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Chapter 16

Balancing Conservatism and Innovation: The Pragmatic *Analects*

Sor-hoon Tan

At the age of 14, I picked up a copy of the *Analects* for the first time.¹ A quick browse revealed content that reminded me so much of my mother's lectures about proper behavior that I promptly put it aside as a tract of old fashioned thinking and conservative manners. Through my early adulthood, my feelings about Chinese culture were close enough to the May Fourth intellectuals' sensibilities that I did not question interpretations of the *Analects*, and more generally Confucianism, as teaching a kind of conservatism incompatible with modern life. However, subsequent study has convinced me that such interpretations are one-sided and often motivated by ideologies that misunderstood or misappropriated Confucius' thinking. This is not to deny that there are elements of conservatism in Confucius' teachings in the *Analects*, and even more in the traditions that grew around the text, but the meaning of that "conservatism" (perhaps "conservatisms") is neither straightforward nor simple, nor is it always opposed to innovation in all forms. This chapter will explore the tension between the conservative and the innovative tendencies in the text.

Introducing an Approach to Reading the *Analects*

Some might object that approaching the *Analects* from the perspective of conservatism versus innovation is anachronistic, since conservatism is a modern political doctrine or philosophy with its roots in Edmund Burke's 1790 work,

¹ Unless otherwise stated, passages from the *Analects* quoted in this chapter are from the translation of Ames and Rosemont 1998.

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Reflections on the Revolution in France (Burke 2004), although some have traced it further back to Aristotle (Quinton 1993: 248), and the contemporary preoccupation with the tension between conservatism and innovation had no place in Confucius' day. And so it is; but I submit that anachronism need not be objectionable as long as a reader does not completely reduce the text to her limited present horizon and become deaf and blind to its "otherness," but instead interacts with the text in ways that allow that otherness to manifest itself, to make itself heard, to raise questions and cast new light that could not have arisen in a closed horizon defined only by contemporary concerns. This does require the present day reader to discover and understand the historical and other contexts in which the text was formed, transmitted, and read through the ages and in different situations. However, it does not require complete exclusion of contemporary concerns or conceptual tools. Some anachronism is unavoidable if one is not reading the *Analects* merely as a relic, an ancient curiosity that belongs only to the museum, with nothing to say to contemporary problems.²

Confucius himself was guilty of anachronistic readings of ancient texts in the context of the problems of his day. Much as Confucius loved the ancients, it was not for their sake that he recommended that his students read the texts transmitted from the past; he did so out of a confidence in the perennial value of what they could learn from those texts. Confucius' approach to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) shows clearly that his concerns in "cherishing the ancients" were not scholastic but pragmatic (7.1). He urged his students to study the *Odes* not just to preserve texts transmitted from the past or to understand them only in their own terms (of the past), but also for their continued relevance to practices of their time.

Reciting the [*Odes*] can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you (17.9).

Confucius instructed his son that, "If you do not study the [*Odes*], you will be at a loss as to what to say" (16.13). In his opinion, striving to become a person without mastering the "*Zhounan*" and "*Shaonan*" sections of this text "is like trying to take your stand with your face to the wall" (17.10). He valued the study of ancient texts because they provided a language that was useful for understanding the world the readers lived in, for articulating contemporary concerns, and other skills that helped readers live a better life in the contemporary world. He praised Zixia 子夏 and Zigong 子貢 for their readings of the *Odes* in the contexts of their own experience and concerns they shared with their contemporaries and for their ability to

² A related objection is whether the approach unjustifiably imposes a "Western" conceptual framework onto the text. I believe this can be addressed in a similar way by being sensitive to the cultural differences between the contexts in which "conservatism" first arose and the contexts in which it has been employed in Chinese intellectual discourses, just as readers need to be sensitive to the differences between the contexts in which Confucius and his students live and learn, the contexts in which various audiences have understood the *Analects* in different times, and the contexts of today's readers of the text.

apply their understandings of texts in new situations “yet to come” (3.8; 1.15). The exploration that follows will show that balancing the conservative and the innovative is central to the pragmatic project of the *Analects*, which is not confined to Confucius and his students, or to pre-Qin China.

Conservatism is very much a contemporary issue for today’s Chinese, and Confucianism is often involved in the debates among Chinese conservative thinkers, and between them and their opponents. There is renewed academic interest in the works of those who defended Confucianism, and more generally Chinese traditions, against the iconoclastic attacks of the New Culture movement during the Republican era, described as cultural conservatives, after half a century of neglect or vilification (Furth 1976; Fung 2010). The “importation” of what was broadly termed neo-conservatism, varied modern interpretations of Confucianism accompanied by a commitment to preserve or revive the Confucian tradition, played a key role in the revitalization of the Confucian discourse in mainland China during the 1980s (Lin et al. 1995: 735). Later the term neo-conservatism is also used differently to describe a loose set of arguments calling for political stability, central authority, and tight social control, favoring the role of ideology and nationalism, which has emerged as one of the prominent post-Tiananmen Chinese intellectual currents (Chen 1997: 593; Fung 2010: 264–266). It shares with earlier Chinese conservatism a high respect for tradition and overlaps with a broader revival of interest in Confucianism, which some neo-conservatives believe can be the basis for rebuilding national identity and renewing political legitimacy (Xiao 1994: 24).

