

On the non-finality of physical death in classical Confucianism

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Abstract. There is probably no idea more difficult to contemplate clearly than death and dying, especially one's own. How we think about death, however, will surely be influenced by what we think about life and living in general, and more specifically how we define ourselves as human beings. The early Confucians viewed persons very differently than contemporary Western thinkers and developed a ritual orientation grounded in the family that had both ethical and religious (but not transcendental) dimensions, in which the death of the body was not seen as abrupt and final, but rather as a stage that began before our embodiment, and will continue long after its dissolution.

There is very probably no idea more difficult to think about clearly than death, especially one's own, and this holds true for philosophers no less than for anyone else. Herbert Fingarette, for example, has written:

One literally cannot imagine what it will be like to be dead—there's nothing to imagine. What one does imagine is the nearest analogy—being separated from loved ones. Trying to imagine death, one unwittingly imagines something else instead, something that critically misrepresents the matter.

This misrepresentation may reflect not only confusion but also a certain unconscious yet purposeful self-deception. To imagine myself separated from others is tacitly to deny my total non-existence.¹

One thing that does seem clear, however, is that how we think about death and dying will be strongly influenced by our conceptions of life and living as a human being, in general, and more particularly, how we define and describe our unique selves within these general concepts. If this be so, it should prove philosophically fruitful to examine how other cultures have conceived human beings, how the persons in those cultures consequently defined and described themselves, and how those definitions and descriptions were reflected in attitudes and rituals associated with both the living and the dead.

An earlier version of this paper appeared in German in *Philosophieren über den Tod*, edited by Hans-Georg Möller and Günter Wohlfart (Köln: Edition Chora, 2004). In its present form it was given as the Keynote Address at a symposium on 'The Concept of the Human in Traditional Chinese Scientific, Philosophical and Religious Thought', held at the University of Vilnius, Lithuania, October 4–5, 2007, and read again at the Columbia University Seminar on Neo-Confucianism in December 2007. I am grateful to all the participants at both gatherings for their comments and support.

¹ Fingarette 1996, 3.

To this end I want to discuss the lexicon of early Chinese that deals with these issues in general, and with the major texts associated with classical Confucianism—especially the *Analects*, *Mencius*, *Xunzi* and the *Li Ji* or *Records of Ritual*—in particular; with specific reference to death and the dead, in the somewhat more general categories of exemplary human interpersonal conduct and ritual performances.² In the course of doing so, I will be advancing a number of historical, philological and philosophical claims, aided by recent and current research of several colleagues and friends working in these same general areas. My two major conclusions may be stated at the outset to indicate the direction my remarks will take, and I must emphasize that these conclusions apply only to the classical Confucians, not to other thinkers during and following the Warring States period.

(I shall have much to say, for instance, about the spiritual significance of the elaborate burial and commemorative ritual performances insisted upon by Confucius and his successors. On the other hand, the Mohists of the time thought elaborate funerals a waste of money and wanted burials to be very simple. Even more extreme, the Daoist Zhuangzi wanted to away with them altogether.)

The first claim is that for Confucius and his pre-Han followers, human life is *not* viewed as a purely personal series of stages beginning with birth and ending at death, but rather as a personal continuum with roots going back well before birth and extending well beyond physical death. And second, I will argue that one's concept of immortality, in an important sense of the term, should *not* be construed simply as becoming one of the 'ghosts' or 'spirits' after death, but rather, from a Confucian standpoint, as a disciplined coming to see, feel, and understand oneself as living in the ancestors and living on in succeeding generations, and that this coming to see, feel, and understand is the culmination of a rigorous and lifelong aesthetic, moral, and spiritual cultivation centred in filial piety, love, friendship, responsibility and the *li*, or ritual propriety. Had he known of Confucianism, the father of Dylan Thomas might have drawn much psychic sustenance from his son's skill and fame as a poet and therefore ignored the latter's plea that he 'not go gently into that good night'. For Confucius, neither father nor son, despite their accomplishments, understood what it was like to learn to live in the past, in the present, or in the future, and consequently did not learn how to properly face the prospect of their physical death.

² A note on texts and translations. For the *Analects* I have used the translation by Roger Ames and myself (Ames, Rosemont 1999). For the *Mencius*, the translation of D.C. Lau (1970). I have used Burton Watson's translation in *Hsun Tzu: Basic Writings* (1963) and James Legge's *The Chinese Classics*, University of Hong Kong reprint of the Shanghai 1894 edition, for the *Li Ji* (*Li Ki*), modifying the translations from both of these texts at times. In all cases I have used the concordances (*Yinde*) with accompanying Chinese texts published by Gudai Chubanshe (Shanghai, 1982).

For ourselves, what we believe it is to be a human being has been heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, the rise of industrial capitalism, and the replacement of monarchies by governments that claim to be democratically representative of their citizens. Human beings are first and foremost *individuals*. We are rational, we are born free, we have rights, and we are self-interested and autonomous. We have bodies—substantial bodies—and unless we are thoroughgoing behaviourists, we have minds as well (a necessary condition for rationality), even though we are not yet sure of how our substantial bodies interact with our non-substantial minds. And even the non-pious usually allow the rest of us to speak, at least loosely, of human beings having single and unitary souls, difficult though it may be to further describe these latter entities.

