



Photo collage by Willa Davis.

Top photo: Parents, and grandparents with a boy grandchild.

Middle photo: Statue of Confucius at Shanghai's 700 year-old Wenmiao temple.

Bottom photo: Children in a Chinese Orphanage.

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TALKIN' 'BOUT MY PARENTS' GENERATION

Translating Confucian Ethics and Family Values

BY JONATHAN R. HERMAN

In a fine recent *EAA* feature article, David Jones addresses the challenge of making Chinese philosophy and religion relevant to the Western imagination by charting a structured course through the Confucian *Analects*.¹ Jones's strategy, a fairly typical one among scholars of Chinese thought, is to focus on a handful of loaded terms from the Confucian lexicon—*li* (ritual propriety), *ren* (human-heartedness), *junzi* (exemplary person), and *yi* (rightness)—explicating them within

their semantic contexts and providing illustrative examples of how they function in practice. Underlying this discussion is a pair of closely related goals. On the one hand, Jones endeavors to foster in the Sinological novice a sympathetic appreciation of Confucian social ethics, a first-time insight into the “different ways . . . of thinking about our individual lives and their relation to the communities in which we participate.”² On the other hand, he casts this inquiry as part of the broader project of cross-cultural dialogue, suggesting that “the Chinese philosophical and religious tradition offers Westerners . . . an opportunity to better understand [*sic*] themselves and seek possible prescriptions for many of our social maladies.”³ For both Jones and his acknowledged role models—Roger Ames, Henry Rosemont, Graham Parkes—there is considerable stake in this encounter, and his treatment of the *Analects* provides something of a case study for various levels of exploration.

But what of those situations where the specialist is given far less rigorous resources with which to work, where there is no opportunity to engage in textual analysis or close contextual study? How does one responsibly introduce Confucian values to an audience that is unfamiliar with anything Chinese beyond random associations of cuisine or film, where elaborate discussions of history and terminology are almost certain to waft away into a field of rarified obscurities? In short, what is the most effective way to make a constructive contribution when there is only a single chance to take one brief shot at it? This was the challenge I faced when I was recently invited by a local community college to contribute to their annual Spring Symposium, which that particular year was enigmatically entitled “Dance of Generations.” The eclectic assortment of presentations, ranging from Native American spirituality to fetal alcohol syndrome, promised to examine “the inter-

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weaving of people of different generations and generational issues.”⁴ I was specifically asked to speak about Confucian family values and provide some kind of comparative perspective. There were no Asia specialists on the faculty, and few courses that dealt with Asia in any detail. It seemed clear to me that my best hope for communicating something meaningful lay in an approach that was not only humanistic, but also topical, narrative, and anecdotal. Taking cues from both the conversation begun by Jones in his essay and the parameters of this unusual symposium, this essay provides an alternative introductory navigation through Confucian ethics, focusing for the most part on how the Confucian understanding of selfhood is inextricably tied to a distinct model of social relationships, particularly family-based relations. And while the essay does echo Jones’s sentiment that the traditional Chinese worldview may provide a compelling alternative vision, it also considers how some of its more awkward aspects may be exacerbated by contemporary problems.

The Person in Relation

Jones’s mentor, Roger Ames, is fond of breaking the ice with an amusing, though probably apocryphal, bit of whimsy attributed to the American philosopher and educator John Dewey.⁵ At an evening gathering of some kind, a friend of Dewey’s tapped him on the shoulder, pointed toward the other side of the room, and said, “John, don’t those two men standing over there look alike?” Dewey gazed at them thoughtfully for a moment and then replied, “Yes, they do. Especially the one on the right.” Now this hardly qualifies as top-flight vaudeville humor, but the irony of his statement is evident in any event. It is simply not possible for one person to “look alike.” Looking like is a relational concept; one can only look like someone or something else. This point is reinforced by the very structures of the English language. It is semantically meaningless to say that I or you or anyone else “looks alike.” The idea is simply not complete unless there is an additional frame of reference, something else to which the initial subject is likened.

