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Holy Within and Without: Zhang Zai's Teachings of Confucius's Two Natures

Sancte Confucii, ora pro nobis! (Voltaire)

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Abstract

Stated most baldly, my argument is that the Neo-Confucianism of the Song era, particularly as elucidated by Zhang Zai (1020-1078), has far more to do with Western theology than with Western philosophy. Considerations not just of the pattern of thought or the philological methods used, but also in how the canon was approached seem more akin to the kind of hermeneutical approaches found in Western theological discourse. In Chinese discourse, however, God himself is missing, so the question of “holiness” takes on a more secular aspect. Or rather, instead of having some form of divine dispensation from above, as one might in the West, it is a matter of elevating secular man (here: Confucius or his disciples). However, this “making holy” requires some strenuous efforts at reinterpretation, and it is Zhang Zai's moves in this direction that form the core of my paper.

Introduction

Holiness in China, as is true of sacredness in many other civilizations, has been ascribed to numerous and quite divergent things of both a material and an immaterial nature: individuals and dynasties, specific locations or books, and even ceremonies and traditions. Nevertheless, a differentiation between the holy (or sacred) and the profane was often not sharply drawn. Instead, it was more akin to a continuum in which the philosophical (or biological) metaphor of “embryonic origins” might be seen as relevant, for such a metaphor permits a gradual transition from the invisible to the visible.

One consequence of this view is that humans or objects do not necessarily have to have been holy (or sacred) to begin with. As in much of Chinese tradition, but most particularly in its cosmology, the emphasis is on *process* or becoming, even with respect to holiness. This permits

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a bridge to be built to the West, inasmuch as there are Western traditions that emphasize not merely existing holiness but the process of becoming holy. Far more striking connections can be made to the image that was drawn of Confucius, for there are parallels to the idea of the two natures of godliness: being and becoming at the same time.

It is true that the notion of the „holy sage“ (*shengren*; if it did not have such western connotations, the term “saint” might also be applied) was used for culture heroes who lived before Confucius, as well as before the Confucian renaissance of the 10th-11th century Song era. The term was also applied in the personality-based cults that grew up around the students of Confucius. Nevertheless, the term *shengren* came increasingly to be used as a synonym for Confucius himself, and *xue shengren*, meaning “to learn from the holy sage” means nothing more than to attempt, throughout one’s own life, to follow Confucius’s example.

However, to understand the Confucian-inspired notion of the holy sage, it is necessary to examine how Confucius’s divinity was conceptualized, in turn part of a process that began long before the Song era.¹⁾ It would only be with the 11th century founder of the Neo-Confucian renaissance, Zhang Zai, that an effort would be made to do so systematically. Key aspects of his attempts to create an orthodox image of Confucius remained relevant until the end of the Imperial era.

What follows is a detailed examination of Chapter 11 of the *Zhengmeng*, composed in 1076 near the end of Zhang Zai’s life. My argument is that the formal composition of this chapter is itself part of Zhang Zai’s views, if not interpretation of, the figure of Confucius as divine.²⁾ His chapter, entitled “At Thirty” (*sanshi*), should be seen in conjunction with the previous chapter, „The Creators” (*zuozhe*), inasmuch as that provided insights into Zhang Zai’s understanding of the embodiment of the Confucian ideal of what one might call “the saintly” in the West. That

1) See Thomas A. Wilson (ed.), *On Sacred Grounds. Culture Politics, and the Formation of the Cult of Confucius*, Cambridge/Mass., London, 2002.

2) A compilation of the more significant commentaries can be found in Zhang Dainian’s „Guanyu Zhang Zai de sixiang yu zhuzuo“ [On the Thoughts and Works of Zhang Zai]. In: *Zhang Zai ji* [Collected Works of Zhang Zai] (1978), pp. 1-18, esp. p. 17. See also Ira Kasoff (1982): *An Analysis of the Thought of Chang Tsai*. Diss. Princeton, pp. 276-85. In principle, the *Zhengmeng* is an exegesis of what Zhang Zai considered canonical. However, the traditional exegesis of Chapter 11 is inconsistent, at most ready to concede that sections 1 to 22 are about Confucius himself, while sections 23-34 are about Confucius with respect to, or in relationship to, his students. The most comprehensive commentary, *Zhengmeng chuanyi*, was authored by Wang Zhi (1662-1723) who himself saw a certain relationship between sections 1 to 4, but regarded “every other section as an entity unto itself with its own meaning.” Modern Chinese exegesis is alienated from its own tradition, inasmuch as it attempts to interpret Zhang Zai as „materialistic“ or in some other manner „philosophical,” perhaps in an effort to separate what seems a too close connection between analyst and author, or as though Zhang Zai were an accomplice of Confucius.