To be sure, not everyone in the modern West has adhered to this view of what it is to be a human being. Nineteenth century Romantics, for example, or Marxists, or radical behaviourists have advanced different concepts of being human. But it remains that in virtually all contemporary, social, moral, and political philosophy; in theology; in legal thinking; and especially in economic theory, the concept of the human being as a free, rational, autonomous, self-interested individual continues to reign supreme.

This ideology of the human being—and it is an ideology—makes it difficult for us to see ourselves other than as isolated and egoistic. There are tremendous pressures on us to focus on number one, our individual selves/egos, pressures that come not only from advertising, or the competitive ethos of capitalism, but even include the grammars of the Indo European languages we speak: Unless I put the appropriate first-person singular pronoun self-referentially in place, many of the sentences I speak will be ungrammatical.

With such proclivities toward an ego-full view of human life, it is of course difficult to contemplate one's death, which is the utter annihilation of that ego; little wonder our imagination fails us, and we become confused, self-deceived, or depressed when we do. Nowhere has this individualist perspective on being human been portrayed more vividly than by Aldous Huxley when he said:³

We live together, we act on, and react to, on another; but always and in all circumstances we are by ourselves. The martyrs go hand in hand into the arena; they are crucified alone.

This perspective has affected women in the West no less than men. The 19th century suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, for example, wrote:⁴

³ Huxley 1963, 12.

⁴ Quoted by Martha Nussbaum in her review of Vivian Gornick's recent book on Stanton in the *Nation* (February 27, 2006), p. 28.

We come into the world alone ... [and] we leave it alone...
 Rich and poor, intelligent and ignorant, wise and foolish,
 virtuous and vicious, man and woman; it is ever the same,
 each soul must depend wholly on itself.

The classical Confucian view of what it is to be a human being is very different from the one I have just all-too-briefly described, and consequently death and dying, too, must be seen, felt, and understood differently; Confucian selves are seen, felt, described and understood more relationally to others than individual selves.

For Confucius, I always have been, and always will be, first and foremost a *son* of my parents. *Xiao*, which should be translated *family reverence*, is the foundation of classical Confucianism; the family relationships within which I develop into a person largely constitute who I am. The role of son has had a profound influence on my life, and on my parents' lives, an influence that is lessened only slightly at their death. As I matured, I became many other things besides a son: I am husband of my wife, father of our children, grandfather of their children; I am a student of my teachers, teacher of my students; friend of my friends, colleague of my colleagues; and more.

Most of these roles intersect with other roles, and many of them are not simply one-to-one. I am not *Samantha's father* only to Samantha, but also to her teachers, friends, and now her husband, and sons. I share students with my faculty colleagues as I earlier shared teachers with my fellow students.

All of us here, of course, also have these familial and other relational roles, but only rarely are they felt as constitutive of our essential selves as persons, as definitive of who we *really are*. The English verb that most frequently accompanies the noun *role* is *play*. We *play* our roles, with the world as stage, but with our true, individual selves largely hidden from view behind the costume, mask or makeup.⁵

This tendency to focus on the essential individual in the West—especially in the United States, birthplace of *rugged individualism*—can also be seen from the fact that we equally tend to focus on the sameness, continuity, or self-identity of other individuals even when their roles are changed; my friends remain basically the same even when they get married, divorced, or take on numerous other roles.

Confucian selves, on the other hand, do not *play* but *live* their roles, and consequently when the roles change, the focus—and the locus—of the self changes. Marriage made me a different person, as did becoming a parent; divorce would change me yet again, both as I responded to others and others responded to me. Upon divorce, for example, a bachelor good friend might invite me to join him on a summer cruise around the world, which he would not do while I was married.

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of the concept of *xiao*, see the translation by Roger Ames and myself of *The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2009).

Thus, for Confucians, when all my roles have been spelled out and their interrelationships made clear, then I have been fairly well specified as a unique person, but with virtually nothing left over with which to piece together a purely individual, free, autonomous self. And my unique personhood changes as my interrelationships with others changes. ‘I’m not the man I used to be’ is usually construed as a male lament on the ravages of the aging process; for Confucians, it is quite literally true—and for women as well.

Against this background let me now turn more directly to the Confucian texts and the classical language in which they were written. In the introduction to our translation of the *Analects*, Roger Ames and I argued for interpreting classical Chinese more as an event language (akin to ancient Hebrew), than as a ‘thing’ language like most of those in the Indo-European family, a distinction which mirrors at least in part the difference between Chinese role-bearing persons, constantly changing, and consistently the same Indo-European individuals.⁶ Certainly all languages have both nouns and verbs, but Chinese sentences are often grammatical without a subject noun phrase. In English, we would say, *It is raining* even though there is no referent for the pronoun. Moreover, the Chinese can both noun verbs and verb nouns far more easily and frequently than English can—and less bizarrely as well, as this last sentence demonstrates.