Although the connection may not be immediately evident, this vignette serves as a provocative first lesson in Confucian ethics and traditional Chinese values, two catch-all phrases which can arguably be employed more or less interchangeably. The pivotal point here is the matter of selfhood, the philosophical or religious question of a person’s true self, that defining quality that makes someone uniquely who he or she is. For some, this issue may smack of grandiose metaphysical pretense, but one need not ascend the heights of academic esoterica to observe how comfortably citizens of the modern West tend to invoke language like “personal identity,” “depths of the soul,” or “innermost core” when addressing the matter of self. If these and similar phrases are examined carefully, one finds that there are two significant assumptions habitually embedded within such understandings of self and identity. First, self is ordinarily thought of as identical to the *individual*, implying that a person’s most essential quality is something independent of and theoretically abstractable from other people and outside stimuli. Thus, the task of “finding oneself” is usually imagined as a lonely or, at least, solitary affair. Second, and closely related to this, is the idea that searching for one’s true self requires introspection or something of an inward journey. One attains self-knowledge through meditation, through close self-examination, through consciousness looking back into itself.

Ames’s ice-breaker functions as an introduction to Chinese values because this understanding of what constitutes the self—i.e., self as individual, self as internal—is very different from the Chinese understanding of the matter. Just like Dewey’s man who looks alike, the traditional Confucian idea of a person is not an isolated entity, but a self in relation to others.⁶ And so, the question of “who am I?” is meaningless without an external referent. I am not, contrary to the claims of William James’s indignant crab who cannot bear to be classified as but one of a class of crustaceans, “MYSELF, MYSELF alone.”⁷ I am the son of my parents; I am the younger brother of my elder brothers. I am also someone’s friend, someone’s teacher, and someone’s neighbor. What’s more, these identities are organic and fluid; they continue to change through our lives. I was not always, but I am

now someone's husband, now someone's father, now someone's uncle, and so on. I was once a child in the charge of two healthy young parents; someday, I will be mourning them both. In the traditional Chinese worldview, human beings, by virtue of their biological make-up and observable history, are by definition social beings. It is important to note that this is not merely a case of confusing what is cultural or what is "constructed" with what is real. One's biological connection to one's family, one's social connection to the community—these are concrete, lived realities that cannot be abstracted away by hypothesizing a pure recluse living in an imagined isolation. Perhaps most importantly, if the traditional Chinese worldview sees a person as the center of an ever-shifting, ever-broadening network of relationships, then it is one's relationship to the generation that came before, the relationship with one's parents and their generation, that is recognized as the primary one. The principle of filial respect (*xiao*), the special kind of dedication that one has, or at least should have, toward one's parents, is the boilerplate for Confucian ethics, the model that sets the tone for almost all social relationships. In short, to understand traditional Chinese society, one must understand its dance of the generations and some of the unexpected ramifications of it.

When one examines Confucian culture for its social and intergenerational dynamics, the most immediately obvious aspect of it is one that is tempting to ignore: the fact that it assumes and perpetuates certain ingrained hierarchical structures and attitudes. Respect for parents is not part of some vague sense of good manners; it is indicative of a clear, and often unchallenged, premise that parents and elders occupy an elevated social rank and that failure to acknowledge superior status may result in a serious breach of etiquette. For example, in spite of the various cosmopolitan influences in contemporary China, many Chinese are still aghast when informed that some Americans—and not only Quakers—may occasionally address their elder relatives by their first names. Their reactions stem from a deep-rooted understanding that parents and elders are somehow "higher," an intuition that is viewed not as some psychological or social construct, but as absolutely reflective of a natural principle. Children should respect and obey parents simply because that is the order of things. Moreover, the extended web of social relations basically replicates this kind of vertical linkage. Of the five traditional Confucian relationships, four of them—father to son, husband to wife, ruler to subject, and elder brother to younger brother—are explicitly hierarchical, and even the fifth one—friend to friend—was initially conceived more as something of a relationship between older mentor and junior apprentice.

