

# THE PRIDE OF THE “COTTON-CLAD”: A CROSS-CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF INDIVIDUALISM AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Yang Ye\*

*Abstract: Max Weber attributes the rise of modern Western society to Puritanism, noting that the Calvinist Protestant found, in his lonely attempt to communicate directly with God, a sense of human dignity and individualism in agreement with the rational structure of democracy. Weber, however, asserts that Confucianism lacks the Protestant way of thinking and hence cannot help with the rise of a modern Chinese society. This essay finds illustrations of Weber's theory about the West in European civilian intellectuals who confronted authority with dignity, leading to the contemporary tradition of Western intellectuals "as the author of a language that tries to speak truth to power." It also challenges Weber's fallacy about China through a study of the varied attitudes of the individual vs. the state in Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, in the formation of a convention known as "the Pride of the Cotton-Clad," which may play a role in building a state governed by law and justice and a society that respects all its citizens.*

## I

THE GERMAN sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) has attributed the rise of capitalism and the modern Western political and social structure to that of Puritanism, and he has observed that the Calvinist Protestant found in his inner sense of loneliness, in excluding all mediators between himself and God and in trying to communicate directly with God, a sense of human dignity. This in turn brought about a kind of individualism in agreement with the rational structure of modern Western society.

Indeed such a sense of human dignity may be illustrated by numerous examples of European civilian intellectuals who preserved their dignity and pride when they confronted kings and lords, from the Reformation through modern times.

Among such intellectuals who proudly defied nobilities was Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), the definitive English author of the eighteenth century. In 1747 he issued the prospectus of his *magnum opus*, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, addressed to Lord Chesterfield (1694-1773), but it was simply neglected by the latter. Seven years later, when the *Dictionary* was about to be published, Chesterfield, the aristocrat and statesman who was also a leading patron of letters in England at the time, wrote two reviews of the dictionary in *The World*, an influential periodical to which he was a regular contributor, commending the work. In response to that,

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\*Dr. YANG YE, Associate Professor, Department of Comparative Literature & Foreign Languages, University of California, Riverside, CA 92521, USA; Advisory Professor, Fudan University, Shanghai, China. E-mail: [yang.ye@ucr.edu](mailto:yang.ye@ucr.edu).

Johnson wrote a letter to Chesterfield in which he sarcastically claimed that, “being very little accustomed to favours from the Great,” he knew not well how to receive or acknowledge such a grace. Johnson went on to reject the aristocrat’s recommendation which “had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent and cannot enjoy it, till I am solitary and cannot impart it, till I am known and do not want it” (Redford, I, 94-97).

This epistle has since established itself as a little classic, and has been the focus of discussion for many Johnson scholars. Alvin Kernan has called the exchange “a great event in the history of letters and of print, the scene in which not just Samuel Johnson but *the author*, after centuries of subservience to the aristocracy, declares his democratic independence of patronage,” and he has argued that the letter “still stands as the *Magna Carta* of the modern author” (Kernan, 20, 105). Robert DeMaria, Jr. noted that this episode in Johnson’s life has been glorified by folklore, and pointed out that in repudiating Chesterfield, Johnson “is also claiming the rights of an older generation of scholars, like Erasmus and More, who retained some of the privileges of the monastery and whose learning put their souls, though not their lives, above courtliness” (DeMaria, 180).

Then there was the story about the German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) which goes that, after a quarrel in 1806, he wrote to Prince Lichnowsky: “Prince, what you are, you are by accident of birth; what I am, I am through my own efforts. There have been thousands of princes and there will be thousands more; there is only one Beethoven!” (Kerst and Krehbiel, 73). The composer’s reputed disdain of the nobilities, as well as his confidence in his own talent, has been made even better known by another frequently retold anecdote. Bettina Brentano (1785-1842), who developed a friendship with both Beethoven and the poet Goethe, published three letters from the composer addressed to her, with controversial authenticity. According to one of the letters, the two men were taking a walk in Teplitz, presumably in August 1812, and they saw from a distance the entire Austrian Imperial Family approaching them. The poet immediately stood aside and in spite of the composer’s protest, refused to move. Beethoven pulled his hat over his head, buttoned his overcoat, and strode through the crowd with his arms crossed, while princes and their retainers made way to let him pass. Archduke Rudolph took off his hat. The Empress greeted the composer. In contrast, Goethe stood at the roadside with his hat off through all this, making low bows to the nobilities (Marek, 276-282).

Although this letter turned out to be, most likely, fabricated from Brentano’s vivid imagination, as most modern scholars have agreed, the event itself, widely known as the “Teplitz Incident,” has become a part of the popular folklore about Beethoven, and has greatly influenced the way the composer has been perceived, especially in a political sense, as pointed out by David B. Dennis (Dennis, 10). Alessandra Comini has argued that this legend, in which “the plain, dark overcoat, which he had buttoned up defiantly, made this unfettered god of music a man of the people—perfect symbol for the battle against tyranny,” and that it has become a “myth” due to the post-1848 revolutionary mood in Europe “that was disposed to see in Beethoven a fellow fighter against repression” (Comini, 17-18) .