Chapter 10, however, never mentions Confucius by name but instead discusses the “Spring and Autumn Annals (*Chunqiu*); only in Chapter 11 is he the central figure. Confucius himself [not unlike Muhammad!] claimed he only “transmitted but did not create/innovate“ (*Lunyu* 7.1), though one can read Chapter 10 to indirectly mean he was, in fact or in the end, “creator” (at least of the Spring and Autumn Annals). The *Zhengmeng* itself was the culmination or compilation of Zhang Zai's teachings.³⁾

Analysis

The key passage is found at *Lunyu* 2.4. In it, Confucius associates specific ages with specific life circumstances, and to each statement, Zhang Zai provided short commentaries that were likely meant as normative elucidations. An English version can be rendered as: „At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I took my stand. At forty, I no longer had doubts; at fifty, I knew the will(lit. the call) of heaven. At sixty, my ear was attuned; at seventy, I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the bounds. These individual statements, laconically entitled “at thirty,” “at forty,” and so forth, are supplemented by passages that Zhang Zai takes from other texts in the canon. Thus, the comment to “at thirty” reads: “...not that he had to force his standing firmly” [e.g., with respect to the world of morality]. This is an allusion to the “Book of Rites” (*lijì*) or more specifically to the term *qiang li* (from *Liji* 18 *xueji* 2), according to which “after nine years a firm stance has been reached, and there is no turning back, which means the same as ‘grand completion.’” This implies that the text accompanying the “at thirty“ observation should be read to mean that Confucius, at 30, had already reached the “grand completion.”⁴⁾

“At forty”, we read, “his awareness/being was nascent and he entered into/pierced the spirit, employing it to achieve the greatest effect” (*jing yi [ru shen yi] zhi yong*), and “he brought about the [proper] measures” (*shi cuo*). The first of these appears in the “Great Commentary or Appended Judgments” to the Book of Changes (*Yijing, Xicizhuan* B3), containing a statement about how the “changes“ (*yi*) act or work. The second derives from the “Practice of the Mean“ (*Zhongyong*), a mystical piece that only gained greater recognition again in Zhang Zai's lifetime, and in this context had to do with a more precise determination of “truth” or “truthfulness”

3) This source, published in Peking by Zhonghua shuju, is unfortunately filled with inaccuracies. With Michael Friedrich and Friedrich Reimann, I have produced and edited a German translation (*Chang Tsai. Rechtes Auflichten. Cheng Meng*. Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1996), and the chapter I discuss here is on pp. 73-83 of that edition, with commentary on pp. 211-17. Commentary on the history of various editions of the work can be found on pp. 290-309.

4) Lunyu 8.8. is also paraphrased here: “Elevation in song; Fulfilment in morals; Mastery of music.“

(*cheng*) (see *Zhongyong* 25).⁵⁾ The full text there reads: “The virtue of nature (*xing*) is the way of bringing together what is without with what is within; therefore it is also what is appropriate in bringing about [the proper] measures.” In phonetic and ideographic senses] the homonymous pronunciation of *cheng*, as well as the ideographic proximity of the characters for “completion” and “truthfulness,” combined with the above-mentioned determination through *Zhongyong* 25, have the effect that they all resonate in the explication of what “at forty” means. But to put it more starkly, “truth or truthfulness,” which is the goal of the Confucian ideal type as applied to persons, , is thereby attributed to Confucius already at the age of 40!

“At fifty“ the text reads, “he had exhausted the pattern, completely laid out nature (*xing*) and reached for the call of heaven” (*qiong li, jinxing, zhi tian zhi ming*). This paraphrases a sentence from the *Yijing* (*Shuogua* 1) about the activities of the holy sage. In another passage (*Yulu* A), Zhang Zai had described “receiving the call” as a precondition for holiness (*shengren*); in this context, he alters this „call“ into „call of heaven.“ He continues: “Yet he himself could not call it “arriving/reaching for,” and thus instead said: “I knew the call of heaven” in order to signal that in Confucius’s case it was not the individual “call,” often considered as coeval with fate that is inherent to every human being, but the call issued to the son of heaven at the time of the Zhou (11th ct. BC). Thus, here for the first time we find Zhang Zai reading Confucius against the grain or against his overt intention, explicating what he considers to have been the true meaning in Confucius’s assertion.

Following *Zhongyong* 22, “only the most truthful under heaven can explain their nature fully,” and with this, “the nature of humans and things/beings.” With this, “he may support the changes and nourishment of heaven and earth, and may become a trinity together with heaven and earth.” It is for this reason that Zhang Zai’s paragraph/text on “at sixty” is that Confucius “completely explained or laid out the nature of humans and things,” which is what Confucius himself (in *Lunyu* 2.4) meant by “attuned ears.“ Thus, for this stage of life as well, a formulation was chosen describing Confucius as the apotheosis of humankind. In this case, it occurs through the connotation of Confucius being the embodiment of the “three powers” (*san cai*), the unity of heaven, earth, and humankind, a trinity without which the world would be unthinkable.

“At seventy,” finally, “he had the same virtue as heaven, did not strive or make an effort; he was instead finding the middle way of composure.“ If one follows Zhang Zai, this phrase “having the same virtue as heaven and earth” is the same as that applied to the first hexagram of the

5) Here, and in what follows, I am not relying on *Zhongyong* order found in the *Liji*, but instead on the version handed down from Zhu Xi. It can be found in the *Sishu zhangju jizhu* [Collected Commentaries on the Four Books] (1983). Peking: Zhonghua shuju (in the *Xin pian zhuzi jicheng* series).