Against this background, many scholars have commented that the revival of interest in Confucianism in mainland China of the last few decades have been supported by the Chinese Communist Party in the hope of finding a replacement for a fast becoming defunct Marxist ideology (De Bary 1995: 179; Wang 1998: 22; Lin and Galikowski 1999: 56; He and Guo 2000: 28–30).³ The Communist state’s intentions and attitudes towards Confucianism are probably more ambiguous and mixed. Furthermore, whatever the state’s motives, support for the Communist state need not be and probably has not been the driving force for many Chinese scholars and other ordinary Chinese who have taken advantage of the resources made available to research and other activities that support the interest in Confucian and other Chinese traditions, including those parents who have sent their children to “Classics recitation” classes that became popular in recent years.⁴ What they share is more likely a belief that Confucianism and other Chinese traditions have a role to play in contemporary life and in China’s future. If attachment to traditions is conservative, Chinese conservatism today appears to be thoroughly pragmatic.

³ Cf. John Makeham’s rejection of the thesis that “official patronage” played a key role in the revival of Confucianism in China (Makeham 2008: 54–57). The pronouncement of Marxism’s death also may prove to be exaggerated.

⁴ Instead of following the lead of state propaganda, ordinary Chinese citizens tend to be put off by state orchestrated promotion of “traditions.” An example is the call for boycott of the film on Confucius (starring Hong Kong movie star Chow Yuen Fatt) in 2010 due to a perception that it was endorsed and promoted by state authorities (Magistad 2010; Pierson 2010).

The current “neo-conservatives” in mainland China are very different from the “neoconservatives” in the United States – not surprising since American neoconservatism grew out of very specific ideological and policy background quite different from Chinese experience of the past century (Stelzer 2004). Chinese neo-conservatives are deeply suspicious of liberal democracy, oppose radical changes to China’s political system, and support strengthening state authority to maintain order and stability, if necessary by employing ideological tools, such as nationalism built on cultural traditions. Although often influenced by European and American thinkers such as Spengler, Eucken, and Babbitt, the cultural conservatism of the Republican era developed within the context of China’s own problem, particularly in response to radicalism of the New Culture/May Fourth movement, and China’s need to find a place in a rapidly changing world (Fung 2010: 64–72). The Chinese neo-conservatism of the 1990s grew out of reflections on the implications for China of the collapse of the Soviet Union and an apparently new world order, as well as new domestic problems. Although different, there are some similarities between Chinese conservatisms and what Western thinkers identify as conservatisms – although Western thinkers also disagree among themselves – for example, privileging of order and stability against revolutionary change, respect for and commitment to the conservation of tradition, and a holistic view of society often understood as a “social organism” (Quinton 1993; Scruton 2001). Like all “isms,” the meaning of “conservatism” is essentially contested. It is not necessary for our purpose to venture too far into those conceptual contests. This chapter is primarily concerned with the issue of respect for tradition and related attitudes to change and innovation.

The Conservative Confucius: Transmission Through Critical Reflection and Change

Confucius has often been called conservative, for example, in his attitudes to rites (*li* 禮) (Shun 1993: 465), which are central to the Confucian way of life. Li Zehou 李澤厚 attributed to Confucius a desire to restore the clan-based social organization and government of the early Zhou dynasty (Li 1996: 7). In *Analects* 3.4, Confucius said, “The Zhou dynasty looked back to the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 dynasties. Such a wealth of culture! I follow the Zhou.” To some, Confucius’s thinking was a “conservative reaction” to the breakdown of the world order decreed by heaven in ancient China (Graham 1989: 1–33). Much of this reputation for conservatism rests on Confucius’ own confessed “love for the ancients (*haogu* 好古),” his frequent references to exemplary conduct and personalities of the past, and his emphasis on the study of transmitted texts such as the *Book of Odes* and the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記 1992). The tension between conservatism and innovation, between tradition and creativity, is linked to Confucius’ love for the ancients in *Analects* 7.1:

The Master said, “Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients – in these respects I am comparable to our venerable Old Peng.”⁵

Confucius claimed that he sought most of his knowledge in what was already known to the ancients (7.20). His work as a teacher is itself a process of transmission, and part of what he taught his students is to value what was handed down from the past, and to put that tradition-based knowledge into practice. Confucius’ student, Zengzi 曾子, examined himself daily by asking, “In what has been passed on to me, have I failed to carry it into practice? (*chuan buxi hu* 傳不習乎?)” (1.4).⁶

Why look to the past for knowledge? Confucius was mainly concerned with how one should act and live. The Master said, “There is nothing I can do for someone who is not constantly asking himself: ‘What to do? What to do?’” (15.16) The phrase “what to do (*ru zhi he* 如之何)” occurs frequently throughout the *Analects*. In pondering this question in various situations, Confucius found the ancients to be worthy of emulation, and their conduct illuminating of the excellence that Confucius sought in his own conduct and tried to transmit to his students. The ancients were exemplars because they were responsible for what Confucius saw as impressive achievements of the civilization of past ages. Confucius explicitly justified his admiration and praise for those living in past ages in terms of their contribution to the excellence of their communities.

The Master said, “When it comes to other people, I am not usually given to praise or blame. But if I do praise people, you can be sure they have proven themselves to be worthy of it. It is because of such people that the Three Ages – Xia, Shang, and Zhou – steadfastly continued on the true path (*dao* 道)” (15.25).