In time, through numerous revolutions or peaceful evolutions, kings and lords have mostly yielded their power to rulers of modern states in various different names like chairman or president, and such affirmation of individualism and dignity on the part of civilians, as discussed in the above, has led to the contemporary tradition of the Western intellectuals as “exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak truth to power,” as Edward Said has articulated in *Representations of the Intellectual*, his 1993 Reith Lectures for the BBC. The moral authority of the intellectual as a prophetic outsider, Said remarks, is not for sale, and he should remain independent of special interests and stick to his individualism and social importance. Towards the end of his lectures Said argues for more space and freedom for the intellectual’s activity and against acquiescent servility to authority:

The intellectual has to walk around, has to have the space in which to stand and talk back to authority, since unquestioning subservience to authority in today’s world is one of the greatest threats to an active, and moral intellectual life (Said, 121) .

It seems to me Weber has convincingly demonstrated that the individualism and a sense of human dignity, from the Calvinist Protestant to the modern intellectual, have played a significant role in the evolution from feudalism towards the modern society in the West. In examining other major civilizations in the world, however, Weber has reached the conclusion that Confucianism lacked the Protestant way of thinking, and thus would not play a role in the rise of a modern society in China.

Based on limited knowledge of the subject notwithstanding, Weber’s rejection of the Chinese Confucian heritage has since been frequently parroted in one way or another by quite a few modern and contemporary authors, which reminds us of the fable of the six blind men feeling the elephant, each making his assumption through partial contact. To give just one example, in his highly provocative work, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel P. Huntington has argued that “China’s Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and the supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization” (Huntington, 238). It is to be challenged henceforth through an examination of the variations of the attitude of the individual versus the state in Daoism, Chinese Buddhism and most remarkably, in Confucianism, in the formation of a Chinese intellectual tradition known as the pride of the “cotton-clad” civilian (in contrast to government officials, who wore silk dress and fur coats), with its origin in the writings of Mencius, the Confucian “Second Sage.”

## II

Among the so-called “Three Teachings” (*san jiao*) in the Chinese tradition, Daoism is best known for its search of personal liberation, its distrust of all social structures, including the government, and its disdain of authority. Of the two ancient Chinese thinkers generally considered to be the founders and representatives of Daoism, Zhuangzi often chooses to wrap up his political and social argument with a fable or a story, leaving room for the reader to find the message between the lines. The Taoist

insistence on individual dignity and freedom is best revealed in the following frequently cited passage from the chapter of “Autumn Flood” among the *Outer Chapters*:

Zhuangzi was fishing by the Pu River. The King of Chu sent two Grand Masters to him with the decree: “I would like to burden you with the responsibility in my territory.” Zhuangzi held on to his fishing pole, did not turn around to look at them and said: “I have heard that there was a sacred turtle in Chu which died three thousand years ago. The king had it placed in a case, covered with a piece of cloth, and stored up in the ancestral temple. Now, what about this turtle: would it rather die and leave its skeleton behind to be honored, or would it rather live and wag its tail in the mud?” The two Grand Masters said: “It would rather live and wag its tail in the mud.” Zhuangzi said: “Go away, then! I shall wag my tail in the mud” (Zhuangzi, 203-204).<sup>1</sup>

As usual Zhuangzi leaves the story to speak for itself rather than philosophize subsequently, but the implicit message may emerge with a little *explication du texte*. The passage starts with the description of a symbolic activity (“fishing”): that of a civilian enjoying himself at leisure. Note that the King, in spite of his message conveyed in polite, diplomatic language characteristic of the age, does not approach Zhuangzi by himself, but rather dispatches his subordinates, even though they are high-ranking officials, for the mission. Next we shall notice Zhuangzi’s defiant gesture (“held on to his fishing pole, did not turn around to look at them”). To him, being forced to serve in the government, however venerated he will be, is equivalent to death, and a civilian’s life, however humble, as compared to that of a turtle which “wags its tail in the mud,” is the only other option: to live as an unrestrained free human being.

