

# CONFUCIAN CHINA IN A CHANGING WORLD CULTURAL ORDER

Roger T. Ames, University of Hawai'i  
([rtames@hawaii.edu](mailto:rtames@hawaii.edu))

I. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, . . . it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

II. Comfort and convenience

III. THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS OF OUR DAY:

- a. **THE PERFECT STORM:** Global warming, pandemics, food and water shortage, environmental degradation, exponentially expanding population, international terrorism, nuclear proliferation, income disparities, consumer waste, energy shortage, and so on.
- b. What is the difference between a *problem* and a *predicament*?
- c. Does culture—that is, our values, intentions, and practices—make a difference?
- d. What is the difference between **finite games** and **infinite games**? (James Carse)
- e. Do we presently have the cultural resources to make a difference?
- f. The fact of association; the fiction of autonomous individuality.

**IV. SEA CHANGE in the world's economic and political order with China at its center. What about culture—a change in values, intentions, and practices?**

**V. Taking Stock: Where are we today?**

**1. China is rising. From increasing economic and political power (APEC 1989) to cultural influence; from G20 to a new cultural order.**

**2. Peking University's Wang Jisi: a monograph published by Brookings earlier this year, in 2003 America's GDP was eight times as large as China's, in 2012 it is less than three times larger.**

**3. Do we understand China? OED: the word "Chinese" as "inscrutable"—"I cannot understand."**

**4. J.L. Borges:**

**"Around 1916, I decided to apply myself to the study of Oriental literatures. As I was reading with credulous enthusiasm the English translation of a certain Chinese philosopher, I came across this memorable passage:**

**'It matters little to a convict under a death sentence if he has to walk on the edge of a precipice; he has already given up living.'\***

**To that phrase, the translator had appended an asterisk and indicated that his interpretation was to**

be preferred to that of a rival sinologist who had translated:

\*‘The servants destroy the works of art so as not to have to adjudicate on their merits and defects.’

At that point . . . I did not read any further. A mysterious skepticism had crept into my soul.” (*Œuvres complètes* vol. 1, 1183).

5. Educating the world on China 許嘉璐: the changing configuration of Confucius Institutes
6. National learning fever 國學熱: the internationalization of Chinese culture
7. The demonizing of China: UDHR human rights example (first and second generation: *individual liberties and entitlements vs. flourishing community*)
8. Abjuring romanticizing China: China as continent: the myth of the Han.
9. Here comes China: What is Chinese culture? What does Chinese culture have on offer?

## VI. INTERPRETING CHINESE CULTURE: WHAT CHINA IS *NOT*.

### 1. Recent archaeological finds

2. Cultural reductionism: Europe’s “interpretation” of China’s Abrahamic religiousness—*tian* 天 “Heaven,” *yi* 義 “righteousness,” *dao* 道 “the Way,” *li* 禮 “ritual,” *xiao* 孝 “filial piety,” *ren* 仁 “benevolence,” *li* 理 “principle”
3. Qian Mu 錢穆: What does Chinese culture bring to the table? Saussure: *langue* and *parole*
4. Cultural orientalism and inventing an “other”: despotic, mystical, backward, occult, collective, pagan
5. Barnes and Noble, Borders: “Eastern Religions”
6. Western academy: Chinese philosophy is *not* “philosophy”—taught in religion/Asian studies departments, self-colonization
7. Trying to take Chinese philosophy on its own terms. Interpretive asymmetry: “shoehorning”. Its encounter with Western philosophy is NOT its defining moment.
8. Retranslating the Chinese canons: trying to take Chinese philosophy on its own terms.
9. Marcel Granet: “Chinese wisdom has no need for the idea of God.”
10. Tang Junyi  
唐君毅：中國民族無含超絕意義的天的觀念。中國人對天有個普遍的觀點：就是天與地是分不開的。“The Chinese as a people have not embraced a concept of “Heaven (*tian*)” that has transcendent meaning.

**The pervasive idea that Chinese have with respect to *tian* is that it is inseparable from the world.”**

- 11. A.C. Graham: “In the Chinese cosmos all things are interdependent, without transcendent principles by which to explain them or a transcendent origin from which they derive. . . . A novelty in this position which greatly impresses me is that it exposes a preconception of Western interpreters that such concepts as *Tian* ‘Heaven’ and *Dao* ‘Way’ must have the transcendence of our own ultimate principles; it is hard for us to grasp that even the Way is interdependent with man.”**
- 12. Joseph Needham: “Chinese ideals involved neither God nor Law. . . . Thus the mechanical and the quantitative, the forced and the externally imposed, were all absent. The notion of Order excluded the notion of Law.”**

## **VII. METAPHORS OF ENCULTURATION: LANDSCAPE AND TRAVELING**

- 1. The Council of Aunties**
- 2. Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 and Yan Fu 嚴復 : family lineages 氏族, 家族**
- 3. Li Zehou 李澤厚 “cultural sedimentation” 積澱**
- 4. Inseparability of the vital internal and external landscape in embodied living**