Confucius’ frequent praise for the ancients, given very deliberately and only after careful evaluation, is all the more significant, given that he prided himself on being careful with his praise and blame of others, and seemed critical of Zigong’s fondness for judging others (14.29).

In two passages in the *Analects*, Confucius compared his own contemporaries unfavorably with people of the past. “Scholars of old would study for their own sake, while those of today do so to impress others” (14.24). Even the faults of common people had become worse over time.

The Master said, “In the old days, the common people had three faults that the people of today perhaps have done away with. Of old, rash people were merely reckless, but nowadays they have managed to overcome all restraint. Of old, proud people were merely

⁵ Other translations of the key phrase, “*shu er buzuo* 述而不作,” include “I transmit but do not create” (Chan 1963: 31); “I transmit but do not innovate” (Lau 1979); “I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own,” (Waley 1996); “I transmit, I invent nothing” (Leys 1997).

⁶ An important Ming 明 dynasty Confucian work, *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 (*Instructions for Practical Living*), derived its title from this *Analects* passage. It consists of records of conversation with students, letters and short essays by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), one of the most important figures in the Confucian tradition.

smug, but nowadays they are quarrelsome and easily provoked. Of old, stupid people were frank and direct, but nowadays they are positively deceitful” (17.16).⁷

Given this comparative evaluation, it is not surprising that he often held up past examples as models to guide present conduct. The “way of the ancients” set the criteria for excellence in archery: “Marksmanship does not lie in piercing the leather target, because the strength of the archers varies. This is the way of the ancients” (3.16). Archery is not only an important sport for the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), one of the six arts a cultivated person should master, but it is also representative of personal cultivation and exemplary conduct (3.7). Confucius cautioned against being too hasty in speech by referring to conduct of past ages. “The ancients were loath to speak because they would be ashamed if they personally did not live up to what they said” (4.22).

According to the “*Zhongyong* 中庸” chapter in the *Liji* 禮記 (*Record of Ritual*), “Zhongni (Confucius) revered Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 as his ancestors and carried on their ways; he emulated and made illustrious the ways of Kings Wen 文 and Wu 武 (*zushu yaoshun xianzhang wenwu* 祖述堯舜憲章文武)” (*Liji* 32.30/147/8; Ames and Hall 2001: 111).⁸ This became an idiomatic description of Confucius’ teachings in the Chinese tradition. Historical (or legendary) figures are paradigmatic characters with an important role in Confucius’ ethics and pedagogy (Tan 2005). In his conversations with his students, Confucius drew on shared narratives of the life and conduct of well-known personalities to elucidate his views about virtuous conduct and the way exemplary persons should aspire to.

The Master said, “How great indeed was Yao as ruler! How majestic! Only *tian* 天 is truly great, and only Yao took it as his model. How expansive was he – the people could not find the words adequate to praise him. How majestic was he in his accomplishments, and how brilliant was he in his cultural achievements” (8.19).

Shun was praised for having “effected proper order while remaining nonassertive (*wuwei er zhi* 無為而治)” (15.5; see also 8.18; 8.20). That Yao and Shun set the highest ethical standards is clear from the way Confucius would emphasize the difficulty of certain ethical achievements – the sagely achievement of being “broadly generous with the people able to help the multitude” (6.30) and “cultivating themselves while bringing accord to the people” (14.42) – by saying that they are difficult even for Yao and Shun (but not impossible).

From the Three Ages, Confucius singled out the exemplary ruler, Yu 禹, to whom Shun yielded the throne and who founded the Xia dynasty:

⁷ His student Zigong took this further and condemned his own contemporaries for extremes that exceed the vices of the Shang tyrant Zhou (19.20).

⁸ The chapter is more commonly known under James Legge’s translated title of “Doctrine of the Mean” (Legge 1960: vol. 1), although the implied comparison with Aristotle is misleading (Ames and Hall 2001: 150–152); Tu Wei-ming 杜維明 translated the title as “Centrality and Commonality” (Tu 1976). The term “ancestors” is used in the sense that Yao and Shun are the source of Confucius’ teachings rather than about biological ancestry.

He was simple in his food and drink yet was generous in his devotion to the gods and the spirits of his ancestors; he wore coarse clothing yet was lavish in his ceremonial robes and cap; he lived in the humblest circumstances yet gave all of his strength to the construction of drainage canals and irrigation ditches. As for Yu, I can find no fault in him at all (8.21).

Confucius placed Yu in the company of Shun when it comes to the “majestic” way they did not use their authority over the world for their personal benefits and enjoyment (8.18). He saw his own mission as continuation of the cultural and moral legacy of the Zhou king, Wen 文王 (9.5). In case anyone thinks that it is their positions as rulers that impressed Confucius, it should be noted that, among King Wen’s 文王 sons, he regarded the Duke of Zhou 周公 more highly than King Wu 武王. His only mention of the latter recorded in the *Analects* was implicitly critical (8.20). The Duke of Zhou’s talents provided a standard to measure others (8.11). Confucius kept him in mind constantly as an exemplar in his own personal cultivation: The Master said, “My, how I have regressed! It has been a long time since I dreamed again of meeting with the Duke of Zhou” (11.17).⁹