During the Age of Division (220-589), a period when there was a weakening of ideological control with the disintegration of the Chinese empire, Buddhism penetrated into China and quickly gained ground in a process of Sinicization. When an ancient Indian became a Buddhist monk, he left behind all his family, his clan, and his worldly possessions; as someone who became detached from the ordinary society, he no longer paid any veneration to secular power. This practice seemed to have moved east along with the spread of Buddhism. Gradually, however, when Chinese natives chose to enter the Buddhist clergy, it posed a problem in terms of the relation between the individual and the state. In the early fifth century, the great Chinese Buddhist Huiyuan (334-417), who was conversant with Confucian and Taoist classics before his conversion, composed the famous treatise “A Monk Does Not Bow Down Before a King,” which persuasively argued that the Buddhist clergy, by nature of their life and purpose, were far removed from the ordinary people, and therefore could not be expected to execute the external signs of obedience to secular authority. In an

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<sup>1</sup>My English translation. In the Zhou dynasty, the “Grand Master” (*da fu*) was designation of the second highest category of government officials. (Hucker, 465)

extremely smart way, however, Huiyuan also made it clear that the authority had no need to fear any challenge and threat from the Buddhist monks.<sup>2</sup>

### III

The most influential and predominant among the "Three Teachings" of Chinese civilization has of course been Confucianism, wherein the principles of personal integrity and human dignity form an integral aspect of Confucian culture which, however, was perennially subdued by despotic Chinese rulers in history, and simply ignored by many Western "China-watchers." Ever since the New Culture Movement (known as the "May Fourth Movement") of the late 1910's, Confucianism has often been identified with a political conservatism that formed the basis of the Chinese imperial system, and targeted for criticism as the main cause for everything that has kept China from developing into a modern society of democracy and rule by law. In the early 1970's, a specific anti-Confucian campaign was launched in an attempt to uproot its influence from the entire Chinese society, which was abortive on hindsight. Since then, however, Confucianism has again come to the center of the stage of controversy. While the rehabilitation of Confucianism often has the state's open or acquiesced official support, radical reformers both in and out of China have continued the accusation of Confucianism as an obstacle to China's modernization and democratization.

To reach a true understanding of Confucian thoughts, one has to make a distinction, in the first place, between "Confucianism" in a wider sense, which would include all later developments (or, not infrequently, distortions) throughout Chinese history, and what I would call "classic Confucianism," which is to be traced chiefly in the pre-Qin classics, especially the original texts of *The Analects* and *Mencius*. Second, a process of Hegelian *Aufheben* (sublation) is always necessary in the comprehension and possible transformation of Confucianism or any cultural heritage. Confucianism, especially after it was officially promoted during the Han dynasty, has indeed become an ideology for governing throughout the imperial dynasties. In the long process, some of its manifold aspects have been emphasized and foregrounded, such as its respect for authority, its emphasis on the propriety of social positions and respective social responsibilities, while some others have been subdued and neglected.

Confucianism emerged as a response to the challenge of the age. The highly ritualized Zhou civilization was on its way out; the power of the central state of the Zhou kingdom was increasingly weakening; war among feudal states broke out each year. At the core of the thoughts of Confucius was the search for an answer to the problem: what kind of political and social structure could guarantee peace and prosperity of the people, and stop all wars? Confucius' answer was a state that would govern by the principles of *ren* ("benevolence," "the humane" or "humanity") and *yi*

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<sup>2</sup>For an English translation of Huiyuan's treatise see De Bary, 1960, 320-326.

(“the righteous” or “sense of justice”). To establish such a state, one has to start from the grass root: the individual.

Central to the ultimate Confucian political ideal of “governing the state and bringing peace to all under heaven” is the cultivation of individual personality. If the acknowledgement of individual rights and human dignity lays the foundation for Western democracy, then it is not alien to Chinese culture, as the classic Confucian texts abound in observations about such acknowledgement. In the Chinese tradition, when one refers to the Confucian concept of ideal personality, Mencius’s famous description of what makes a “great man” (*da zhangfu*) always comes to one’s mind first. Eloquent as Mencius’ observation is, it has originated from, and developed on, some of the essential thoughts of Confucius. Therefore, to fully understand the Mencian concept, one need to, in the first place, trace it back to the teachings of Confucius.

Confucius considers the right Way (*dao*) and Virtue (*de*) to be the basis for the personality of a Confucian “gentleman” (*junzi*). He exemplifies it by a description of himself: “I set my heart on the Way, base myself on virtue, lean upon benevolence for support, and take my recreation in the arts” (VII, 6).<sup>3</sup> In terms of the relation of the individual vs. the state, Confucius again believes that the individual, rather than accommodating himself to the latter in a blind and unprincipled manner, should “abide to the death in the good Way.” In ancient China, the idea of the world was “all under heaven” (*tianxia*), and the term “state” (*guo* or *bang*) meant not only the central royal government of the Zhou, but also each of the many vassal states around. Patriotism, in the modern sense of the word, was not known in this age. Instead, albeit a native of the Lu dukedom himself, Confucius seems to believe that the individual had his right to choose to live in whatever state where the right Way prevailed. As he remarks:

Enter not a state that is in peril, stay not in a state that is in danger. Show yourself when the Way prevails in the world, but hide yourself when it does not. It is a shame to be poor and humble when the Way prevails in the state. It is a shame to be rich and powerful when the Way falls into disuse in the state (VIII, 13).