A second, related point is that filiality is envisioned not as a hypothetical or detached feeling of respect, but as a concrete, existential virtue that is indelibly linked to specific forms and practices. While certain modes of western thinking allow for dichotomies between belief and practice, between content and form, or even between mind and body, Chinese thinking produces no such dualism. Filial respect is not real unless it is *embodied*, unless it is learned through proper practice and demonstrated through proper physical form. In fact, the conversation seldom addresses whether or not to be filial, but instead explores what forms are the most suitable expressions of that filiality and the most effective vehicles for learning it. In some ways, honoring



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one's parents is analogous to riding a bicycle; one cannot learn to do either without actually doing it, and to say that one knows how to do either is semantically meaningless without an actual performance in formal action. Thus, the quality of respect is inseparable from a whole gamut of observables, from choice of language to how one sits, from how one obeys parents in life to how one mourns them in death. This is why Confucian culture is a *ritualized* culture, where attitudes, psychological states, and emotional affects are all closely associated with inculcated forms of expression that are studied, internalized, and refined. To summarize thus far, this particular brand of family values is one piece of an elaborately structured social system, where people are organically related to one another through asymmetric hierarchical bonds, which are realized through a vast but specific repository of cultural expressions.

The prominence placed by the Chinese on the virtue of filial piety and its appropriate expressions—the Confucian dual emphasis on both the *feeling* and the *practice* of reverence—can perhaps be illustrated by an idiosyncratic example. In a modern heir to the literary legacy of popular “morality tales” (*shanshu*), a brief passage from an oddity entitled *Seven Examples of Filial*

Behavior Among Europeans and Americans provides a fascinating perspective that may contrast a bit with how westerners ordinarily view their own heroes and role models.

The American president Washington's father had a wife who gave birth to four children and then died. His father then married another woman and had five children by her. As Washington was growing up, his stepmother treated him just like her own children. When Washington was thirteen years of age, he became fatherless. His stepmother ordered him to attend school and urged him to study. His elder (full brother) got a commission in the navy as an ensign. Washington was envious and desired a commission as well. His stepmother was fearful that the navy's lavish and licentious customs would taint him. She would not allow him to join. Washington followed her wishes—he did not disobey her. His brother's ship sunk. He left behind a wife and a young daughter. Washington supported them while they were alive and buried them when they died—he regarded doing so as his own responsibility. Later he was selected to become president. He returned home to see his stepmother. She was old and ill. Washington lamented her condition and could not bear returning (to the capital). Only when his stepmother urged him to return did he go. Later, upon hearing news of her death, he was extremely grief-stricken. He immediately ordered a horse and returned home to conduct the funeral. When his countrymen heard this, they were reduced to tears.⁸

Clearly, with the Confucian stress on family history and familial obligations (including the custodial actions taken by the stepmother), but with virtually no references to his political career, the crossing of the Delaware or the founding of a country, let alone the chopping down of cherry trees, this is a different George Washington than the one who shows up in American apocryphal accounts. But it does illustrate the high priority given to obedience, duty, and emotional attachment as earmarks of responsible offspring.

Traditional Values, Contemporary Problems

At this juncture in the discussion, it is worth pointing out something that may or may not be explicit from the preceding discussion and illustration, but is crucial for developing any semblance of comparative perspective. To state it very plainly, this social model is at odds with two cornerstones of the American myths: egalitarianism and individualism. The Chinese ethic does not follow from a failure to understand supposed universals such as the self-evident doctrine of equality or the inalienable rights of the individual.⁹ Rather, it follows from an emphasis on public spiritedness instead of private dignity, on public service instead of private autonomy, and the greatest moral transgression lies not in the violation of an individual person's integrity but in the omission of duties to others. This is not to suggest that there are no analogues at all to traditional Chinese thinking in the western intellectual landscape; many advocates of communitarian philosophy laud the emphasis on social responsibility and agree with the premise that particularistic family ties are the glue that enables a healthy community to function. But of course, the West is much more deeply rooted in the liberal tradition, whose spokespersons would quickly condemn the apparent disregard for human rights and caution that the well-intentioned concern for social harmony will ultimately lead to a tyranny of the majority.