Thus if I ask, ‘What is *it* that dies?’ the straightforward answer must be ‘The body’. But the early Chinese do not appear to have had the same kind of bodies we do. Consider for example, what Nathan Sivin says on this theme in his careful readings of the Chinese *materia medica*:

In China the boundaries of the (human) body were different from Greece. The terms normally used for the body, *shen* and *ti*, cover a great deal more than Greek *somai*, which clearly denotes the physical. *Shen* includes the individual personality, and may refer in a general way to the person, rather than to the body. *Ti* refers to the concrete physical body... It can also mean ‘embodiment’, and may refer to an individual’s personification of something. *Chu* comes closer to the scope of the European notion of body, but a *ling chu* implies the person, and *chu* was not a common word. The only term for the body that has nothing to do with the person seen whole, *xing*, literally means ‘shape’. It often refers to the body’s outline rather than to its physical identity. It is not surprising that the European mind-body dichotomy (among a great many other mental habits) seems exotic to East Asians...⁷

To elaborate on these terms, first, *shen* is often used as a personal pronoun in the *Analects*, as when Zeng Zi says, ‘Every day I examine myself (*shen*) on three counts...’ (1.4). At other times it can mean ‘one’s whole life’, as in 15.24 when Zigong

⁶ Ames, Rosemont 1999, 20–8.

⁷ Sivin 1995. Roger Ames has analyzed *shen*, *xing*, and *ti* in similar fashion in Ames 1993.

asks, 'Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one's days?' (*chong shen*).

The *shen* is often the locus of inner cultivation, as in the famous chain argument at the beginning of the *Da Xue* (*Great Learning*):

Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons (*shen*). Wishing to cultivate their persons (*shen*), they first rectified their heart-minds.⁸

But at the same time, one's *shen* body was not altogether one's own, was not fully discrete. From the *Records of Ritual*:

Noble people are always reverent, and being reverent about the body (*shen*) is of the greatest importance. The body is a branch of one's parents, so how could one be irreverent in this regard? The inability to be reverent toward one's own body wounds one's parents; wounding one's parents, one wounds one's foundational trunk; when the trunk is wounded, the branch perishes.⁹

Second, *ti*, as Sivin noted, can refer to the physical body; it is the locus for experiencing pleasures and pains, and for physical labour. But it, too, is not always discrete: *Analects* 18.7 refers to the *si ti*, usually translated as *the four limbs*, but in *Mencius* 2A6 the *si ti* are in part the locus of the *si duan*, or *four sprouts* of authoritativeness, righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom.

Moreover, like *shen*, the *ti* is divisible in other ways. As the *four sprouts* grow, they can be discerned differently from the front of the body to the back, as *Mencius* claims in 7A.21:

[These four] are rooted in his heart-mind and show in the face, giving it a sleek appearance. [They] also show in the back and four limbs, rendering their message clear without words.

But once again like *shen*, more than one person can occupy the *ti* body: parents and children, siblings, husband and wife, and even, on occasion, teacher and students. In *Mencius* 2A2 Gongsun Chou says:

I have heard that Zixia, Ziyou, and Zichang each had one aspect of the Sage [Confucius] while Ran Niu, Minzi, and Yan Hui were replicas of the Sage in miniature. Which would you prefer to be?

Mencius declines to answer the question, but the point of the quote is to further illustrate that *ti*, like *shen*, is polysemous in ways that English *body* is not.

Third, as Sivin observed, while *qu* seems at times to mean *body*, it is not a common term in archaic Chinese. It is found a few times in the *Xunzi*, but always to denote the body or person of one who does not understand, one who is confused,

⁸ My translation.

⁹ Legge 1960, 288.

dazzled sensually; *xiao ren* or petty persons have *qu* bodies; the term is pejorative for Xunzi.¹⁰

A final term denoting the body not found in the *materia medica* but used on occasion in the *Analects* is *gong*. As Deborah Sommer has noted,¹¹ on these occasions it is the body in motion, exhibiting either a valued or disvalued personal quality. Thus in 10.4, on passing through the entry of the duke's court, Confucius would 'bow forward from the waist' (*qu gong*). Less favourably, the son who turns in his father for stealing sheep is derogatorily referred to as a 'true person' (*chen gong*; 13.18). Sommer has given a splendid definition of this term: 'the *gong* body is a discrete, living physical frame that is the site of publicly displayed performed values'.¹²

Now the conclusion I draw, at least tentatively, from this brief philological excursus, is that while the death of the Chinese body certainly occurs, that death does not have the ring of finality that it has in the West; no Chinese term for *body* has either the denotation or connotation of a solely physical chunk of matter, capable of being destroyed utterly.¹³ In one sense, the *shen* and *ti* bodies of living children may be said to die, at least in part, when their parents (siblings, spouse, students) die; and at the same time, the *shen* and *ti* bodies of the departed continue to live on in their descendants, and their *gong* bodies-in-action live on in vivid memory.

We may see this point in another way by looking at another Chinese term centrally employed in burial and mourning ritual: *shi*. It is usually translated as *corpse*, and it does indeed refer to the recently deceased. But it also denotes a decidedly living entity, the person who stands in for the departed during memorial rituals, and hence is best rendered as *personator* in such cases. I must emphasize, however, that it is the *same* graph; only context can establish whether the referent is living or dead.¹⁴

In early China (at least through the Han) the personator *shi* was, wherever possible, the grandchild of the departed *shi*, even if only in their early years. Although at the outset of the ritual the personator sits quietly and solemnly, he or she is thereafter plied with much food and drink and invited to give thanks and blessings to those in attendance. In this way too, then, the dead *shi* continue to live and to speak, as embodied in the living *shi* of the personator.