It should be noted that what Confucius means here by a state “in peril” or “in danger” should be understood as one that proved to be a threat to the Way, not to the individual personally. On the surface, his advice to “hide oneself” when the Way fails is close to Taoist thinking, but in the context of the Master’s numerous sayings on the topic in *The Analects*, it is more an active denial of the state than a kind of passive escapism.

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<sup>3</sup>For both *The Analects* and *Mencius* I use D. C. Lau’s translation in the *Penguin Classics* (1979 and 1970), but on a number of occasions make alterations when I believe the translation has deviated from the original. Sources of citations (chapter numbers in Roman numeric and passage numbers in Arabic numeric) are given parenthetically in the text. I have also changed all the romanization spelling from the Wade-Giles system in Lau’s translation to *pinyin*.

In terms of the individual's social relations (the ways one individual treats another), Confucius stresses the importance of good will and trust: "Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others and to be trustworthy in what you say" (I, 8). Mutual trust should be the basis for human relation and a good society. Once, on being asked by a disciple, Confucius has named "the trust of his friends" as one of the three things he would enjoy most (V, 26). He has made a strong point on another occasion: "I do not see how a man can be acceptable who is untrustworthy in word?" (II, 22)

Confucius considers "courage" as one of the three basic human virtues (the other two being "humaneness" and "wisdom"), a concept that was later further developed by Mencius. The Master criticizes his disciple Zi Lu for having "a greater love for courage" than himself but lacking in judgment (V, 7). Obviously, the Master acknowledges his own admiration of courage as well, but he believes that courage is to be subjected to benevolence: "A benevolent man is sure to possess courage, but a courageous man does not necessarily possess benevolence" (XIV, 4). The core of Confucian courage lies in a sense of the righteous. To encounter what is right, and yet to leave it undone shows a lack of courage (II, 24). When Zi Lu ventures to ask the Master if a gentleman should consider courage a supreme quality, he is told that for the gentleman, what is the supreme is the righteous (XVII, 23).

Both the humane and the righteous are basic concepts of Confucian thinking, though the latter was not fully defined and developed until Mencius. While Confucius talks more about the former, he also says a few words on the latter. Born and brought up as a nobleman and used to luxury and comfort in life, the Master nevertheless has exalted the joy of a simple, plain, but principled life:

In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the using of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and power attained not through the right means have as much to do with me as passing clouds (VII, 16).

On another occasion, Confucius has observed that a "complete man" is one who, at the sight of profit, manages to remember what is right, who is ready to lay down his life in the face of danger, and who is able to remain loyal to his principles even if he has lived in straitened circumstances for a long time (XIV, 12).

On the ultimate meaning of life and death, Confucius puts his emphasis on the former, which to a very large extent accounts for the prevailing secular, this-worldly concern in Confucian thinking. When asked about his idea of death, the Master has made his famous terse reply: "I don't know life yet, how am I supposed to know death?" (XI, 12) However, if one has to choose between the two when the big issues of the humane and the righteous are at stake, then the decision is clear: a Confucian gentleman who lives on the principle of the humane and with a purpose in life should never seek to stay alive at the expense of humaneness, and in order to accomplish humaneness should be ready to accept death (XV, 9).

Confucius is fully aware that human beings by nature preferred wealth and rank to poverty and humbleness, but when the basic principles are at stake, again the choice is to be made on principles:

Wealth and high station are what men desire, but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them. Poverty and low station are what men dislike, but if I suffered them while sticking to the right way, I would not try to escape from them (IV, 5).

In other words, the individual's attitude towards the society and the state depends upon whether the right Way prevails in that society or in that state, and the higher principles of the humane and the righteous are the final measure of his social behavior.

The numerous brief passages in *The Analects* on the contrast between the gentleman and "the petty-minded" (*xiao ren*) provide glimpses of illumination on the ways of fostering a Confucian personality. The Master tells his disciple Zi Xia that one should aim to be a "gentleman scholar" rather than a "petty-minded scholar" (VI, 13), which shows that intellect and learning, in Confucius's idea, are far from sufficient to make a perfect human being. Eventually, what marks the gentleman from the petty-minded is one's attitude in the face of profit. "The gentleman understands what the right is. The petty-minded understands what profit is" (IV, 16). In other words, the gentleman always puts his sense of the righteous first. Wealth and rank mean as little to him as the "passing clouds" when the righteous is at stake. The petty-minded, on the other hand, keeps his eye on the profit only, and goes all out for his personal gain.

