternatively term "a realistic pluralism." Gods are dead people. This ontological principle is an affirmation of the reality of any thing as it is constituted by the harmony

of its constitutive relations, whether it be each and every thing, each and every kind of thing, or the unsummed totality of things—the wholeness of unfolding experience called *dao*. Given that in this correlative "yin-yang" worldview, the nature of relatedness is understood as intrinsic, constitutive, and productive—any one thing can only be appreciated by appeal to its relations. Persons are known by the quality of relations that locate them within family and community. In such a world, lineages such as Confucianism, Legalism, Daoism, Buddhism and so on, are best understood in terms of their relations with each other. Confucianism and Daoism, for example, far from being exclusive, are best presented as omnipresent sensibilities that are not only a source of mutual critique within the Chinese experience, but also as a source of mutual stimulation and growth. Indeed, Neo-Confucianism cannot be understood without reference to Buddhism and Daoism.

David Jones: *Many EAA readers will be interested to learn your views on the Chinese predilection toward religious syncretism, which is exemplified perhaps best by Buddhism's absorption into Chinese culture.*

Roger Ames: Given what I have said above, the intrinsic rather than external nature of relatedness means that things are constituted by their contextualizing relations. In this world, traditions are porous, changing each other in the most literal and concrete sense. When Buddhism first enters China in the second century of the Christian era, it is a decidedly exotic tradition, but even so, is initially interpreted through largely Daoist categories. By the time we get to the Sanlun, Chan, and Huayan Chinese lineages centuries later, an argument can be made that Buddhism has become so sinocized that it is best understood by reference to Daoism rather than by appeal to its South Asian roots. This religious syncretism is best demonstrated concretely. When we enter a Buddhist temple, we certainly find a statue of Avalokitesvara (Guanyin), the Virgin Mary-like Buddhist bodhisattva, but we also find Guanzhong, the Confucian cultural hero, as well as sundry local deities from popular religion.

David Jones: *As I realize you are aware, many Western students are more enamored by Daoism than Confucianism or Chan (Zen) Buddhism than the thought of Confucius himself. In what way, or ways, would you counsel EAA readers that Confucius' philosophy, and those who engaged him intellectually after his death, is every bit as interesting, meaningful, and even as "sexy" as the more popular versions of Chinese thought that Westerners seem to like?*

Roger Ames: Daoism is quite intriguing. And is entirely worth the student's interest. I spent a session in my Chinese philosophy class this past week with talking skulls and wizened old men, reflecting on the *Zhuangzi's* posited resolution to the problem of death. Coming to terms with death is certainly one of the main themes in this text. But as I have said above, any simple distinction between Daoism and Confucianism does not work very well. For example, it is a commonplace to associate Daoism with creativity and Confucianism with self-cultivation. But *Zhuangzi* is out to cultivate a spontaneous way of being in the world that precludes problems arising as competing propositions. This spontaneity, far from being randomness or impetuosity, is the virtuosity of the master carpenter, calligrapher, and martial artist. The point is that Daoism entails a much cultivated, disciplined creativity—it takes hard work to become a Daoist exemplar.

We might be justly proud of our deference to the rule of law, but China is a cultural resource that can be appropriated with profit to address the often disappointing quality of our personal relations—our often dysfunctional family lives—marred as they can be by selfishness, alienation, indulgence, and sometimes even violence.

Confucianism is certainly centered on self-cultivation, but such self-cultivation, as is the case with Daoism, must go beyond simple discipline to creative self-expression. Confucius says explicitly that in becoming authoritative as human beings, people cannot yield even to their teachers. That is, becoming a quality human being is a process of personal growth that originates with one's inchoate self and, through unrelenting attention to ritualized living in community, culminates in becoming a source of meaning for one's world. It is an entirely creative process of becoming one's own best thoughts. By enchanting the ordinary experience of the day, we are able to live inspired lives, and to become a source of spirituality for the world around us.

David Jones: *Finally, although there is so much more to discuss, would you share with EAA readers why China's early history, philosophy, and culture from 1000 BCE–300 CE is so relevant to twenty-first century Westerners as we make our ways into the future, especially to those of us who deliver Chinese history, politics, philosophy, and culture to students?*

Roger Ames: For me it is very simple. We have much to learn from China. One widely acknowledged European ethnocentrism has been universalism—the one true God, the one model of modernity that separates first world and third world, the ineluctability of modern science, the universality of conceptions such as human rights and democracy. This way of thinking about world order has been hugely productive, but also has its limitations. On a good day it is the rule of law; on a bad day it is cultural imperialism. The German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is a fair representative of this universalistic and rationalistic impulse that has led some scholars to dismiss his interest in China as at best condescending, and at worst, an example of this cultural imperialism. In short, as the story goes, his motivation in turning to the East was simply corroboration, and thus his celebration of China amounts to nothing but an appeal to another high culture as a means of demonstrating the truth of European universal indices. But those who would rehearse such a story should know Leibniz better.

In the Preface to the *Novissima Sinica* written over the period 1697–99, an astute and penetrating Leibniz offers a synoptic comparison between the contributions of European and Chinese culture that would satisfy the most optimistic interpreters of this antique Chinese culture and that is of enormous relevance today. Leibniz allows that in technologies, crafts, and artifacts, Europeans stand on equal ground with the Chinese, with each people having “knowledge which it could with profit communicate to the other.” With our modern marketplace full of Chinese goods, they have certainly learned from us. In theoretical disciplines such as mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and theology, however, Leibniz sees a clear European superiority. Indeed, Europeans “excel by far in the understanding of concepts which are abstracted by the mind from the material.” Europeans own the theoretical sciences and surpass the Chinese in those intellectual tools of the mind that lead to demonstrable truth.

As a reluctant aside, Leibniz offers a second area in which Europe overshadows the China of his day—an area in which in our own historical moment we contemporary American's have transplanted too much from the European soil. For it is much to Europe's shame that they have a decided advantage in the military arts. Leibniz allows that this particular superiority is not out of ignorance on the part of the Chinese, but rather a matter of deliberate choice, and it is to their credit, for as a people they properly “despise everything which creates or nourishes ferocity in men.”

In fact, the Chinese antipathy towards conflict and belligerence is not unrelated to what Leibniz perceives to be their greatest cultural achievement. On Leibniz's reading, the Chinese excel in the not unimportant pursuit of civil life where Chinese “civilization” has set a standard far superior to that found in Europe. China's ongoing achievements in practical philosophy—“the precepts of ethics and politics adapted to the present life and the use of mortals”—have enabled them to excel in the establishment and maintenance of social order at all of its different levels. Leibniz attributes this inspiring public virtue to the way in which *li*—the continuing process of personalizing ritualized roles and relationships in familial relationships—functions to produce the *ethos* in the human community.

We might be justly proud of our deference to the rule of law, but China is a cultural resource that can be appropriated with profit to address the often disappointing quality of our personal relations—our often dysfunctional family lives—marred as they can be by selfishness, alienation, indulgence, and sometimes even violence. After all, is there anything more important anytime anywhere in the human experience than the cultivation of interpersonal relations—the very ground of a flourishing community?

David Jones: *Thank you Roger for your time, but most of all I wish to express my gratitude for all that you have done for educating the world, which even includes the Chinese themselves as they move into their history in a Post-Maoist era, about why this civilization, the longest continuous one in the world, is relevant for our contemporary thinking, philosophizing, and living in the twenty-first century. You have given so many so much. Thank you, for not only your time, but for so much more. ■*

Editor's Note:

Readers interested in the book that David Jones mentions in this interview should see the following bibliographical reference: Ames, Roger and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans. *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.