Yijing, at least in the *Wenyan* commentary. That hexagram, *Qian*, is equated with the holy one. We should not be misled by the absence of the “earth” component here, however. Under the aspect of unity, *Qian* already contains *Kun*, lying across from it, at once both contrast and complement. In the context of the *Zhengmeng*, however, “heaven” is not just complementary in the polarity of heaven/earth but is also the unifying moment of this polarity. As for the “not striving, making an effort, finding the middle way of composure,” these are applied (in *Zhongyong* 20) to those who “make everything true, are authentic” (*cheng zhi*) and thereby correspond to a heaven that “is truthful and authentic” (*cheng zhe*).

Here one should pause to examine how Zhang Zai proceeds, for that helps better understand the goal of his argument with respect to sacredness or holiness. He treats the entire text of the *Zhengmeng* as though it were a mosaic: a passage from a canonical work is illuminated with the aid of another passage from a different canonical work, in a manner well-known to early biblical exegesis in the West. However, this procedure is only made explicit where his reading goes too strongly against the received wisdom. A case in point is replacing the original “knowing” (or recognizing the call of heaven) with “arriving/reaching for:” here a legitimation was necessary. Otherwise, Zhang Zai relies on the implicit power of the manner in which he intersperses texts.

In philological terms, the frequent use of ellipses has its desired effect or is an important tool – though only because it is used under the assumption that the texts themselves are known by heart and readers could fill in the missing elements, phrases or words themselves. This could more generally be regarded as “resonance,” or a form of intertextuality existing prior to widespread literacy, inasmuch as a word or a turn of speech would evoke an entire quote. When combined with selected, or omitted, parts of the original passage that is being commented upon, or the added commentaries (in themselves no longer commentaries but passages in their own right), then one in the end creates a new canon that exists exclusively by virtue of that resonance.

Just as significant is a change made to the original, for example when a word is replaced by another. In this manner, Zhang Zai created a main connecting thread out of bits and pieces of canonical works, one which was binding on all the areas of his encyclopaedic worldview: nothing was to remain unexplained. The technique is that of the Socratic method, based in this case on a questioning of passages that is intended to bring hidden insights to light. The long scholarly tradition in China, whose goal in principle was enlightenment to be reached through a meditating on the hidden meanings of texts, reached its highpoint with Zhang Zai's *Zhengmeng*. Individual works of the classic canon had been commented on in China both before and after Zhang Zai; his singular contribution was to create a new canon out of bits and pieces of other canonical works.

In following the extremely complex introductory passage, we have thus come upon a quite coherent pattern, one which allows us a tentative conclusion. Zhang Zai's intent or goal was less to elucidate the individual ages of Confucius than it was to present, using these ages themselves, something having little to do with the diachronic process of Confucius as a historical figure, namely the quality of "the sacred or holy man." From the outset, I would argue, this quality was identical with that of a) "grand completion," b) the manner in which the "changes" functioned, and c) with "truthfulness" or "truth/authenticity." With respect to b), the canonical work is the Book of Changes; Zhang Zai regarded it as a description of how the world was constructed, a world that can be understood to be identical with various combinations of tri- and hexagrams of the *Yijing*.⁶⁾ As for c), this is appropriate to apply to heaven as well as to the person, namely Confucius, who has become heaven, for without such truth or truthfulness/authenticity, "no thing would exist" (*Zhongyong* 25).

I suggest there is a parallelism at work here, not unlike the exegesis above of the "at seventy" passage. On the one side, we have the diachronic, temporal, "ages of man" view, which could be defined as pieces or segments of unitary reality; on the other side, we have the synchronic, ongoing present, characterized by determining or making more specific the nature of perfection. Yet these two moments, Confucius as person and Confucius as heaven, do not stand in opposition to one another. Rather, they are linked by the notion of the "holy" and form part of each other, the weight given to the respective moment dependant on the particular perspective adopted. It is also possible to bridge the apparently contradictory statements Zhang Zai makes elsewhere in this fashion, namely that "the holy man is heaven" (*Jingxue liku* 7B, in *Zhang Zai ji*, p. 287) and "the holy man is human" (*Yulu* B, p. 317), for the former refers to the holy man not being obscured (*wu yin*), the latter to his "limits as a man" (*ren ze you xian*).

Zhang Zai uses this dual diachronic/synchronic perspective throughout to explicate the two moments of the *shengren*, moments one can also see as standing in permanent dynamic tension. Actually, this is an impossible task, not unlike the squaring of a circle, at least at the level of the text. For a written text by definition provides a before and after temporality, and not a simultaneity. A linear and diachronic text can only render synchronicity by – as Zhang Zai does – using quotes that come from the synchronous realm (thereby also alluding to "completeness"), by making references that are temporally bound or limited, or by substitution within the temporal level itself.

6) See Chapter 14 in the *Zhengmeng* on the "Great Transformation" as well as the relevant parts (with reference to the *Xicizhuan*) of the *Yishuo*, the "Speech on the Book of Changes," which Zhang Zai wrote before the *Zhengmeng*.