A sense of shame also marks a Confucian gentleman from the petty-minded. Confucius has once remarked that a gentleman is "free from worries and fears," and the reason for that is because he is supposed not to find anything to reproach himself for on self-examination. Frank and forthright, the individual who behaves on high moral principles naturally is supposed to enjoy a peaceful mind. In the Master's own description: "The gentleman enjoys ease of mind, the petty man is always full of anxiety" (VII, 37). The Confucian high principles may be summarized in one word, namely his "purpose" (*zhi*) of life. In the Master's own words: "The Three Armies may be deprived of their commander, but even a common man cannot be deprived of his purpose." Such moral principles and courage often emerge in adversity, when one is forced to make important choices in the face of danger. In the Master's own great metaphor: "Only when the cold season comes is one to know that the pine and the cypress are the last to shed their leaves" (IX, 28).

#### IV

*The Analects* is a book of records not only about the Master himself, but also about his many major disciples. Among the latter, Zeng Dian seems to have focused his attention on the cultivation of personality; he has added a sense of mission to the Confucian gentleman. To him, a gentleman cannot afford not to be strong and resolute in mind, for "his burden was heavy and his road was long, and only with death would the road come to an end" (VIII, 7). On another occasion he has observed that the gentleman is one who stays loyal to his life's purpose in times of crisis (VIII,



6). It was said that after the death of the Master, Zeng Dian became the tutor to the Master's grandson, Kong Ji (Zi Si). As time moved on, one of Kong Ji's disciples turned out to be Mencius, later canonized as the Second Sage. A careful examination of the sayings of Mencius would demonstrate how the torch was carried on from one generation to the other in the Confucian tradition.

Unlike Confucius, who served briefly as Minister of Justice in his native Lu state, Mencius remained a civilian all life. In ancient China, civilians wore cotton clothes whereas the officials wore silk dress or fur coats. The term "cotton-clad" (*bu yi*) has therefore become a synonym for the civilian. It was in the numerous sayings and behaviors of Mencius that the convention of "the Pride of the Cotton-Clad" (*bu yi zhi ao*) was firmly established in the Chinese tradition.

Mencius is fond of discussing courage. As mentioned previously, Confucius seems to have accepted courage with a grain of salt; in his sayings courage is always subordinate to the humane and the righteous. By the age of Mencius, the concept of courage seems to have taken on a negative sense. That explains why King Xuan of Qi would tell Mencius, in such a sheepish manner: "I have a weakness: I admire courage." Mencius, in his idiosyncratic challenge to popular ideas, suggests that one should make a distinction between "petty courage" (*xiao yong*) and "supreme courage" (*da yong*). The former is the kind of audacity that drives a common man to engage in a street fight, whereas the latter is the kind of courage to set the state right and to bring peace to "all under heaven." His example of a practitioner of the latter, the "supreme courage," is the founder of the Zhou dynasty, the Martial King, who led a successful revolution against the despot King Zhou of the Shang regime, and thus changing the "mandate from heaven" (IB, 3).

Mencius has made it clear that he learned the idea of "great courage" from the teachings of Zeng Dian, who in turn heard it from the Master himself. Mencius cites Zeng Dian's saying (a passage not found in *The Analects*):

I once heard about supreme courage from the Master. If, on looking within, one finds oneself to be in the wrong, then even though one's adversary be only a common fellow coarsely clad, one is bound to tremble with fear. But if one finds oneself in the right, one goes forward even against men in the thousands (IIA, 2).

Obviously, to Mencius, the principle of the righteous lies at the core of courage. However, Mencius has further developed the Confucian concept of courage by looking into its mental basis. To him, courage is based on what a human being holds within himself. Besides the "heart sensitive to the sufferings of others" which is the foundation for benevolence, a human being is supposed to have "the heart of shame" which is the basis for the righteous (IIA, 6). He has made a strong point on the same idea on another occasion: "A Man must not be without shame, for the shame of being without shame is shamelessness indeed" (VIIA, 6). This has originated from Confucius's observation: "To be able to feel ashamed is close to be courageous." To Mencius, one of the three things a gentleman delights in is that, "Looking above, he is not ashamed to face Heaven; and looking down, he is not ashamed to face man" (VIIA, 20). In addition to "the heart of shame," one should have "the heart of right

and wrong,” and make a clear distinction between what he is supposed to do and what not to do based on principles. In Mencius’s opinion, a great man who is able to achieve certain things is one who refuses to do other things in the first place (IVB, 8).