Confucius also praised the conduct of exemplary officials and subjects, such as Bo Yi 伯夷 and SHU Qi 叔齊 of the Shang dynasty, who rather starved than eat “Zhou grain” when the Shang dynasty was ended by King Wu (5.23; 7.15; 16.12), Bi Gan 比干 who lost his life remonstrating with notorious last Shang king, Zhou 紂, and two other virtuous officials of Shang dynasty (18.1). Several officials of various states throughout the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) period, some of whom had biographies or were mentioned in the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Zuo’s Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), also appear in the *Analects*. Some lived a century or more before Confucius: NING Wuzi 甯武子 of Wei 衛 (5.21), LIUXIA Hui 柳下惠 of Lu 魯 (15.4; 18.2), and Guan Zhong 管仲 of Qi 齊 (14.9; 14.16; 14.17). When it comes to learning from exemplary people, Confucius’ conservatism did not limit him to those who were long dead and gone. He also praised Ji Wenzhi 季文子 of Lu (5.20) who died only in 568 B.C.E., and many more who were alive during his own lifetime, such as Zichan 子產 of Zheng 鄭 (5.16; 14.8; 14.9) and YAN Pingzhong 晏平仲, also known as YAN Ying 晏嬰 of Qi 齊 (5.17). Among his contemporaries, Confucius praised Jing, the Prince of Wei 公子荆 (13.8) and several Wei officials, KONG Wenzhi 孔文子 (5.15), Priest Tuo 祝鮀, also known as Shiyu 史魚 (6.16; 15.7), and GONGSHU Wenzhi 公叔文子 (14.13), as well as officials of Lu, MENG Zhifan 孟之反 (6.15), MENG Gongchuo 孟公綽 (14.11), ZANG Wuzhong 藏武仲 (14.11; 14.14), and BIAN Zhuangzi 卞莊子 (14.11). Despite general comparisons that imply a deterioration of virtue over time, it seems that there was no lack of virtuous people among Confucius’ contemporaries.

Confucius’ student Zaiwo 宰我 once referred to ancient practices in answering a question about the altar pole to the god of the soil in terms that displayed his

⁹ Mengzi described the Duke of Zhou as a sage (*Mencius* 2B9) and referred to “the way of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius (*Zhou Gong Zhongni zhidao* 周公仲尼之道)” (*Mencius* 3A4), rendering the Duke of Zhou the founder, or at least co-founder, of the *Ru* tradition (Lau 1970).

eloquence at the expense of the ancients. This drew the disapproving comment from Confucius that “you don’t level blame against what is long gone” (3.21). He rejected Zilu 子路 and Zigong’s questioning of Guanzhong’s claim to authoritativeness (*ren* 仁), over Guanzhong’s failure to die with his lord and instead went on to serve the man who killed his lord. Confucius maintained that Guanzhong was *ren* because, in helping the Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公, he benefitted many people and helped preserved Chinese civilization (14.16; 14.17). Confucius’ apparent disapproval of his students’ casting aspersion on the ancients does not mean that he could see no fault in the ancients. We find Confucius criticizing Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (697–628 B.C.E.) (14.15) for being devious, and ZANG Wenzhong 藏文仲 of Lu (died 617 B.C.E.) for being superstitious (5.18) and occupying his position under false pretense in not recommending LIUXIA Hui for office (15.14). Of the ancients he praised, Confucius’s evaluation of them was sometimes mixed. For example, though he defended Guanzhong against his students’ implied criticism and considered him an authoritative person (14.9), he himself noted Guanzhong’s lack in capacity, extravagance, and not knowing the rites (3.22).

Confucius did not slavishly imitate those whom he praised. In considering those who retired from the world, refused to serve regimes that ruled contrary to the way, in order to preserve their own integrity and virtue – including Bo Yi, SHU Qi, and LIUXIA Hui – Confucius distinguished himself from them in not having “pre-suppositions about what may or may not be done (*wu ke wu buke* 無可無不可)” (18.8). Although ancients could serve as exemplars generally, what one should do in a complex situation is determined by its specific unique set of circumstances, not some fixed rule of behavior derived from the ancients’ actions. As for why Confucius praised the ancients more than he criticized them, his apparent reluctance to do the latter, perhaps it is because doing the former served the purpose of criticizing the present and urging contemporaries to improve themselves and their world with the virtuous ancients as models, while the latter has the tendency of encouraging the complacency of those living, who might think that they were better than the ancients, which would not be as helpful to learning and self-cultivation. In the *Analects*, Confucius’s judgments of people, rather than trying to preserve a fixed way of life forever, were generally part of a pedagogy aimed at improving the conduct of those living and transforming the world they lived in for the better.

Insofar as conservatism “involves attempts to perpetuate a social organism, through times of unprecedented change” (Scruton 2001: vii), something Confucius could be loosely said to be involved in (despite the absence of any metaphysical theory of holism), it aims to preserve that which maintains and benefits the social organism, although in some cases change could be desirable or even necessary to that purpose. In Confucius’ case, one could argue that he was conservative about the preservation of excellence or virtue through self-cultivation and as the basis of good government, for he believed these excellences constituted the flourishing civilization of the Three Ages. Survival of a flourishing civilization requires continuity of the excellence that sustains it. As long as civilization is not completely destroyed, even if the general trend is decline, some excellence survives, and hence even in an age of decline there would still be some exemplars. Confucius probably

would agree with Zigong that he was able to learn from everyone because something of the ancients' way survived even in his contemporaries. Zigong says:

The way (*dao* 道) of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly – it lives in the people. Those of superior character (*xian* 賢) have grasped the greater part, while those of lesser quality have grasped a bit of it. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu's way in them. Who then does the Master not learn from? Again, how could there be a single constant teacher for him? (19.22).