This can be seen, in fact, in Zhang Zai's treatment of "at fifteen," the first age mentioned in *Lunyu* 2.4, which only appears in the second section of the chapter. To some extent, this age is the key point of tension for understanding the manner in which to think about the *shengren*. Recall that in the *Lunyu* it reads: „at fifteen, I set my heart on learning" (*shiwu er zhi yu xue*). To that, but only in the second section, Zhang Zai says:

For ordinary people, learning increases daily, only they themselves do not recognize it. Confucius was unusual, compared to other people, allowing what was learned to run its course and exploring what was customary. That he divided [literally: cut or sliced] his transformation from fifteen to seventy; that was the flowering of his progression in virtue!

Here we also have a further exception to the rule of implicit argument that has less to do with understanding a difficult passage than with the desire to explicate the bringing together of an unexpected pair of terms, in this case that Confucius was "unusual," which is given by *yi*, the antonym of *chang*. More important, however, is that "flowering" as used here stands for the synchronous level, while "progression" connotes the diachronic.

This can be explicated as follows. The term *jin* certainly evokes progression, and a continuous movement. But the "flowering of virtue" (*de zhi sheng* in B3, otherwise *sheng de*; see the *Yijing*, *Xicizhuan* A5, A7, B3) in the context of the *Zhengmeng* contains all of the individual virtues, which is to say the cardinal virtues of Confucianism as well as the "little virtues" (seriousness (*zhuang*), watchfulness (*jing*), generosity (*hou*), and so forth). The phrase „flowering of virtue" is thus the unifying connotation of virtue par excellence, and without it, individual virtues only have a divided – which is to say, a cut or sliced, or in other words, partial or not whole – character.⁷⁾

It seems therefore reasonable to assume that the „learning" with which Confucius's path began in diachronic time was placed later in Zhang Zai's reading because the direction once taken, the direction the will takes that moves it toward learning, in fact contains all the other

7) Compare this to the conflation of time segments with continuity to be found in Chapter 2.18 (*Zhang Zai ji*, p. 12, line 14): „Quick is the growling and movement of thunder, but that from which it comes is steady. If one can grasp from whence the mind/spirit come(s), then that is the flowering of virtue." Chapter 4.11 and 17.2 should also be understood in like manner. Furthermore, this is also „becoming one with heaven," which is not possible „as long as one remains individual," which is to say determined by the ego or the person (see Chapters 4.16 and 17.8-17.9). Zhang Zai also refers to this as „daily renewal" (*ri xin*) (see *Yijing*, *Xicizhuan* A5), as well as „overarching and without possession" and as „not limited by the smallness of the heart" (see Chapter 9.6 and 33.3).

temporal stations mentioned “from fifteen to seventy,” in a paradoxical simultaneity of moments, divisions, “cuts” [that are in one sense diachronic time, in another sense in simultaneous time]. On the other hand, as a man, Confucius has no choice other than to step through the corresponding stages of development, and do so in a temporal sequence. The will becomes the motor of life as a human. But inasmuch as that is directed toward “learning,” it opens the possibility – at least in the case of Confucius – to be or take part in the whole, which is, in fact, already present as a thought underlying the sequence of quotes provided in Section 1 of the chapter “At Thirty”, Sections 3 and 4 also make the fact clear that Confucius must die and that it would only be then that he no longer possessed his own will. For, in an allusion to *Lunyu* 7.5, he no longer dreamt of the ruler of Zhou, the authoritative model for Confucius.

The interplay of human and heavenly in the figure of Confucius also leaves room for conjectures that one could, in the widest sense, call historical in nature. Section 5 mentions Confucius’s “trouble without” as compared with Emperor Shun’s “trouble within.” Shun had a notorious villain, Gu Sou, as father, but was nonetheless emperor. Some of the more esoteric speculations circulating during the Han era made out of the non-emperor Confucius a “pure king” (*su wang*). Zhang Zai takes this further in stating that “something was present in Confucius that people were not able to recognize, such that only heaven could recognize it. So [Confucius] said: ‘There is no one who recognizes me! It is [only] heaven that recognizes me!’” (*Lunyu* 14.35).

If we take into consideration a chain of associations that runs “recognition – *Qian* hexagram – heaven” (*Yijing, Xicizhuan* A1 and *Shuogua* 9 and 10), and that, in the sense of the quotes provided in Section 1, also applies to the holy one, then we might say that heaven in some sense recognizes itself in the form of the holy man. This sheds further light on the aforementioned explication of the “at fifty” passage about “arriving at/reaching for the will/call of heaven.” There it was stated that Confucius himself could not refer to it in this manner, which is why (in *Lunyu* 2.4) he spoke of “knowing” the will of heaven. Thus, the call of heaven must in fact have been sent out to Confucius, only in altered form (compare here as well *Yulu A, Zhang Zai ji*, p. 310: “the capable one (*xian*) must have been recognized, among all others, by heaven; the holy sage must have received the call”).⁸⁾ True, Confucius “followed his desires and moved [like grass] in the wind” (following *Shangshu* 3, *Da Yu mou* -, Section 13) – so much for Section 6 about the heavenly side of the holy sage – but according to Section 7, he was not “king following the model of the Zhou,” which is why, as a man, he still had “plans” or “ideas” (*yi*), which in the context of