*The Book of Mencius* not only keeps a record of what the Second Sage said, but also one, frequently quite detailed, of what he did. He has set up a role model for later Chinese intellectuals to maintain their own dignity against men of higher rank and power, including kings and princes. Indeed, even the Chinese Buddhist Huiyuan’s famous dictum that “a monk does not bow down before the king” probably originated from the Mencian example, as Huiyuan, before he converted to Buddhism, was a learned man conversant with Confucian classics. Unlike Confucius, who seems to have been an amiable, polite and soft-speaking gentleman most of the time, as known to us from *The Analects*, the Mencius as we find in the classic was a proud individual who exemplified the Master’s metaphoric praise of his disciple Zi Lu, “though clad in coarse and rugged clothes, (he) would not feel ashamed when standing right next to those in fur-coats.” Mencius never hesitates to speak his mind in front of rulers. On one occasion, in a dialogue with the King of Qi, Mencius has pressed the issue on the responsibilities of a sovereign, which embarrasses the King so much that, we are told, his Majesty “turned his face to his attendants and changed the subject” (IB, 6).

Once, on the excuse of sickness, the King cancels an appointment with Mencius on very short notice, and asks to reschedule the interview for the next morning. Mencius replies that he too is ill and so is unable to go to the court as told. The next day, Mencius goes out to pay condolence to a friend. His disciples are scared, and beg Mencius not to go out, but Mencius insists: “I was ill yesterday, but I have recovered today.” After Mencius has left the house, a messenger from the King arrives to inquire after his illness, along with a doctor. A disciple tells the visitors that Mencius has recovered and is on his way to the court, and immediately sends someone to waylay Mencius with the message: “Do not come home. Go straight to the court.” Still Mencius does not go the court: instead he goes to stay at a friend’s place. When the friend tells Mencius that he is not showing the King the due respect, Mencius starts to make an eloquent self-defense. To him, in terms of “assisting the world and ruling over the people,” virtue is the supreme thing, more important than rank and age. He observes:

Hence a prince who is to achieve great things must have subjects he does not summon. If he wants to consult them, he goes to them. If he does not honor virtue and delight in the Way in such a manner, he is not worthy of being helped towards the achievement of great things (IIB, 2).

In terms of the relation of sovereign vs. subject, Confucius, in his mild way, has emphasized propriety: they should treat each other as proper to their respective position. “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject be a subject” (XII, 11). On a singular occasion the Master has defined the relation as follows: “The ruler should employ the services of his subjects in accordance with the rites. A subject should serve the ruler by doing his best.” While Mencius’s idea is not opposed to the Master’s, it seems to

have put more weight on the individual's dignity. The relation, in his opinion, ought to be a co-operative one, dependent on each other, and based on mutual respect:

If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a stranger. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy (IVB, 3).

While there is a difference between the ruler and his subjects in the social hierarchy, the dignity of the individual is not to be humiliated simply because of his lower station on that ladder. If the ruler does not behave as he ought to, then one is not obliged to treat him as one. To Mencius, a revolution, or "change of mandate," is fully justifiable if the sovereign does not follow the principles of the humane and the righteous, as in the case of the last ruler of the Shang dynasty, Zhou, overthrown by rebel leaders who had been his former subjects. On the question of whether regicide is permissible, Mencius has a clear answer:

One who assassinates benevolence is an assassin; one who murders rightness is a murderer. One who is both an assassin and a murderer is an outcast. I have indeed heard of the execution of the outcast, Zhou (the last king of the Shang), but I have not heard of any regicide (IB, 8).<sup>4</sup>

It is on the basis of such a mutually dependent and co-operative relation between the prince and the subject that Mencius goes further to make his great statement about the common people versus the state and the sovereign: "The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain (symbol of the state) come next; last comes the ruler" (VIIB, 14). The Mencian concept of personal integrity and human dignity is further defined in his well-cited description of what makes a "great man":

To live in the wide space of all under heaven, to assume the right position of all under heaven, and to carry out the great Way of all under heaven; to share it with the people when one's ideal prevails, to carry it on all by oneself when it does not; not to be overwhelmed by wealth and rank, not to be led to deviate from one's principles by poverty and low station, and not to be bent in one's Way by awe and force: this is what makes a great man (IIIB, 107).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Mencius's idea is in sharp contrast to that of a Western thinker like Thomas Hobbes. Compare this passage with *Leviathan* (Hobbes, Chapter 29, 369). Ancient Chinese regard the sovereign as the Son of Heaven 天子 (*tianzi*) who is therefore supposed to enjoy the mandate of Heaven, and behaves according to Heaven's Way. Hobbes believes that the sovereign is "obliged by the Law of Nature and to render an account therefore to God, the author of that Law, and none but him" (Hobbes, Chapter 30, 376). The similarity ends here. To Mencius a rebellion or revolution is justifiable when the sovereign has lost the mandate, but Hobbes argues for the absolute power of a sovereign, and does not seem to have provided an answer if that "Law of Nature" is not carried out by the sovereign.

<sup>5</sup>The English translation of this passage is mine, as Lau's is not as clear as it should be.