However one views this moral disconnect, there are certain unanticipated consequences of the Confucian dance of the generations, and it would be intellectually dishonest to gloss over those in the interests of presenting Chinese thought exclusively as an alternative paradigm. More than twenty-three hundred years ago, Confucius's heir apparent, Mencius, said, "Of ways of being unfilial, there are three; and the most egregious is to leave no posterity."¹⁰ It is not entirely clear whether Mencius really had three things in mind, but his point was crystal clear to his audience and still rings true to modern Chinese sensibilities. It is the duty of a child (that is, of a male child) to have children (that is, male children) in order to fulfill an obligation to one's parents. It is not always articulated why this duty is so primary, though it is certainly related to continuation of the line and the family name, and to the hope by parents for some tangible guarantee that after their deaths there will be pious descendants to revere their spirits and tend their graves. In short, presenting one's father with a male grandchild confers a kind of symbolic immortality, not only to the father, but to the father's forbears as well. In an individualistic, rights-centered culture, the decision to have children may be experienced as a deeply private personal matter, but in the Confucian world what is at stake is the historical survival of one's entire lineage. As far the Chinese are concerned, when we are talking about our children's generation, we are *really* talking about our parents' generation.

There are of course, many tensions and ambiguities inherent in this particular value system, as can be readily illustrated through two contemporary examples. The first case is a work of fiction, though an immensely realistic one, Ang Lee's half-comedic, half-dramatic 1993 film, *The Wedding Banquet*, which follows the travails of a young, educated, professional Taiwanese man living in America, who has not married and fulfilled the ultimate filial debt to his parents. His parents back home, worried about their own declining health and anxious about their son's apparent indifference to the gravity of the situation, regularly bombard him with photos of potential wives and other ineffective tokens of trans-Pacific matchmaking. Wai-tung, the young man, politely rebuffs his parents' suggestions, not because he prefers to court women in his own way, but because he is gay and living happily with his partner of several years. In a desperate attempt to bring some peace to his long-suffering parents, Wai-tung tells them that he has a girlfriend whom he will soon be marrying, never dreaming that his ailing parents would actually insist on flying to the U.S. to meet the bride and attend the wedding. Wai-tung hastily recruits a bogus fiancé, a struggling Chinese artist who has an unrequited crush on him and the need for a green card, though the play-acting couple's simple civil ceremony proves unsatisfactory for the old-world, somewhat aristocratic parents. The cou-

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ple is drawn into a full-blown traditional wedding banquet, complete with hundreds of guests, lavish decor, and endless festivities, which continue beyond the walls of the restaurant and into the honeymoon suite. By the film's end, the bride is pregnant, Wai-tung's father has had a mild stroke, and Wai-tung finally tells all to his near-grieving mother (who is justifiably fearful that the couple will sneak off for an abortion). The unexpected turnabout occurs when the Chinese father lets on to his son's homosexual partner that he in fact knows about all the duplicity and deception. It was the only way, he sadly and resignedly explains, that he could get his grandchild. The final image of the elderly parents boarding their plane back to Taiwan, each in pain but stoically convinced that the other has somehow been spared the worst, is indeed a poignant one.

The Wedding Banquet provides an honest, dispassionate look not only at the internal dynamics of Confucian family values, but at how these values may challenge (and be challenged by) ethical models with which a Western audience is more familiar. On one level, there may be the suggestion that the commitment by Wai-tung's parents to traditional forms and structures prevents them from ever really seeing or accepting their son for who he is. By perpetuating their inherited traditions, they have constructed a situation where Wai-tung the individual has no legitimate options. He may deceive his parents, or he may live up to their expectations and thus deceive his wife or even his community, or he may subvert his own private will and perhaps deceive himself in order to ensure continuity and harmony. But Wai-tung's parents are not portrayed as arrogantly intolerant. They agonize that their hopes are so burdensome to their son, and by the end of the story, both parents even make uncomfortable attempts to reach out to their son's homosexual