8) Such thoughts can be found already in the second century BC, for example in Dong Zhongshu (see Chap. 16 of the *Chunqiu fanlu*), but the characterization is a different one in the example I cite.

the *Zhengmeng* are otherwise treated more negatively.⁹⁾ The conclusion one can draw, is that, as it says in Section 8, "the Way did not exist under heaven," yet "the Way was nevertheless not far from people," that it therefore must have been incorporated in the heavenly side of Confucius.¹⁰⁾

Thus, as Zhang Zai puts it elsewhere, "the spirit of the holy sage was nothing but heaven," which is why the holy sage, like heaven, "can recognize ten thousand things in the round" (Chapter 3, Section 16, *Zhang Zai ji*, p. 154). Yet in what is called „care“ or „concern“ (*you*) following the *Yijing* (*Xicizhuan* A5), he differs from heaven (see Chap. 3.8, *Zhang Zai ji*, p. 147). In this quality, similar to that shown by the Bodhisattva, "he sets out the teaching by way of the spirit" (*shendao she jiao*, following the *Yijing*, and the *guan* - , *tuan*- commentary on hexagram 20), while "heaven formulates no words" (*Lunyu* 17.17).

When applied to the chapter under discussion here, this means (according to Section 9), that Confucius had to "serve" (*shi*) because otherwise he would have "been as in the way as a bitter melon" (this an allusion to *Lunyu* 17.4 and 17.6). Here Confucius is contrasted to the "sons of the nobility" (*junzi*), who, following *Lunyu* 11.1, can take the time to become educated in music and manners; by his own admission, Confucius was "a wild one," uncultivated and uncivilized (*yeren*), who "dared not wait" but had to "stride into action" (Section 10). Zhang Zai, consistent in his interpretation, regards this "haste" as part of the "care" or "concern" of the holy sage, which is valued independently of considerations of rank. For that reason, Zhang Zai summarizes Section 10, using passages from *Zhongyong* 14, to assert that the *junzi* makes his way in wealth and honor just as he does in poverty and lowness, and in so doing, wishes nothing beyond himself.

Yet it cannot be enough to merely characterize Confucius, the holy man, as "wild:" to Zhang Zai's way of thinking, the descriptor *junzi* must needs also apply. So here again, Confucius's statement is read against its apparent meaning, as Zhang Zai interprets the notion of *junzi* to lie outside of differences in social rank. Therefore, though Confucius is seen as someone who "makes his way in lowness," in reality it is he who is the real *junzi*. *Junzi* and *yeren* appear to be utterly incompatible, and yet Confucius also embodies two different levels. These are

9) This is primarily due to *Lunyu* 9.4, in which *yi* is brought in conjunction with „having to“ (*bi*), „inflexibility“ (*gu*), and „I“ (*wo*) – as the "fourfold [aspects] to be cut off [or excised]."

In Chapter 7.10 (also in 25.13), Zhang Zai refers to consciousness as „completed/ final“ (*cheng xin*), which also means the connotation [of the term] is one of rigidity (*cheng xin*).

10) The passage in the *Mengzi* (4A.12) concerning justice - „The path is in you, yet you search far away for it...“ shows similarities, inasmuch as – in a manner characteristic of the Confucian image of people – that it is a norm for the entire complex of interrelations between the *shengren* and other people .

introduced in a form that in Western rhetoric is called *figura per detractionem*. That is, in the conclusion to Section 10, Zhang Zai changes a crucial word, transforming the phrase “the *junzi* wishes nothing beyond himself” (in *Zhongyong* 14) to now read: “This is it, this is what it says: he wishes nothing beyond himself.” Readers familiar with this passage in the *Zhongyong* will have to draw the conclusion that this is in reference to a third level of comparison, a different one, beyond the antithesis between the “sons of the nobility” and the “wild one” already mentioned. Much as “heaven” and “human” come together in the holy sage, *junzi* and *yeren* come together in a different *junzi* that lies outside both terms, yet is related to them. This sort of move with respect to the identity or nature of terms, is rather common in Chinese thought. An example is provided by a word like *changduan*, which literally means “long-short,” and is the term for the abstract idea of “length”.

Confucius was not recognized, one might say, for what he was. “His merits and his deeds,” it says in Section 11, “were not tested; [as a result,] people only saw artistry” (paraphrase of *Lunyu* 9.7). Such contribution might have come through the written word, but following *Lunyu* 9.9, “the River brought forth no writing; the phoenixes do not come: I am at my end.” This, according to Section 12, does not mean that Confucius himself came to end, as one might think; the appearance or presence of phoenixes or charts are good omens of an “illumination of the writings” (*wen ming*). Instead, “the writings of the master recognized (*fuzi zhi wenzhang*), that the end had come.”¹¹⁾ Thus, Section 12 concludes that once the holy writings no longer appeared, that holiness had to be manifested, or embodied, through a person: Confucius. The path no longer existed under heaven, so the compensation of this loss came about through or in the holy sage, the person in whom the heavenly and the human were combined. The manner in which this is manifested in Zhang Zai’s interpretation is to emphasize the contrast between the illumination of the holy writings (*wen ming*) themselves and writings that were clearly crafted by a human (*wenzhang*) (Sections 3-12).