This passage provides the ultimate definition of a Confucian gentleman. From the Master's saying about a gentleman's attitude towards life and death, the righteous vs. the profit, Mencius, in a metaphorical language that characterizes his arguments, describes the choice between life and death a gentleman has to make when the righteous is at stake. Both fish and bear's paw, he says, are delicious food, and if one can only have one of the two, one will naturally pick the more valuable bear's paw. Similarly, both life and the righteous are highly treasured, but when one has to make a choice between the two, it should be the latter.

## V

Such Confucian values as illustrated in *The Analects* and *Mencius* are well illustrated in classical Chinese literature. For an earlier sample that sings about personal integrity we can go all the way back to the ancient poem attributed to Qu Yuan, *On Encountering Trouble* (*Li sao*). In that poem, probably the earliest lyric song that presents an individual voice and creates a self portrait (or a *persona*), we already see the image of someone who cultivates and maintains his "inward beauty" of personal integrity. Despite all kinds of adversity and misfortune, he refuses to deviate from his principles, and eventually implies that he will choose death (suicide) rather than giving up his beliefs. However, the poem was a cultural product long before Confucianism was established as a dominant ideology, in the distant Chu state that was on the margin of the circle of Confucian influence. Although there are many similarities between the conduct of the persona in the poem and a Confucian gentleman, it is not to be recognized as an open affirmation of Confucian values.<sup>6</sup>

Another example was Zhuge Liang (181-234), the famous statesman of the period of the "Three Kingdoms" (220-265) and a major counselor to Liu Bei (161-223), the founder and first sovereign of the Shu-Han Empire. Zhuge Liang remained a "cotton-clad" civilian until he was visited three times by Liu Bei in person, and it was only then that he, seeing the latter's sincerity, agreed to leave his farming life, an event that has since been immortalized in the classical Chinese novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Later, even at the height of his political power (as Prime Minister under Liu Bei's successor, Liu Chan), he always kept his civilian background in mind. In the famous "Memorial on Dispatching the Troops" ("*Chushi biao*"), he not only offers political advice to the young ruler, but also provides a personal account of

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<sup>6</sup>Qu Yuan (340?-278? B.C.), to whom the authorship of the poem has been ascribed, was a younger contemporary of Mencius (372?-289 B.C.). I often suspect that the similarities of moral values between those found in *On Encountering Trouble* and in *The Book of Mencius* demonstrate that the Confucian school of thinking was established on the basis of age-old traditional values, rather than verify the immediate success and widespread influence of Confucian principles.

himself, declaring, not without some pride: “Your subject was originally a ‘cotton-clad,’ engaged in farming at Nanyang.”<sup>7</sup>

Then there was Tao Yuanming (365-427), one of the most beloved Chinese poets of all times, who served briefly as a county magistrate. On hearing that a superior official, whom he despised, was about to tour the county, and if he remained at his position he would have to pay the homage to that person, he resigned from the position, stating that he would not “bend my waist (i.e., to bow down) in front of a rustic fellow for the sake of five *dou* of rice.”<sup>8</sup> He returned to his life as a civilian, living the rest of his life on farming. Though he lived a poor life, so much so that occasionally he even begged for food, he composed numerous poems about his content and happiness while living as one among the “cotton-clad.”

Last but not least, we should give some thoughts to the place of Confucianism in modern China. Let us first consider how it started to be officially accepted and promoted. The critical questions that obsessed the early emperors of the Han dynasty were: Why did the preceding Qin Empire, so powerful in the beginning, turn out to be so short-lived (sixteen years only)? What went wrong? What could we do to prevent our empire from falling apart in the wake of the Qin? The adoption of Confucianism, only one of the Hundred Schools of Thoughts in the age, was a direct response to those questions. After the Martial Emperor (156-87 BC, ruled 140-87 BC) accepted his courtier Dong Zhongshu’s advice to “banish the other schools and honor Confucianism only,” Confucianism began to enjoy a dominant place in Chinese intellectual history, and its influence in Chinese culture can never be overstated.

However, the Confucian discourse on the individual, on personal integrity, and on human dignity was often subdued in Chinese history. The most dramatic censorship was exercised by Zhu Yuanzhang, Emperor Taizu (1328-1398, ruled 1368-1398) and founder of the Ming dynasty. After he was enthroned, Zhu had observed the tradition in honoring Confucianism as the official ideology, but in the winter of 1373, when he came upon the above-cited passage about the relation of ruler versus subject in reading *Mencius*, he was so infuriated that he immediately issued an imperial edict to stop honoring Mencius in the Confucian temple. Anticipating disapproval from his ministers, he mentioned in the edict that anyone who dared to remonstrate against the edict would be executed. The great inspiration of Mencius was manifested by what took place right afterwards. According to the biography of Qian Tang, a courtier, in the official *History of the Ming*, Qian made a remonstrance right away, saying: “If I am able to die for Meng Ke (Mencius), I shall die a glorious death.” Many others followed. The emperor finally revoked the edict,

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<sup>7</sup>For the episode in an English translation of the novel see Roberts, Chapter 37, 281-289. Zhuge Liang’s “Memorial on Dispatching the Troops” is also known as the “First Memorial on Dispatching the Troops” (*Qian chushi biao*) in distinction from the “Second Memorial on Dispatching the Troops” (*Hou chushi biao*), but the authenticity of the latter is controversial. For the citation from Zhuge Liang’s text see Xiao Tong, *Juan 37*, Vol. 4, 1671-1675.