Confucius' own references to both ancients and contemporaries, and his arguments with his students about the ancients, show that the important thing about learning from others is correctly identifying and understanding the relevant excellence and conduct that exemplifies it rather than whether a person belongs to a bygone age or is a contemporary. Confucius' conservatism does not include the belief that ancient conduct is necessarily superior by virtue of being ancient.

Confucius was well aware that change is pervasive and inevitable; he did not consider all changes to be deterioration.¹⁰ In modern times, Western and Chinese conservatives also have no problem accommodating change; they only object to sudden, radical, or revolutionary changes that attempt to destroy continuity altogether (Scruton 2001: 11; Fung 2010: 79). Confucius acknowledged that historically, there had been changes as the Xia dynasty gave way to the Shang, and the Shang to the Zhou:

The Yin dynasty adapted the observances of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) of the Xia dynasty, and how they altered them can be known. The Zhou adapted the observances of ritual propriety of the Yin, and how they altered them can be known (2.23).

One could infer that Confucius approved of these changes made to the rites over time since he considered Zhou to be superior because it was able to learn from the two earlier dynasties (3.14). Even though he is generally considered a conservative about *li*, which is not surprising given the way *li* works to hold community together both synchronically and diachronically – stability is necessary for *li* to work – Confucius did not rule out all changes in rites as unacceptable. He was prepared to go along with contemporary changes to ritual practice when the change was a matter of frugality, but not when the new practice reflected hubris (9.3). Changes in rites begin with some individual doing something differently from how it has always been done, arbitrarily or reacting to changes in circumstances generating pressures for change. Single acts deviating from past practices will change the practice itself only if taken up by sufficient numbers engaged in the practice. From Confucius' perspective, novelty is not necessarily good or bad, but requires careful assessment based on serious reflection about the values embodied in the practices in question and what the deviation signifies to decide whether the change is acceptable.

¹⁰ From ancient times, the Chinese did not privilege stasis, but preferred to find ways of working with change and making change work for them: the historical importance of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) is a testimony to this attitude. Some scholars believed that Confucius himself studied this Classic, and *Analects* 7.17 may contain a reference to it (Yang 1984:71; *Shiji* 1997: 492a; Yang and Yang 1979: 22; Shaughnessy 1993: 222; cf. Nylan 2001: 241).

Confucius acknowledged that different ages had different strengths, and selected from past practices those which were most suited to contemporary situations. When YAN Hui 顏回 asked about “*weibang* 為邦 (making a viable state),” it is fair to assume that his interest was in making a state for his own age, among others. Confucius’ reply is telling:

The Master replied, “Introduce the calendar of the Xia dynasty, ride on the large yet plain chariot of the Yin, wear the ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and as for music, play the *shao* and *wu*. Abolish the ‘music’ from the state of Zheng and keep glib talkers at a distance, for the Zheng music is lewd and glib talkers are dangerous” (15.11).

This selection of different practices from the Three Ages is guided by what would work for their time rather than simply because those were past practices. The selections are not justified by their age alone, if at all, and the recommendations that followed are explicitly justified in terms of qualitative assessment.

Even when practices have ancient lineage, Confucius gave reasons for continuing with the recommended practices, since he did not advocate continuing all ancient practices. Confucius emphasized to Zizhang 子張 that the practice of 3 years mourning was not confined to one particular Shang ruler mentioned in an ancient text, but practiced by “all the ancients” (14.40). Although readers could infer that its being common practice among the ancients rendered it more significant for Confucius, he favored the practice not just because of its ancient lineage, as it became clear in his response to Zaiwo’s questioning of the practice.

“When exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are in the mourning shed, it is because they can find no relish in fine-tasting food, no pleasure in the sound of music, and no comfort in their usual lodgings, that they do not abbreviate the mourning period to one year. Now if you are comfortable with these things, then by all means, enjoy them.”

When Zaiwo had left, the Master remarked, “Zaiwo is really perverse (*buren* 不仁), it is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosoms. The ritual for a three-year mourning period is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents!” (17.21).

Confucius’ conservatism did not lead him to insist on preserving ancient forms of behavior indiscriminately, but only when the reasons for those practice continue to be relevant in present circumstances.

In describing Confucius’ teachings as a “conservative reaction,” A. C. Graham nevertheless emphasized that Confucius was critical and selective in what he had tried to preserve and sometimes rebuild from the past (Graham 1989: 12–13). Transmission is not indiscriminate but passes on what is evaluated as worthy of conservation. There is a normative element in the Chinese term, “*shu* 述,” which is a homonym and cognate, sometimes even substitute, of “*shu* 術,” meaning “art” or “method” (*Shuowen jiezi* 1981: 70b). While “*shu* 術” may also mean a “device” or a “trick,” things that may seem ethically dubious, what is worth noting is that whether as “art” or “trick,” “*shu* 術” works within a particular context. In other words, just as in following a path rather than walking about randomly, one is selecting a better way, marked by the accumulated experience and wisdom of those who went before us or guided by some device, to reach a particular destination, Confucius’ transmission involved selecting what would continue to work for his time and later. The use

of *shu* in the *Analects* is also implicitly normative. Confucius scolded Yuanrang 原壤 for having “nothing to transmit” (14.43) – not nothing *simpliciter* but nothing worthy. Zigong protested Confucius’ desire to stop speaking with the question: “What would there be for us, your disciples, to transmit (*ze xiaozhi heshu yan* 則小子何述焉?)” (17.19).¹¹ Confucius’ students expected from their revered teacher not just any speech, but teachings worth passing on for generations, and the *Analects* resulted from the efforts of these students, and possibly also later followers, to transmit what they assessed to be valuable learning and knowledge.