¹⁰ Xunzi Yinde 1982, 2/1/32.

¹¹ Sommer forthcoming. I have also profited from her 'Ritual and Sacrifice in Early Confucianism: Contacts with the Spirit World' (Sommer 2003).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ This is not the place to go into the matter, but if the closing line of Ch. 33 of the *Daodejing* is translated straightforwardly as 'Those who die but do not perish are long-lived', then this issue is even more complex than I am suggesting above; the terms are fairly synonymous in English.

¹⁴ Michael Carr has written a thorough, if idiosyncratic, analysis of the personator phenomenon in ancient Chinese ancestral sacrifices (Carr 1985).

The personator pattern of ancestral sacrifice predated Confucius. Here, for example, is part of a poem from the *Shi Jing* celebrating a clan ancestral ritual:

The wild ducks and widgeons are on the river;
 The personators of your ancestors feast and are happy.
 Your spirits are clear,
 Your viands are fragrant;
 The personators of your ancestors feast and drink;—
 Their happiness and dignity are made complete

...

The wild ducks and widgeons are where the waters meet;
 The personators of your ancestors feast, and are honored.
 The feast is spread in the ancestral temple,
 The place where happiness and dignity descend.
 The personators of your ancestors feast and drink;—
 Their happiness and dignity are at the highest point.

...

No troubles shall be theirs after this.¹⁵

We may be tempted here to raise ontological or theological questions at this point, especially about the specific nature of the relation between the personator and the dead ancestor being revered; an understandable question surely, but one which just as surely reveals a Western metaphysical orientation. Deborah Sommer can help us resist the temptation when she says:

Whether the personator metaphorically represented or literally substituted for the deceased or temporarily *was* the deceased is a difficult and perhaps ultimately unnecessary distinction to make, as the personator occupied precisely that liminal space between the living and the dead, between representation, substitution, and actuality.¹⁶

We may also want to ask—almost cannot help but ask—did the early Chinese of the poem really believe the ancestor's soul/spirit was partaking of the food and drink, was really talking through the medium of the *shi* personator? Confucius offers a profound non-answer 'answer' to this question for us, when his disciple Zilu raised pretty much the same queries:

Zilu asked how to serve the ghosts and spirits, the Master replied, 'Not yet being able to serve other people, how would you be able to serve the ghosts and spirits?' Zilu then asked about death, and the Master responded 'Not yet understanding life, how would you understand death?' (11.12).

¹⁵ Legge 1960, 4: 479.

¹⁶ Sommer forthcoming.

Something else to note about this poem is the intergenerational nature of the ritual participants. Descendants of the deceased will be numerous, and of varying ages. And just as we maintain our links with the past through participating in time-honoured rituals, by including the young in them as fellow participants we are preparing them and even future generations to perform and carry them on in turn. Thus it is not just a strong sense of kinship with our fellow human beings living when we are that the Confucian spiritual discipline is designed to induce, but at a higher level, a feeling of solidarity, of belonging, to and with those who have preceded us, and those who will follow.¹⁷

And just as the deceased continued to live on, in part, during these ancestor worship rituals, so too, did the living die, in part, during the 2-plus years of the mourning rituals, wherein the offspring of the deceased led a strenuously ascetic existence. They were to leave their homes for a simple crude hut devoid of furnishings,¹⁸ be celibate, eat only the blandest of grains and vegetables, and in very small quantities; they were to bathe but rarely and wear the coarsest of garments; they took up affairs of the family or state only in the most dire of circumstances; and much more. Indeed, the mourning rituals of offspring were sufficiently austere that some of the editors of the *Records of Rituals* seemed to have felt obliged to issue a warning—in the name of Confucius—against asceticism so extreme as to endanger the mourner's health:

Confucius said: 'If a man have a sore on his body, he should bathe. If he has a wound on his head, he should wash it. If he be ill, he should drink liquor and eat meat. An exemplary person will not emaciate himself so as to be ill. If one dies from such emaciation an exemplary person will say of him that he has failed in the duty of a son'.¹⁹

There are other ways the continuum of life and death is evidenced in early China, especially in the moving essay 'On Rituals' by Xunzi.²⁰ In the first place, the coffins and other funerary paraphernalia for the aged were to be prepared while they could oversee their construction. For the first several days after breathing stopped, food continued to be placed in the mouth of the deceased, and their bodies bathed as they lay in state in the central quarters of the home. Only slowly, and in stages, were they

¹⁷ In a somewhat more general context, but nevertheless inspired by the Confucian vision, I have taken up this sense of *belonging* in my *Rationality & Religious Experience* (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).

¹⁸ See for example, *Analects* 17.21 and 14.40. The *Records of Ritual* are replete with other austerities that the grieving offspring must endure (as a part of their spiritual development) during the mourning period.

¹⁹ Legge 1960, 2: 160.

²⁰ The accounts here and immediately below are taken from the *Li Lun Pien*, to my mind one of the most sophisticated and psychologically penetrating philosophical essays of all time, virtually ignored in the West, and after the Tang, in China as well; to the detriment of both cultures, in my view. The essay is translated as 'On Rituals' in Xunzi 1963, 89–111.

moved to more outer chambers and salved to prevent putrefaction. This went on for 3 months in the case of a parent, 5 months for a nobleman, and 7 months in the case of a ruler.