<sup>8</sup>The “rustic fellow” refers to that official whom the poet despised. Five *dou* 斗 of rice (about 11 British gallons) is the measure for the monthly official salary for a county magistrate at the time.

but after a while authorized his ministers to make an abridged version of *Mencius*, which excluded 85 passages from the original text including most of what we have discussed above, and had it circulated as the only official edition (*Ming shi*, Vol 13, *juan* 139, 3981-3982; Quan; Rong; Su) .

It failed to work. As a matter of fact, the Ming dynasty, despite its numerous “literary inquisitions” and ruthless persecution of intellectuals, was an age during which individualism rose high, especially during late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although the founding emperor tried to stamp out the teachings of Mencius, they found a fresh and spirited incarnation in a work produced at the end of the dynasty, Huang Zongxi (1610-1695)’s *Waiting for the Dawn: A Plan for the Prince*. In the work, Huang has further developed the Mencian theory on the sovereign-subject relation, challenged the authority of the prince, clarified the responsibility of ministers, and discussed the necessity and prospect of a state governed by law. This book has had a profound influence on the rise of modern Chinese political thought, including that of the renowned reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929) and Sun Zhongshan (1866-1925), the founder of the Republic of China (De Bary 1993).

The continuation of the Confucian values accounted for the instant popularity of Western theories of democracy and human rights when they were introduced to the Chinese public at the turn of the century. In Yan Fu’s excellent classical Chinese rendition of John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* and Montesquieu’s *L’Esprit des lois*, Chinese intellectuals found a source of inspiration that was not incompatible with some of the fundamental Confucian moral values. Without such compatibility, those books would never have met with their immediate success in China.

On the other hand, there was nothing the Chinese rulers had feared more than the Chinese intellectuals behaving on the Confucian principles of personal integrity. Among Chinese sovereigns, Emperors Kangxi, Qianlong and Yongzheng of the Manchu Qing dynasty could claim to have practiced the most cunning “art” of dealing with the problem. On the one hand, they carried out large-scale “literary inquisitions” and maintained high pressure to wipe out all resistance. On the other, they offered wealth, rank, and honor to all those who served them in blind obedience. For a long time, the above-cited Mencian discussion of the “supreme importance of the people” was known to the Chinese public in a garbled version, with the second line (about the state) torn out of the text. To Mencius, even the authority of the state is not as important as the people, and should be placed second. But to all despots past and present, “the interest of the state” has become the supreme. Patriotism, which Samuel Johnson once called “the last refuge of a rascal,” has become a cheap tool for all totalitarian states.

Weber’s theory has already been seriously challenged by the rise of an Industrial East Asia. The economic success we have witnessed in East Asian countries such as Japan or South Korea, and in China today, all under age-old Confucian influence, has been attributed by many scholars to a Confucian work ethic in the cultural background. The establishment and growth of democracy and rule by law in the region have also proved that people with a Confucian tradition could well accommodate themselves to the so-called “Western” modern political system.

Habits die hard, though. Even today, geo-politicians and some political scientists, with their half-baked knowledge of Chinese culture, still argue against the feasibility of democracy in China. Ironically, they often suggest as a reason for their argument the Confucian emphasis on family, community and state. Either it is the case best described by Alexander Pope's line that "a little learning is a dangerous thing," or these gentlemen are simply like the ostrich that buries its head in the sands.

As we have discussed above, although a Confucian gentleman does not seek a communion with God as the Protestant does, he does not necessarily lack a sense of his individual value and dignity. The Confucian ideal of governing the state and bringing peace to the world is not in conflict with a respect for the individual and a sense of human dignity, but rather is based on them. The cultivation of personal integrity and the principles of "the humane" and "the righteous" will, and ought to, play a significant role in the re-construction of a national consciousness. Despite the anti-Confucian cultural movements since the 1910's and all the political campaigns in China, Confucianism has been an integral part of the culture for too long to be exterminated. The sense of human dignity and pride of the individual versus the state, the fundamental principles of the humane and the right, can and should provide a solid foundation for a state governed by law and justice, a society that honors and respects the dignity of each and every one of its citizens, that will inevitably rise on the eastern horizon.

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