Confucius’ selective and critical attitude towards tradition also extends to his transmission of the texts. For Confucius, textual study is part of acquiring learning and knowledge, and he himself described his own method as one of “learning much, selecting out of it what works well, and then following it” (7.28). It is reasonable to expect that he would also select for transmission only what worked well from the texts he received rather than pass them on without change. One possible reason Confucius considered himself only a transmitter is that he did not write any “original” works; his literary labors referred to in passing in the *Analects* seem to be confined to “putting in order” texts handed down from the past¹²:

The Master said, “It was only after my return to Lu from Wey that I revised the *Book of Music*, and put the ‘Songs of the Kingdom’ and the ‘Ceremonial Hymns’ in proper order” (9.15).

Confucius was credited with editing, and sometimes authoring, the *Five Classics* – the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Book of Odes*, the *Record of Ritual*, the *Book of Documents* (書經 *Shujing*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lushichunqiu* 呂士春秋), sometimes adding the lost *Book of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記) to make *Six Classics* – fairly early in the tradition. However, modern scholars disagree about the relation of Confucius to the Classics (Nylan 2001: 8). The *Mengzi* 孟子 claims that Confucius was the author of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Mengzi* 3B9), a claim repeated in SIMA Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*) (*Shiji* 1997: 493b) and other texts. SIMA Qian’s biography of Confucius (*Kongzi shijia* 孔子世家) maintains that there were over 3,000 songs, and Confucius selected only 305 “which had moral value (*ke shiyu liyi* 可施於禮義)” for transmission (*Shiji* 1997: 491b; Yang and Yang 1979: 22). By current standards of inquiry, these claims lack convincing evidence. However, whether he composed any part of the received texts, and whatever the exact nature of any editorial work he performed on the Classics, insofar as his teaching involved textual materials, part of his “transmission” process would have involved critical selection of what he assessed to be valuable and worth

¹¹ Lau 1979; cf. “How will we your followers find the proper way?” (Ames and Rosemont 1998 translation).

¹² Though “*zuo*” was not used explicitly to refer to authorship in the *Analects*, the *Mencius* uses it in that sense when referring to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Mencius* 3B9; 4B21). This meaning was included in the *Shuowen jiezi*, citing an example from the *Book of Odes* (*Shuowen* 1981: 374a).

transmitting, guided by his own experience and what he considered relevant to his pedagogical project of helping others cultivate themselves and govern well.

As a transmitter, Confucius was critical and selective. In emulating the ancients, he did not merely imitate but understood the exemplars in the context of new situations for practice. Tradition, as the transmission of what has been valued and continues to be valued, unites old and new. A living tradition, tradition that remains part of our lives, rather than residing only in dusty texts and museums, unites past, present and future. Instead of resisting change, it is itself a process of change that is also continuity. Even as he sought to conserve the excellence of the past, Confucius himself could be seen as working to bring about change through his critique of his time by holding up cultural accomplishments of past dynasties as examples for his contemporaries, and in his role as a teacher who transformed his students by helping them cultivate themselves and walk the path of the exemplary person that ancient exemplars had walked, and in so doing extend that path beyond that of the ancients. There is no doubt that Confucius, even if he was conservative in some sense, did not oppose conservation to change. He would not approve of something just because it is old or has always been done, nor would he reject something just because it is new or has not been done before. Is this critical and selective transmission and openness to change sufficient for being innovative? Could Confucius himself be considered innovative?

The Innovative Confucius: Self-Image Versus Others' Evaluation

If being innovative means introducing something so new that it is completely different from, and moreover has no connection to, everything that went before, then Confucius is not innovative. This equates innovation with *creatio ex-nihilo*, and in the realm of human endeavors, is probably more myth than fact. Human experience lies between two extremes, suggesting neither absolute stasis nor total absence of continuity in change. In describing those still attached to the Confucian tradition as cultural conservatives, intellectual historians make the point, either implicitly or explicitly, that these thinkers accepted or even actively promoted fundamental political changes; political institutions were not the objects they wished to conserve. The change they rejected was the total elimination of Confucian teachings and practices that they considered integral to Chinese culture. In China's nineteenth century encounter with Western powers, Confucian scholars clarified which changes were acceptable from their perspective and which were not, seeking to combine "Chinese substance and western applications (*zhongti xiyong* 中體西用)."¹³ Although the idea is philosophically problematic and was ineffective

¹³ The best known advocate of this is ZHANG Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909). Extracts from his 1895 work, *Exhortation to Learning* (*Quan Xue Pian* 勸學篇), touching on this idea can be found in de Bary et al. 1960: 82–87; Zhang (1998).

as a solution to China's problems at the time (Levenson 1968: 1: 59–78), it is an example of how conservatives who are not totally against change need to, and how they might, separate acceptable from unacceptable changes. The “Chinese substance and western applications” idea bears some resemblance to Burke's distinction between acceptable “reform” and unacceptable “change.” Burke insists upon

[...] a marked distinction between change and reform. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves, and gets rid of all their essential good as well as the accidental evil annexed to them. Change is novelty; and whether it is to operate any one of the effects of reformation at all, or whether it may not contradict the very principle upon which reformation is desired, cannot be certainly known beforehand. Reform is not a change in the substance or in the primary modification of the objects, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained. [...] To *innovate is not to reform* (Burke 1796: 169).