The thought that people merely saw the „art“ or „artistry“ of Confucius is thoroughly explicated and illuminated in Sections 13-23. Again [, though perhaps in an even more extreme form than in previous sections], Zhang Zai writes against the *Lunyu* text, which mentions “historiographic works” (*shi*). Instead, he reads Confucius as concerned with morals or morality,

11) This may be an allusion to the *Chunqiu*, though it is certainly a reference to *Lunyu* 5.13: „The writings of the master may be found and examined; his thought about nature or heaven cannot be found or examined.“

based in how he orders the “Writings about Rites by Lu,” (Section 13),¹²⁾ on how he categorizes music (Section 14), which indicates how he would have ruled the world,¹³⁾ and finally by his behavior at court (Sections 15-16). There it is made clear that the unifying aspect in Confucius's orientation towards the rites always lay in his unchanging stance with respect to the ruler even if the ruler was not even there.¹⁴⁾ He is the embodiment of a “spirit of justice” (*yi*), in one case for fairly allocating certain resources (Section 17),¹⁵⁾ in another, that he selflessly provides instruction even to rebellious and depraved women (Section 18).¹⁶⁾ His “honesty” (*xin*) would even have not missed its mark among the barbarians (Section 19).¹⁷⁾ The unchanging stance toward his ruler, through the “loyalty” (*zhong*) alluded to in Section 19, resonates in Section 20, in which it says that he “stood by his ruler and could not forget him.”¹⁸⁾ In his teaching, his “perception” or “insight” came to the fore, because he oriented himself to such an extent to his interlocutor that “his words had to alternate and to change in order to suit the other” (Section 21).¹⁹⁾ Furthermore, as we already know, Confucius recognized the call of heaven, and knowing his fate to be that of the politically unsuccessful, also did not strive for riches (Section 22).

Thus, the depiction of his effect is bound to an enumeration of the individual manifestations of Confucian virtues, while making the underlying unity existing within those individual virtues evident. It is for just this reason, again using the *delectio* method, that Section 23 depicts the “humanity” (*ren*) of Confucius as a *junzi*, and *ren* is the most important of the cardinal virtues of the *junzi*. Because this virtue encompasses all other virtues, like heaven it can not be comprehended in mere words, instead appearing only in the teachings. These teachings are in turn of a kind that is sparing with words, to mercifully shield those who have not (like the holy sage) yet “fully laid out their nature and arrived/reached for the call.” With this formulation, the circle closes, and we are back to what was laid out in Section 1. At the same time, they provide a

12) Zhang Zai did not see *Chunqiu* as a work of history. Still, one has to admire the twists and turns necessary to transform a corrupted passage – “the incomplete account of history” (*shi zhi que wen*, at *Lunyu* 15.26) – into “writings about morals and manners.” This acrobatic feat was accomplished with the aid of a rather far-fetched definition of *shi*, meaning “priest” or “historiography.” In the *Lunyu*, Confucius meant the “invocation priests” (*zhu shi*) – in his three commentaries in the *Chunqiu*, he mentions them 14 times! – and it is supposedly for that reason that the Spring and Autumn Analects? are about morals and manners.

13) *Lunyu* 13.10: If one allowed Confucius to [properly] act, it would be completed in [only] three years.

14) With reference to *Lunyu* 10.1-4.

15) Following *Lunyu* 6.4-5.

16) Following *Lunyu* 17.6 and 6.28. The conclusion is drawn from *Mengzi* 4B.10 and 7A.3.

17) Following *Lunyu* 9.14 and 15.6.

18) As a paraphrase of *Lunyu* 14.32.

19) An explanation for *Lunyu* 9.8 that is drawn from the *Yijing*, *Xicizhuan* A9.

transition to the remainder of the chapter.

It remains to be asked what the relationship of the *shengren* to other people is. The ensuing sections (24 to 34) illustrate the answer with respect to Confucius and his students. First, however, the question of who belongs to the circle of “other people” needs to be addressed, for it is limited to those capable of receiving instruction; the rest, like natural phenomena, are objects of divination. In this chapter, Zhang Zai answers the question of the age, namely whether any particular individual could become a holy man, in a similarly paradoxical manner as he did with respect to the heavenly and human sides of Confucius, by both affirming and negating at the same time. For that reason, one can arrive at an understanding of the teachings of the holy sage without being holy oneself. In his usual elliptical exegesis, Zhang Zai puts this as: “The holy man establishes/sets forth his teaching’, which means: Everyone can become Yao and Shun,” implying a distinction between potentiality and actuality inasmuch as Yao and Shun, in his reading, were not *shengren* but “creators” (*zuo zhe*). Explicating, Zhang Zai goes on to say that “had this been put into words, or even put into practice in teaching, as long as something was present in people that they could not achieve, then the [above] statement of the holy sage would have been hollow” (*Jingxue liku* 7B (*Zhang Zai ji*, p. 283, following the *Yijing*, Nr. 20 on *guan* –, *tuan* – and *Mengzi* 6B.2)). [In short, only a select few were in fact capable of hearing and understanding the teachings, though many had the potential to understand – though they would not actually be holy like their teacher].