In all of these examples, what is striking, to me at least, is that there are no sharp breaks, only transitions, and slow transitions at that. Moreover, the transitions run in both directions: life in death, death in life; the ancestors live on in part, while their descendants, not altogether metaphorically, are dying in part.

In proffering this initial analysis, I should like to call attention to two points. First, we see a contrast between the life-death continuum of early Confucianism and the stark either/or, and finality, of life and death in the West, especially in the contemporary United States, wherein the unconscious person, in a coma and on life support machinery, is nevertheless alive until such time as the monitor no longer records brain waves, at which time the person is pronounced dead. Brain death is sudden, it is total and taken to be final; and thereafter the corpse is considered of a piece with the rest of the physical machinery that sustained it, as vital organs are harvested to be placed in the machine-bodies of other persons with faulty parts.²¹

The second point I want to note with regard to my remarks up to this point is that I have attempted to describe what may be said to live, and to die, only in terms of Chinese expressions that are all translated at times as *body*; so far I have said nothing at all about what, in the West, is often taken as what does not die, namely, the soul, or spirit. The silence was intentional, because I have been concerned to show both that there is not a sharp conceptual contrast between physical life and death in early Confucianism, and equally to point up the contrast between the Chinese view and that which is most common in the West, especially in the three Abrahamic religious traditions with respect to the concept of *body*.

I now want to suggest that the contrast remains equally stark when we consider *soul*. For myself, while there is much in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths I admire, their concepts of an immortal soul are incoherent, in that I cannot think of, imagine, or wish for, a part of me to exist throughout eternity. I will not belabour the point here, but merely note a *New Yorker* cartoon which pictures two elderly gentlemen sitting on a cloud, resplendent with wings, white gowns, halos and harps, with one saying to the other 'I'm not sure I'd have wanted to live to be 83 if I knew I was going to be 83 *forever*'.

Whereas a Western individual body is singular and unitary, and dies utterly, the Western individual soul, equally singular and unitary, as the cartoon suggests, lives

²¹ I have worded this description of brain death and organ transplants sharply not to condemn them out of hand, but to point up the contrast with the Confucian perspective. For the moral problems created by the concept of 'brain death' seen in cross-cultural perspective, see La Fleur 2001.

on forever. Confucians, on the other hand, may be said to have either no bodies, or a multiplicity of them, *and* either no soul, or a multiplicity of them as well. They have no soul in the sense of a unitary entity replete with personality traits and memory living on in that way unto eternity; at the same time, each person has *several* more or less non-corporeal aspects, the terms for which have usually, if somewhat misleadingly, been translated as *soul*.²²

The *po* soul is linked to the *shen*, *ti*, or *gong* body, and seems to remain with it after interment. The *hun* soul has no clearly defined sense, either in the early Confucian texts—where it occurs but rarely—or in Han dynasty writings and steles describing entombment rituals. It is often linked there—as the binome *hunpo*—with the body, too, but as K.E. Brashier has well said:

The *hunpo* is not necessarily conscious, not spiritual,
and not even uniquely human, and so the Western translation
'soul' seems an ill fit at best.²³

At times the *hun* appears to be best described as an *animated soul*, which, if properly cared for and nourished at the ancestral sacrifices, will become a *ling* soul or *ling hun*, *purified soul*. If the sacrifices are not maintained, the *hun* soul may become a *gui*, or *ghost*, and haunt descendants for their filial failures. (Although it is not always a pejorative term, especially when it stands in the for the binome *gui shen*, discussed below).

Human beings also have a *shen* soul, although it might be more proper to say that the other 'souls' of a person may be transformed into a *shen* soul, becoming a *perfected* or *godlike* spirit if the departed's descendants maintain the ancestral sacrifices properly. (The graph for this *shen* is homophonous with the *shen* graph

²² *Po* and *hun* souls are not mentioned in the *Analects* (Unsurprising, given the Master's reluctance to speak of such things). They do not occur in the *Mencius* either, once each in *Xunzi*, and on half a dozen occasions in the *Records of Rituals*. *Ling* appears only as a proper name in the *Analects* (Duke Ling of Wey) and several times in compounds in *Mencius* (e.g., 'Sacred Terrace', 'Sacred Pond', etc). *gui* and *shen* are far and away the terms of choice overall in the early Confucian texts for discussing the non-corporeal dimensions of deceased persons, again suggesting, to my mind, that the focus of early Confucian spirituality was always on *this* life. This might also help explain why texts like the *Analects* were seldom found in Han and later tombs, as compared, say, with Daoist-inspired writings, which *did* often dwell on such topics, especially physical immortality. (I am grateful to Conrad Schirokauer of the Columbia Seminar on Neo-Confucianism for raising this issue for me.)