Both approaches understand conservation in terms of something fundamental or essential that must remain unchanged.

How did Confucius himself draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable change? He did not see the excellences of the ancients he tried to conserve in essentialist terms. Confucius' affirmative reply to Zizhang's query whether it would be possible to know “ten generations hence” need not be read in terms of something remaining unchanged throughout the ages, although that is a common reading. We could know the successor to the Zhou even ten generations later if we could trace the changes so that we could see how each generation built on the earlier by adding new elements and discarding old ones, in the same way Confucius could see continuity between Zhou and the earlier dynasties of Xia and Shang (2.23). This kind of continuity may be elucidated with the metaphor of a rope made of interwoven strands of fiber. For the rope to remain unbroken, it is not necessary for any *one* strand to run from the beginning to the end (the essentialist requirement). Instead, different strands enter the rope at different points, and end at different points, no one strand is essential, but the weave of the various strands ensures that, even if there is no common strand between two points of the rope, there is still only one unbroken rope. If Confucius failed to be innovative, it is not because he insisted on preserving some unchanging essence of tradition. Abandoning essentialism, one might distinguish conservative and innovative changes in terms of degree of novelty, whether a change is significant or extensive enough to be recognized as making what has been changed meaningfully *new*. In this sense, some of Confucius' achievements have been recognized as innovative.

A modern textbook which has gone through several editions in mainland China, continuing the tradition of attributing to Confucius a significant engagement with the *Classic of Changes*, claims that Confucius transformed the text from a manual of superstitious consultation with spirits to a philosophical text about human endeavors (Fan 1978–1986: 1: 172). Confucius' emphasis on texts was an “apparent innovation” since the *Ru* as a group had previously only focused on ritual mastery (Hansen 1992: 58). The textual tradition founded by Confucius involves a new form of social organization capable of generating new authority to challenge the state (Lewis 1999: 63–67). David Hall and Roger Ames' reading of Confucius “make of him an originator, ‘a great man,’ instead of the transmitter he understood himself to

be” (Hall and Ames 1987: 25). Herbert Fingarette presented Confucius “as a great cultural innovator rather than a genteel but stubbornly nostalgic apologist of the status quo ante” (Fingarette 1972: 60). Herlee Creel challenged the traditional portrayal of Confucius as a pedantic reactionary and emphasized his role as a reformer who was trying to start a “bloodless revolution” (Creel 1951: 4, chapter 10). Wu Teh Yao 吳德耀 was of the opinion that Confucius’ political ideas were “revolutionary in his own times,” though he may be called “an evolutionist-reformer” in advocating social and political reforms without resorting to arms or violence (Wu 1987: 72, 77). Julia Ching, who saw Confucius as “a traditionalist in some ways, a reformer in others,” also argued that Confucius was a “revolutionary” in the moral transformation he brought about (Ching 1997: 74). That a “traditionalist” can be critical and selective in his transmission of tradition, and that tradition is not transmitted completely without change, is not surprising in view of recent scholarship on tradition (Shils 1981; MacIntyre 1985; Xu 1993). I have shown elsewhere that there is more room for creativity in Confucianism than has usually been recognized (Tan 2008); there is both tension and interdependence between tradition and creativity in the *Analects*.

In his reflective selection of what he considered valuable and interpretation of what he learned from the ancients in ways that helped to diagnose the social malaise of his time and to formulate viable solutions, Confucius opened up a creative space in his transmission of tradition. This goes beyond the mere fact that change is inherent in the very process of transmission because however much we might try or suppose ourselves to have succeeded, nothing is ever transmitted exactly as it had been previously. We have reason to think that Confucius consciously sought what was new and recognized its introduction as valuable even in the process of transmission. To Confucius, “Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new, such a person can be considered a teacher” (2.11). Some might argue that this passage could be read as implying that some aspects of reality remain unchanged or some unchanging truth applies across time. To me this is a less persuasive reading because if the crux of the matter in learning and teaching is grasping what remains unchanged, why contrast the old with the new, why not “review the past as a means of knowing the present or future” instead? The contrast between old and new emphasizes change rather than something remaining unchanged through the passage of time. The challenge of teaching and, by implication, of learning as well, is to make what is old serviceable in new situations; Confucius’ own example, in the conversations about texts and past exemplars in the *Analects*, is a testimony to this.