Yan Hui, the prototype of the ideal student and the figure about whom this question is usually raised, was “like a holy man, in that he transcended his age and was not recognized” (Section 26, an allusion to *Zhongyong* 11). That also meant he was “without regret,” and yet because that was a holy attribute, this was “why Confucius only admitted to Yan Hui that: ‘such a thing exists only in you and me’” (Section 30, same allusion). He also had no doubt (Section 28), another attribute of the holy sage, as shown in *Lunyu* 2.4, the key section discussed above, and he “loved learning,” a key aspect of following the path of the holy sage (Section 27).²⁰⁾

Is or was Yan Hui therefore a holy sage? Not really, since the freedom from doubt is not his to have. “A student like Yan Hui hides himself and is still invisible, goes his way and is still incomplete” (Section 25). What is being articulated here is the *Wenyan* commentary to finding the number nine on the first line in the *Qian* hexagram: for Zhang Zai, the *Wenyan* commentary

20) Following *Lunyu* 11.4: „Yan Hui is not the one who helps me.“ But why not? Because, according to Zhang Zai, „he had no questions that arose from doubt,“ which would be the characteristic of the *junzi* according to *Lunyu* 16.10. However, this statement is quite difficult to reconcile with the judgment that the holy one „no longer deceived himself“ (*bu huo*), glossed by Zhang Zai in section 1 as „did not doubt“ (*bu yi*).

was the word of Confucius. In Chapter 14 of the *Zhengmeng*, which concerns itself with the *Yijing*, we learn that the relationship between Confucius and Yan Hui is to be understood with respect to the position of *Qian* in the hexagram. In this interpretation, Yan Hui only moves in the area of tension between first and second lines (that of the “hidden dragon” and the “great man”, *da ren*), while Confucius himself embodies the fifth line, where “the great man” became heavenly.²¹⁾ If one takes the movement from the second to the fifth line as a kind of path (or “way”), then what lies between them are lines three and four, characterized respectively as “danger” and “doubt.” The textual exegesis here (i.e. the line commentaries or *yaoci*) already speaks of a „leap at the abyss“ that exists between lines four and five, and it is only on the fifth line itself that the hexagram finds its proper or full meaning. It is for that reason that *Qian* is equated or analogised with heaven: the fifth line is not just one among others but instead provides a point of orientation for all the other lines.

Thus, the effort to portray the relationship between Yan Hui and Confucius (or to portray the general relationship of students to Confucius) as a path [or “way”] on which some move more quickly and others more slowly, is only one aspect. For Confucius is “like heaven, to which one cannot ascend by climbing stairs.”²²⁾ In this context, one can better understand the famous “sigh of Yan Hui,” for in it, the master first “stood in front of him, and then suddenly behind him” (*Lunyu* 9.11).

The entirety of the holy sage, or understanding that aspect, was therefore ungraspable merely in terms of a linear progression, and even less possible to represent in that manner. In fact, the holy sage had always embodied all the moments of the path (or “way”) simultaneously, as noted above. It would not have been enough, even taking all that was said about him (in Sections 3 to 23), and the effect he had in a historical sense: that would only have been an enumeration of all the cardinal virtues embodied by[?] Confucius. Rather than laying emphasis on Confucius’s “humanity” or on his “teachings,” it is instead his “flowering” that is the key virtue underlying it. He represents, synchronically, the entirety of all the segments of the Way. That process is one which lies outside the temporality of a path that is followed, and is what Zhang Zai calls “the edge of the center” (*zhong zhi ji*) or also “the outermost edge of the great center” (*da zhong zhi ji*), in which “the right arrives at its goal” (*zhi zheng*),²³⁾ with the result that one “can

21) Chapter 14.26 (*Zhang Zai ji* 51.7-8). The exegetical problem here is that the term „great“ is used for both second and fifth lines.

22) Chapter 14.22 (*Zhang Zai ji*, 50.11-12); the student Zi Kong (*Lunyu* 19.25) is being cited here.

23) See Chapter 8.3 (*Zhang Zai ji*, 27.5-6) and 14.22 (also at 50.11-12).

no longer fashion an image” of the holy sage.²⁴⁾ The center/edge metaphor is more often rendered in English as center/ultimate, this with reference to Taiji, the Great Ultimate, and the two do evoke different things. In understanding the relationship of Confucius to his students, the immediacy of the circle metaphor is somewhat preferable to the more metaphysical reading of the “ultimate” – but by that same token, lends the distinction a concreteness it does not quite deserve, as the “steps” taken along the Way are not meant quite so literally.

Such steps are very much represented by the students of Confucius. Thus, in Section 31, Zilu and Yan Hui each represent only one aspect of „humanity“ (“the good” and “forward progress”) – characterized as “internal“ or within in the case of Yan Hui, and „external“ or without in the case of Zilu. It is only through Confucius (following *Lunyu* 5.26) that humanity is perfected, through a process of merging, and that is because he “had his joy in what was in heaven.”