²³ Brashier 1996, 151. Brashier is challenging the claim made by Yu Ying-shih and others that the *hun* soul was linked to *yang* and 'heaven' (*tian*), while the *po* soul was identified with *yin*, and earth, but his critique is more wide-ranging. Yu's analysis is in his "'O Soul, Come Back!'" A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China' (Yu 1987). For more on ideas about the life and death of the several 'souls' in early China, see, for example, Poo 1990; Brown 2002 (interestingly for our purposes, Brown answers the question negatively; according to her, Han elites did believe the destruction of the body was total); Puett 2002; and Carr 1985 among many other works dealing with these themes.

denoting some dimensions of the body, although they are written differently.) The *shen* are most unusual entities, for they may be found in non-sentient objects such as mountains, trees, and rivers, as well as in lower animals, and may even be manifest in humans while they are alive: to quote Xunzi, ‘There is no greater godliness (*shen*) than to transform yourself with the “Way” (*dao*).’²⁴ That is to say, *shen*-hood could be realized by the living no less than the dead in early Confucianism. In early Daoism, on the other hand, we are born with *shen*, attentiveness to which was essential for self-cultivation. As Harold Roth has described it:

The concept of *shen* ... is associated with both precognition and with intuitive knowledge. It resides within the human heart-mind but must be guarded, preserved, and nourished by a series of related methods of attaining the states of calmness and tranquillity...²⁵

Shen is thus a contested concept in classical China, but no matter what the difference between the term’s usage over time, and as between Confucians and Daoists, this much is clear: none of the English terms *ghost*, *wraith*, *soul*, *spirit*, *shade*, or *apparition* fully convey what the term can and did signify. At times it was coupled with *gui*, and most translators have had to get along with *ghosts and spirits* for the regularly employed *gui shen* or *shen gui* in the texts.²⁶

The dwelling place of the non-*po* ‘souls’ is the invisible world, sensorially imperceptible to the living under normal circumstances. But the texts suggest strongly that this dwelling place is simply another dimension of this world, the world of our ordinary experience, and not some transcendental realm which the souls of the departed occasionally leave to be among us in this world.²⁷

There was, moreover, a spiritual discipline that one could undertake in order to perceive the normally invisible dimension of the world inhabited by the *gui shen*. Let

²⁴ Watson 1963, 16.

²⁵ Roth 1990, 15. Roth also correctly notes that *shen* ‘is one of the most elusive ideas in early Chinese thought’ (ibid., 1). Relatedly, see Ames 1998.

²⁶ How to interpret the meaning of these terms has been a source of difficulty and dispute among sinologists since the discipline began with the writings of the early missionaries when Matteo Ricci settled in the capital at the turn of the 16th century. Leibniz was especially interested in the terms and discussed them at great length in his efforts to support the ‘Accommodationist’ position adopted by Ricci to aid in the conversion of Confucians. See his ‘On the Natural Theology of the Chinese’ in Leibniz 1994.

²⁷ Although a number of sinologists claim the early Chinese had a concept of a transcendental realm, I have never been able to find such, nor have, for example, David Hall and Roger Ames (1987); what we commonly find are cases of special pleading, if we accept the concept of a transcendental realm as it is found in Judeo-Christian and Islamic theology: the transcendental realm of God is altogether independent of this world, but this world—of God’s creation—is utterly dependent on His realm. According to the left-to-right journalist Christopher Hitchens, ‘People of all ages have a need for the transcendent’ (quoted by the Editors of the *New York Times Book Review*, August 12, 2007, p. 4). Maybe so, but as is so often the case, the Chinese seem to be the exception. For more on the potential of *this* world to be spiritually significant, see Rosemont 2001.

me once again at length quote Deborah Sommer, who has studied this phenomenon in detail:

Commerce with the spirit world was regularized by a complex ritual system, and maintaining relationship with spiritual beings was normative, not extraordinary. The spirits abided in a realm that seemed very far away but was actually very near. This dimension could be invoked by anyone of the appropriate moral and emotional tenor. [Prior to an ancestral sacrifice], preparation required withdrawing from the sensory world, maintaining taboos regarding inauspicious things, and focusing one's purpose toward the development of a pure inner virtue. Such preparations evoked visions of the deceased: filial children could 'see' their ancestors in eidetic visions of the deceased.²⁸

Sommer is basing her analysis significantly on her reading of the *Records of Ritual*, a reading I support. Consider the following from that text:

One ponders about how they lived, about how they smiled and spoke, about their aims and purposes, and about what they enjoyed. On the third day, one will indeed seem to see them at the place [the spirit place where the spirit alights]. After one has made one's round and is about to go out, with a sense of awe one will hear the voices. When one has gone out in the hall, softly one will hear the sounds of their sighs.²⁹

In its present form, the *Records of Ritual* dates from well over 2 centuries after the passing of Confucius. The Chinese tradition has it that Confucius edited the work, but most contemporary Western sinologists are sceptical of this claim. Some parts of the work, however—or at least the rituals described therein—must have been known to the Master, for they originated in a period long before he lived, and attentiveness to this chronology may help us to read differently certain biographical passages in the *Analects* which have seemed to make the Master rigid and austere to some readers, as for example, 10.7:

In periods of purification, Confucius would invariably wear a spirit coil of plain cloth. In such periods he would invariably simplify his diet and at home would change his resting place.

What we have here, in my view, is an account of one dimension of a ritual discipline of purification preparatory to participation in ancestral sacrifice ceremonies, which enabled descendants to quite literally commune with their forebears.³⁰

In addition to these passages perhaps describing the Master during purification rituals, there are two others which seem to depart from the usual accounts of him as a model of deportment, never too easy or too harsh, never overly solemn, or overly jocular; never, in short, straying from the mean of composure. Moreover, as

²⁸ Sommer forthcoming.