lover. Thus, on another level, there may be the alternative suggestion that it is Wai-tung who has left his parents with no viable options, as his unwillingness to make a sacrifice for the two people who have throughout their lives sacrificed so much for him has the power to create such chaos in his family. It is, after all, not entirely reasonable to expect that his parents could suddenly cast off ingrained values in the interests of tolerance or respect for their son's rights. It is unlikely that his father, with no grandchildren to continue the line or honor the family name when he is gone, could simply resign himself to failing *his* father and his ancestors before him. However one views the family dynamics, the film is an incisive study of how something as intuitively healthy as filial respect can produce such an irreconcilable problem.

The second example is an even more unsettling one, as the Chinese population problem and "one-child policy" (actually "one-son-or-two-child-policy" in some rural areas) are beginning to collide with the exigencies of generational responsibility. Although the government is aggressively trying to combat the attitude, and many modernists claim to have "outgrown" China's gender-conscious heritage, there is no question but that a large segment of the population considers it a serious tragedy if they are unable to produce a son within their permitted quota. Certainly, the vast majority of Chinese appear ready to accept this as a necessary sacrifice for the well-being of their community, but even a small percentage of aberrant responses can do considerable damage. That is why over the last two decades, the practice of infant abandonment has emerged as a pressing concern,¹¹ as many thousands of girls (though there really is no completely reliable data available on the subject) are being raised in orphanages with uncertain hopes for adoption or even survival.¹²

What compounds the tragedy is that, in all likelihood, few of these children are being abandoned by people who are simply cavalier, mentally ill, or drug-addicted. They are most likely being abandoned by anguished parents who are desperate to repay their own filial debts and do not have the option simply to try repeatedly.¹³ If anything, this catastrophe profoundly illustrates how onerous and subsuming the filial urge may be, if it can

drive a parent to do something as contrary to one's own innate instincts as abandoning one's own newborn child. And whether one views this as utterly unforgivable or pathetically heroic, its ultimate effects on Chinese society are only beginning to be felt. It may soon be a national crisis that there are simply many more men than women, and the whole cycle of filial pressure would start anew. Perhaps millions of Chinese men will eventually have to fail their own filial responsibilities or seek Chinese women from overseas or even marry outside of their ethnicity. One can only imagine the kinds of ethical issues that will emerge as various technologies related to the birth process—from sex selection to cloning—become more and more viable. And while it is indeed a comfort that adoption—by both Chinese families (often in violation of birth planning regulations or adoption laws)¹⁴ and Americans and western Europeans—is giving new life to many of the children otherwise destined to live out their youth in orphanages, it perhaps also serves as an unpleasant reminder of the problem.



Rejected by their natural parents, Chinese children with disabilities have often had little prospect of enjoying a normal family life. A five year old pilot foster-care program in Shanghai is bringing them new hope. Much has been recently done to improve conditions in orphanages. The foster care program places children classed as disabled into families and provides support (not only financial) to help take care of the kids.

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To conclude, or at least to offer some interim conclusions, let me stress that this article has offered a selective sampling of implications, both compelling and troubling, associated with the ingrained Chinese attitude toward inter-generational relations. There are, of course, many other possibilities to consider along these lines. For example, this discussion has focused largely on the responsibilities that children have toward parents, but although the relations are not symmetric, there is definitely reciprocity. Also, there is much to say about how a parent is obligated to raise a child or a ruler is obligated to tend to the well-being of the community or a teacher is obligated to cherish his or her charge. This point cannot be stressed enough, as the hierarchical aspect of Chinese relations does not confer benefits only on one side of the equation or preclude the necessity for conscientious care-taking and benevolent rule. In any event, if one approaches the Chinese worldview with