The „ability“ (*neng*) of the students was also a limited one. True, according to Section 32, Zilu was able to “separate those in conflict” and “punish people” (this follows two assertions in the *Yijing*, No. 55 [*feng* –, image commentary *xiang*], and No. 4 [*meng* –, first line, *ibid.*]). Yet he could only do so “because both times the virtues of the line and the image of the oracle was not in full bloom.” Put another way, the synchronicity expressed in the term “flowering” was not given to him.

It is worth pausing for a moment here on the idea of “flowering”, inasmuch as Section 2 was defined by the statement that „the holy sage divided/cut/sliced the process of his transformation into temporal segments from age fifteen to seventy.” The characterization of the *shengren* in the *Yijing* [*Xicizhuan* A12] is „to change and to divide; that is based on alteration” (*hua er cai zhi cun hu bian*). In Zhang Zai’s hands, however (esp. in Chapter 3, Section 13, of the *Zhengmeng*), this took on truly cosmic dimensions, as it was – again with reference to the holy sage – seen as the ability, “to divide the cycle/circle of the year into sections, based on the change of the seasons. In a different passage (Chapter 3.8), the ability was mentioned that he “could reveal the unfathomable through what was graspable” or “manifest”. (*yi zhu xian wei*).

In other words, the holy sage gave to his life the same order that he gives to nature or that he applies to the natural world, for in the form of the seasons, the process of nature is, or is conceived of, as “round” [*zhou sui*]. It is not a large leap to see the life of the holy sage as comprised of such a “round,” or in other words, as a circle. If we then connect this with the idea introduced above of the “outermost edge” (or the “ultimate”) of the great center” that is inherent

24) *Idem*, Chapter 8.3 (27.5-6).

to the *shengren*, that also speaks of his oneness with heaven and an identity that cannot be reached through stepwise ascent, then we can think of this in geometric terms. The midpoint and circumference of the circle are inhabited equally by the *shengren*, though that circumference is the “graspable” or what is “manifest”, while the center – which must be ever newly occupied – is by contrast “unfathomable” and whose location can only be established with reference to the circumference. From that sort of center it is possible to appear “both ahead and then behind” a student, as the “alteration” (*bian*) would not be only of the kind between, say, day and night. Rather, it would be an alteration within the holy sage himself, as he had the capacity to change between the two levels – center and periphery – in a manner which appears (literally in *Zhongyong* 26 and in Chapter 3.8) “unmoving yet changing.”

The student, on the other hand, who resides only at the level of the circumference, or to put it another way, only in the first line of the *Qian* hexagram, can only look with wonder at the *shengren*, seeing how “he shakes off the dust of the earth and speeds away” and “looms up to the height of the outermost in heaven”.²⁵⁾ If, as the sources claim, none of Confucius's students were regarded as holy sages, then we can assume, at least for one specific era – that the Holy Sage was unique.

Conclusion

The question whether any person could arrive at holiness, or be or even become holy must therefore be answered via Confucius. For it was he who received the “call,” and it was thus his fate to be the *shengren*. Yan Hui, by contrast, had the stuff it takes to be holy – but “his call was abbreviated,”²⁶⁾ that is, it was his fate to have only a short lifespan. Seen in that light, the statements about Yan Hui “not being able to contain himself” (Chapter 14, Section 20, *Zhang Zai ji*, 50.7), and his wish “to arrive in a single morning” [at virtue] (Section 27, following *Lunyu* 12.21) take on an unexpected psychological dimension, a kind of consumption of the self dictated by the decrees of fate.

To “find the middle of the Way without effort” (Section 1, applicable to Confucius) is therefore reserved to those – or in this case, to him – who has in any case already learned what

25) Chapter 14.22 (*Zhang Zai ji*, 50.11-13), citing Yan Hui in the first case, though following *Zhuangzi* 7B.21.

In the second case, it comes from *Zhongyong* 27, which comes from Zi Si, a further student.

26) *Jingxue liku* 5 (*Zhang Zai ji*, 270.13).

his calling, or better, what “the call” is. Others may “learn from Confucius”²⁷⁾ or „learn holiness“ (or even „learn from the holy sage“ –*xue Zhongni* or *xue shengren*): through this “learning” they are already on the right path. Yet whether they “find the middle,” much as with the fifth line in the *Qian* hexagram, does not depend on their efforts.²⁸⁾ In that sense, anyone can become a holy sage – as long as he is the holy sage already.²⁹⁾

27) For example the two Cheng brothers, the „actual“ founders of neo-Confucianism. „The two Chengs, since the age of 14, have assiduously desired to learn from the holy one. Now they have reached their forties, but cannot [or have not] even reached the stage Yan Hui and Min Zi Qian were as pupils! The younger Cheng may well be like a Yan Hui, but I fear he is not as selfless as Yan Hui was “ (*Jingxue liku* 7A (*Zhang Zai ji*, p. 280). Yet if Cheng Yi only resembled Yan Hui, who was the *shengren* at the time? Possibly Zhang Zai himself??

28) Chapter 14.22 (*Zhang Zai ji*, 50.11-12).

29) Therefore, one can also arrive at the teachings of the holy man without being the holy man himself. See the discussion in the text of Yao and Shun.