²⁹ Sommer 2003, 212.

³⁰ It must be noted that these rituals were performed at the lineage shrine, not the tomb of the departed, except on rare occasions.

P.J. Ivanhoe has noted,³¹ these same two passages also suggest that Confucius, too, could perceive death as abrupt, final, and an unmitigated tragedy. Both passages have to do with the death of disciples. 6.10 reads:

Boniū was very ill, and the Master went to visit him. Grasping his hand through the portal, he said, 'We are losing him, and there is nothing we can do. But that this man should have this illness, and there is nothing we can do. That this man should have this illness.'

The text describes even greater lamentations by the Master when his favourite disciple Yan Hui dies:

When Yan Hui died, the Master grieved for him with sheer abandon. His followers cautioned, 'Sir, you grieve with such abandon'. Confucius replied, 'I grieve with abandon? If I don't grieve with abandon for him, then for whom?' (11.10).

But the deaths of two beloved disciples runs counter to the cyclic rhythms of the *Dao*. Because they occurred, such deaths must be seen, in one way, as part of the natural world, to which everyone must come to terms: *tian ming*. But in the normal cycles of the world—i.e., the unfolding of the *Dao*—children bury their parents, students bury their teachers, or, more generally, the young bury the old, and the continuum of life and death is straightforwardly maintained. Thus nothing could be more tragic than to have parents bury their children or teachers bury their students, all the more so when those descendants struck down in the prime of life are altogether good people, striving to become *jun zi*, exemplary persons.

For myself, all of these passages I have been citing are in the first instance a full refutation of the claim that Confucius was a punctilious martinet, obsessed with the precise execution of traditionally prescribed ritual behaviour just for the sake of the ritual. In these latter two cases, the life-death continuum has been abrogated, and because they are also personal cases, he all-too-humanly exhibits inconsolable grief. In general, the early Confucians were, as Ivanhoe has described it:

...primarily concerned with understanding what place death and our reactions to it play in a well ordered life, rather than what is the essence or origin of death and its related phenomena.³²

But such understanding, consoling though it may be to Socrates as he awaits the hemlock cup in the *Phaedo*, cannot, of itself, allay the sense of tragic loss we all feel—the early Chinese and ourselves equally—when the young we have nurtured perish before us. Such events are not natural cycles of the *Dao*, and we would be less than natural human beings if we did not lament their occurrence.

³¹ Ivanhoe 2002, 223.

³² *Ibid.*, 221.

If my readings of the texts are warranted, they imply that the early Confucians lived and died in ways that we their Western counterparts do not. If we probe this difference more deeply, I now want to argue, we can come to appreciate more fully the different ways one can conceive of oneself as a person. The unique Western individual may be individuated in a great many ways: by his or her physical appearance (height, weight, hair and eye colour, etc.); by their individual hopes, fears, dreams, nightmares, and aspirations; by their memories; and of course, by their actions and their genealogies.

These latter two criteria are also employed to individuate Chinese persons: we know them by their conduct, and their lineage. But the other criteria employed in the West to single out one person from another are not often found in the early Chinese texts. From the *Analects*, for example, we know in detail how Confucius entered the duke's court, how he ascended an ancestral altar; we know in what order he ate his food, how he hastened his step in the presence of a mourner, how he prepared himself for a sacrificial ritual, how he lamented the death of his disciples.³³

But the *Analects* nowhere describes what he looked like: Was he tall or short? Fat, thin, or of average weight? How did he wear his hair? Was much of it gray? Did he have a hawk, aquiline, or snub nose?

Sad to say, none of these questions, or others like them, are answered in the *Analects*; for painting a portrait of the Master we have not a single clue from the text. The situation is pretty much the same for all the culture heroes of Chinese antiquity, from Huang Di, Shen Nong, and Fu Xi through Kings Wen and Wu and the Duke of Zhou. Their accomplishments on behalf of the Chinese people and their admirable qualities are described in detail, but about their physical appearance, relation to their wives and children, or their hobbies or passions, we know virtually nothing; they are simply role models, exemplars. To be sure, paintings, prints, sculptures, and other images of Confucius, his followers, and other culture heroes abound in the Chinese tradition. But few of them are distinctive, and none uniquely depict a single individual. We know who they are supposed to represent because they are named on the images.

Lacking such knowledge of an individual, we in the West would be extremely reluctant to claim of an individual that we knew who they 'really were', whereas knowledge of a person's lineage and actions—not merely their deeds, but how these deeds were enacted—would seem to suffice for the Confucians. (As well as memory; enhancing which seems to have been one of the goals of the pre-sacrificial purification rituals.)

³³ Book 10 of the *Analects* is devoted to these themes.

We can see this difference in construing who we really are another way by thinking about the ideas of disguise and deception, so important in the history of Western literature.

In a seminal essay contrasting ancient Greek and ancient Chinese conceptions of the self, David Keightley has shown that while the possibility of disguising oneself in ancient Greece is common, nothing approaching this notion appears in ancient China.³⁴ Surely part of the excitement and interest we have in reading the closing books of the *Odyssey* lies in Odysseus, with the help of Pallas Athena, disguising himself so as to be unrecognizable, at least at first, to his own father, wife, and son, not to mention the many suitors for Penelope's hand he will later dispatch.