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the aim of understanding better their ideas of filial respect, keeping in my mind the theoretical lesson taught by John Dewey's man who looks alike, the primary intellectual challenge is to represent honestly a worldview that assumes as a concrete reality the biological, social, even metaphysical interrelatedness of all beings and thus necessitates an ethic of mutuality. It is perhaps fitting to bring this to a close by noting parenthetically how modern Confucian philosophers have begun to extend this ethic outside of the strictly human sphere and applied it, for instance, to ecological and environmental concerns. If one thinks of the earth as "mother earth," then this is filial piety on an especially grand scale.¹⁵ ■

NOTES

1. David Jones, "Teaching/Learning Through Confucius, Navigating Our Way Through the *Analecets*," in *Education About Asia* (Fall 2000), 5, no. 2, 4–13.
2. Jones, 5
3. Jones, 5.
4. Quoted from a press release from Georgia Perimeter College, March 6, 2001 titled "Dunwoody Symposium 'Dance of Generations' Offers Look at Generational issues in the New Millennium." To view online, refer to Web link: http://www.gpc.peachnet.edu/News_and_Information/Release/press01-03-06d.php3.
5. Ames and his colleague David Hall frequently relate Dewey's idea of "the socially derivative character of consciousness and personhood" to Confucianism, though this point is developed most succinctly in *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 76–80. On the apocryphal story about Dewey, Ames playfully writes in personal correspondence, "I just picked it up along the way and . . . have lied about it so often that even I think it is true." Ames is planning to use the vignette in his forthcoming *Blackwell Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing).
6. Tu Wei-ming also discusses this issue in depth. See, for example, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).
7. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985), 9.
8. I am grateful to Keith Knapp, who while recently in China "discovered" this document as a single chapter of an anthology of morality tales. The book was published in 1967, but exact bibliographic information is not available, and it is not clear if the entry was composed for the volume or drawn from an earlier source. The brief chapter runs about ten pages, the first half comprised of similarly quirky narratives, the second half of explicitly Confucian commentary. The other filial Westerners include Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, and, rather surprisingly, Admiral George Dewey, as well as two others who are not readily identified, as the Chinese characters do not match up easily to Western names and the stories themselves are unrecognizable. They are described as an "American orator" and an "elder of the Jewish nation." The translation is adapted from Knapp's.
9. An excellent source on this subject is Wm. Theodore de Bary and Tu Wei-ming, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights*, (New York: Columbia, 1998), especially the essay by Henry Rosemont, "Human Rights: A Bill of Worries."
10. Mencius, IV:1:26. The translation is my own.
11. Kay Johnson, Huang Banghan, and Wang Liyao report, "The connection between population policies and abandonment is clear. It can be seen in the reports of government officials who find welfare centers more heavily taxed by abandoned babies when crackdowns occur in birth planning." Moreover, they note, "Not surprisingly, almost 90 percent . . . of the children who were abandoned were girls. See "Infant Abandonment and Adoption in China," *Population and Development Review*, 24, no. 3 (September 1998), 475, 501.
12. According to Johnson, Huang, and Wang, there were approximately 20,000 children in the welfare centers at any one time during the mid-1990s, though most experts agree that those who made it into the official system represented a small fraction of those abandoned. Johnson, Huang, and Wang, 501–502.
13. "Thus the typical profile of an abandoned Chinese child is a healthy newborn girl who has one or more older sisters and no brothers. She is abandoned because her birthparents already have daughters and want a son. These birthparents routinely say that they did not want to abandon the child but that given their desire for a son, birth planning policies left them 'no choice.'" Johnson, Huang, and Wang, 477.
14. Johnson, Huang, and Wang, 503.
15. See, for example, the essays in Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong ed., *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), especially Tu Wei-ming's "Beyond the Enlightenment Mentality."

JONATHAN R. HERMAN is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Georgia State University, where he teaches courses in East Asian religion, Buddhism, comparative mysticism, and religion and popular culture. He is an officer of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions and the author of *I and Tao: Martin Buber's Encounter With Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), as well as numerous articles on Taoist and Confucian mysticism, comparative religion, and western appropriations of Asian traditions.