Confucius’ teachings transformed the concepts of *li* and other virtues, the conception of human society and its possibilities; he created a new human ideal. His contributions were exceptional enough for him to be regarded as a sage by some people even during his lifetime (9.6); he became revered as the greatest sage in East Asia. Early Chinese inscriptions associate sages with “*zuo* 作,” which Confucius contrasted with transmitting in *Analects* 7.1 and which D.C. Lau translated as “innovate.” In elaborating this, the *Book of Rites*, though from a later period, still treats *zuo* as the task of sages. “Those who created are called sages; those who transmitted are called intelligent [*ming*]. Intelligence and sageliness are names for

transmitting and creating respectively” (*Liji* 19.3/99/21; Puett 2001: 73). According to Michael Puett’s study of inscriptions from the Shang and Zhou period, “*zuo* 作” meant “creating, making for the first time” very early on, and was a general term for activity, with a range of basic meanings, including “creating, making, doing, acting, rising, and other activities” (Puett 2001: 122–23; cf. *Shuowen* 1981: 374a). There is evidence in these early writings that sages were viewed as creators of human culture, understood as deliberate artificial inventions (Puett 2001: 23). Given that Confucius denied that he was a sage, it is to be expected that he would not see himself as qualified to engage in the sagely activity of *zuo*:

The Master said, “How would I dare to consider myself as sage or an authoritative person (*ren* 仁)? What can be said about me is simply that I continue my studies without respite and instruct others without growing weary” (7.34).

Confucius’ statement is a proclamation of modesty that does not devalue *zuo*. This is made clearer when Confucius contrasted his method of “learning much, selecting out of it what works well, and then following it” with “initiating new paths while still not understanding them (*bu zhi er zuo* 不知而作)” – it was the latter that is superior and Confucius admitted that in comparison his was “a lower level of wisdom” (7.28). Although Puett agrees with this reading, his study of the mixed treatment of culture in the *Analects* leads him to conclude that, although Confucius did understand “*zuo*” as a sagely act, it does not mean creation in terms of human inventions that are discontinuous with nature; instead *zuo* involves imitating or patterning oneself after heaven and bringing order to the human world (Puett 2001: 50). However, one could understand patterning oneself after heaven as an example of *creatio-in-situ* (Ames and Hall 2001: 30–38), where novelty is relative and does not require complete disruption and radical discontinuity.

Pragmatic Balance Between Conservatism and Innovation

Whichever meaning of creativity or innovation we work with, there is clearly a discrepancy between Confucius’ self-image and how some others have evaluated him: a few modern scholars may consider him innovative, but Confucius did not see himself as innovative. Our discussion so far suggests that conservative and innovative need not be mutually exclusive, except at their abstract extremes, between which there is a continuum where they begin to overlap, with increasing novelty the closer we move towards the innovative end. Insofar as there is a contrast, despite overlap, between conservative and innovative attitudes, Confucius presented himself as more conservative than innovative, even though his endeavors and the changes they brought about turn out to be more innovative than conservative. One might say that only hindsight that could take into account all those subsequent changes is able to show us how innovative Confucius, and the *Analects*, has been.

This discrepancy between Confucius’ self-image and retrospective evaluation by others deserves deeper reflection in the present context of reading the *Analects* as

relevant to our present time. Should we be conservative or innovative? Generations of those who saw Confucius as the exemplar for their conduct followed the conservative route, but the consequences of that interpretation had often been unsatisfactory in improving themselves and the world they lived in. They were not innovative enough when these consequences are taken into account. According to Confucius, exemplary persons “are not inflexible in their studies” (1.8) and he himself eschewed inflexibility (9.4; 14.32). One should also be flexible when it comes to the choice between preserving the old and initiating or inventing something new. I propose that the contemporary message of the *Analects* and the example of Confucius do not call for a simple either-or choice between the two, a fixed answer for all occasions, but a flexible pragmatic balance guided by the needs of specific situations.

Confucius’ own conservatism had a specific context: the disintegration of a dynasty that had lasted several centuries and was perceived as the source of much that was good. Confucius did not see the problems of that time in terms of a static present in need of radical changes to make it better. The situation was unsatisfactory because there had been too many changes at too great a pace and of too drastic a nature; moreover, they probably appeared to Confucius as unthinking or ill-considered changes, or even changes for no other reasons than personal whims, self-centered desires, arrogance, and ignorance. Against this background, his teachings emphasized appreciation and respect for the wisdom of the ancients, appropriately valuing the accomplishments of past generations and emulating their excellence. Such conservatism is guided by his pragmatic project of making the world a better place. One might consider it an exercise of creative and constructive pragmatic intelligence, what John Dewey calls “the power of using past experience to shape and transform future experience” (Dewey 1988: 346).

This chapter begins by pointing out the pragmatic concerns that guided Confucius’ recommendations that his students study the *Book of Odes*. More generally, Confucius’ approach to learning and knowledge is pragmatic. It is not book learning but the combination of learning and practice that brings delight (1.1). He explained knowledge to FAN Chi 樊遲 in terms of how to act: “to devote yourself to what is appropriate for the people, and to show respect for the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance” (6.22), and “to promote the true into positions above the crooked” (12.22). His judgments of whether someone has knowledge or understanding (*zhi* 知) of something, *li* for example, are based on their conduct (3.22; 4.7; 7.31). Knowledge for Confucius is “active” (6.23), for it is not purely intellectual, but a form of practice that enables one to make decisions (9.29; 14.28), solve problems, and thereby bring satisfaction. There is ample evidence in the *Analects* that Confucius’ central concern is pragmatic: one studies and thinks in order to make better decisions and act with better consequences; learning and teaching aim to transform people and the world they live in. A similar pragmatic concern, based on an understanding of the most crucial problems, that each of us faces individually and that all of us face together in our age, should guide the balance between the conservative and the innovative in teaching and learning from the *Analects*.

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