A number of Shakespeare's plays similarly depend on the ability of certain protagonists to disguise their true identities, without which there would be little plot to the plays. And we learn the importance of disguise and deception very early on, as we read about Superman, Spiderman, and the Lone Ranger. But although China is replete with myths, stories, plays, and children's tales, virtually none of them include deceptions of this sort, and in the few that do, the attempt at deception is woefully unsuccessful.

Keightley accounts, in part, for this difference by describing what he—and others—have claimed for Chinese thinkers, namely, their 'epistemological optimism'; the belief, unlike Socratic Greece, that the world is truly as we experience it, that there is no gulf between appearance and reality. I suspect this differing epistemological orientation is due to the fact that the development of arithmetic and geometry in ancient Greece preceded its 'golden age' of philosophy, whereas in China the philosophical came first, but the point of Keightley's insight is important for our present concerns: the early Chinese could not conceal who they 'really were' by disguise, who they 'really were' was not to be ascertained on the basis of dress, physical features, or any other static or contingent feature of their being, but rather on the basis of highly cultivated perceptual skills in observing how others exhibited themselves in action, actions which spoke the truth about the person, in the same way, as Herbert Fingarette has argued, that the truth—inner and outer—of the dancer is seen in the performance of the dance. The inner 'soul' of a person is not hidden from us if we look closely at what they do and listen carefully to what they say.³⁵

Seen in this light, an autobiographical comment by Confucius in the *Analects* takes on an even deeper meaning. In 5.26, after responding to a question from Confucius about what they would like to do, one of the disciples

³⁴ Keightley 2003.

³⁵ Fingarette 1972.

Zilu said, 'We would like now to hear what it is that you, Master, would most like to do'. The Master replied, 'I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, share relationships of trust and confidence with friends, and love and protect the young'.

Here we have not only autobiography or a moral imperative, I believe, but as well a profound instruction to relational persons for following a spiritual path, as we have already noted in connection with the *Shi Jing* poem discussed earlier. We must develop multiple moral sensibilities for dealing with elders and children, and with differing peers, sensibilities which extend beyond the social and the moral to the spiritual if cultivated properly.

Many readers of the *Analects* in the West—especially, but not confined to those of a theological or ontological bent—have been puzzled about what Confucius really thought about the ghosts and spirits. On the one hand, he takes them seriously—nowhere are they dismissed as non-existent or unimportant—but on the other hand he steadfastly refuses to say anything about them in the text, as we have already noted.

But I do not believe his silence on those matters is an evasion of any kind, for his focus is never on death alone, but how death is related to the living. Given the ongoing great influence of the three Abrahamic religious traditions—and not a few philosophers—with respect to the concepts of the physical death of the individual body and personal immortality of the separated soul, I can, at best, only proffer a hint of what Confucius might have to say to us.

The great majority of us go to cemeteries from time to time to visit the grave of, and pay our respects to, a deceased grandparent, parent, sibling, spouse, a lover, or friend. While at the site of the headstone, most of us will say something addressed to the interred, usually audibly if we are alone or in the presence only of others close to us, and the deceased. If, at such a moment, we should be asked, 'Who do you think you're talking to?' we would be angry, nonplussed, and embarrassed. Angry at the incredible insensitivity of our interrogator, nonplussed at being in such a circumstance. And embarrassed, because we know—in *one* meaning of *know*—that the dead no longer have living ears to hear our words. We know that they are fully and utterly dead and will not return to us: we know that little of their remains are beneath our feet. Yet we talk to them.

Why? If you can answer that question, you will have a deep insight into the Confucian persuasion, an insight which is to my mind an altogether realistic conception of human life and death.

To conclude. How we think about what it is to live and die depends crucially on our view of what it is to be a human being in general and *this* person in particular. Given that there is a multiplicity of ways of conceiving our humanity, there must be a number of ways of contemplating our mortality. The early Confucian conception, with

its attendant social, moral and spiritual disciplines, linking us to our ancestors and binding us to our peers and descendents, proffers a conception that is fully consonant with our deepest sense of the significance of family, the frailty of life and the finality of death, a conception that does not presuppose any beliefs about the world—the only world we may truly know—that are incompatible with the pronouncements of science and it is thus open to us living in the contemporary West no less than to the Chinese readers addressed in their texts two and a half millennia and half a world distant from ourselves.

Glossary

禮 li; ritual	躬 gong; person, body
孝 xiao; family reverence	鞠躬 ju gong; bow at the waist
下雨 xia yu; to rain	尸 shi; corpse; personator of the dead
身 shen; body	詩經 Shijing; Book of Odes
體 ti; body	魂 hun soul
軀 qu; body, mortal coil	魄 po soul
靈 ling; elevated 'soul'	魂魄 hunpo
靈軀 ling qu; the person	靈魂 linghun
形 xing; form	鬼 gui; 'ghosts'
大學 Da xue; Great Learning	鬼神 guishen; 'ghosts and spirits'
小人 xiao ren; petty person	道 Dao
終身 zhong shen; end of one's days	天命 Tianming; the mandate of 'Heaven'
四體 si ti; four bodies, four limbs	君子 junzi; exemplary person
四端 four sprouts	

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