5. Traveling as the intergenerational transmission of culture through time and space: *rendao* 人道 and *daotong* 道統

## VIII. CONFUCIAN ROLE ETHICS 儒學 (角色) 倫理學

1. “Human *Beings* or “Human *Becomings*?” From nouns to gerunds.
2. **WHAT** is a human “being”? This was a perennial Greek question asked in Plato’s *Phaedo* and Aristotle’s *De Anima*. And perhaps the most persistent answer from the time of Pythagoras was an ontological one: The “being” of a human being is a permanent, ready-made, and self-sufficient soul. And “know thyself”—the signature exhortation of Socrates—is to know this soul. Each of us *IS* a person, and has the integrity of *BEING* a person.
3. **IN WHAT WAY** does a person *BECOME* consummately human? This then was the perennial Confucian question asked explicitly in all of the *Four Books*: in *the Great Learning*, in the *Analects of Confucius*, in the *Mencius*, and again in the *Zhongyong*. And the answer from the time of Confucius was a moral, aesthetic, and ultimately religious one. One *BECOMES* human by cultivating those thick, intrinsic relations that constitute one’s initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of one’s life force within family, community, and cosmos. “Cultivate your person”—*xiushen* 修身—the signature exhortation of the Confucian canons—is the ground of the Confucian project of becoming virtuosic in one’s personal relations (*ren* 仁): it is to

**cultivate one's conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that one lives. In this Confucian tradition, we need each other. If there is only one person, there are no persons. Becoming consummate in our conduct (*ren*) is something that we *do*, and that we either do together, or not at all.**

- 4. The fact of association; the fiction of autonomous individuality. Whitehead: the fallacy of simple location; Dewey: the retrospective fallacy. Acorns and chicken eggs.**
- 5. Confucian role ethics as stipulated normative associations: sons and grandmas, teachers and neighbors. Morality as growth in these associations, beginning in family as the entry point for developing moral competence.**
- 6. Roles as concrete normative guidelines telling us what we *ought* to do: “grandmother” him, “brother” her, “teacher” her, “son” him.**
- 7. Concrete conduct as the ultimate source of principles, virtues, values. What and where is “justice”?**
- 8. Articulating an interpretive context: Traditional Chinese Medicine 中醫): What is the heart-mind (*xin* 心)? Holistic, processual, relational, gerundive—primacy of doing: “thinking and feeling,” moving line, *how* rather than *what*. No “in itself.”**
- 9. Relationality as constitutive.**

- a. **Analects 17.3:** 子曰：“唯上知與下愚不移。” The Master said, "Only the wisest (*zhi*) and the most stupid do not move."
- b. **Analects 2.1:**  
子曰：“為政以德，譬如北辰，居其所而眾星共之。”  
Governing with excellence (*de*) can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute."
- c. **Analects 4.10:**  
子曰：“君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比。”  
The Master said, "Exemplary persons in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate."
10. Radical empiricism: not ethical theory, but an attempt to optimize the human experience grounded in a relatively straight forward account of how to make the most of ordinary life in family and community.
11. Perennial issues: personal cultivation, centrality of family relations, parents and children, teachers and students, learning and culture, governing, modeling, ancestors, religiousness, propriety, respect, shame. Making the ordinary extraordinary. Enchanting the everyday.
12. Where does meaning come from? “Appreciating” each other in family and community.
13. The primacy of vital relationality, and its corollaries: gerundive, relationally constituted persons (a

dynamic matrix of unique relations), focus and its field (道德), unboundedness, analogy and correlativity, emergence, moral imagination, human-centered religiousness

14. How to understand Confucian consummation and transmission as cultural *gravitas*: the sense of belonging that attends an achieved, felt worth:

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

“Civilization depends on morality. Everything good in man leans on what is higher. This rule holds in small as in great. Thus, all our strength and success in the work of our hands depend on our borrowing the aid of the elements. You have seen a carpenter on a ladder with a broad-axe chopping upward chips and slivers from a beam. How awkward! at what disadvantage he works! But see him on the ground, dressing his timber under him. Now, not his feeble muscles, but the force of gravity brings down the axe; that is to say, the planet itself splits his stick.” (“American Civilization” in *Atlantic Monthly* 1862)

#### IX. WHAT IS THE GRAVITAS OF “FAMILY REVERENCE” (XIAO 孝)?

1. Family as a strategy for getting the most out of your ingredients. 大家, 國家, 人家.
2. Family lineage: *shizu* 氏族 and *jjazu* 家族

3. From (*lao* 老)   to (*xiao* 孝) 

4. The gap—the space and time—between elders 老 and their juniors 子

5. Hilary Putnam insists that:

**“ . . . elements of what we call “language” or “mind” penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being “mapper’s” of something “language-independent” is fatally compromised from the start. Like Relativism, but in a different way, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.”**

**Putnam will not admit of any understanding of the real world that cleaves it off from its human participation and that does not accept our experience of it as what it *really* is:**

**“The heart of pragmatism, it seems to me—of James’ and Dewey’s pragmatism if not of Peirce’s—was the supremacy of the agent point of view. If we find that we must take a certain point of view, use a certain ‘conceptual system,’ when engaged in a practical activity, in the widest sense of practical activity, then we must not simultaneously advance the claim that it is not really ‘the way things are in themselves.’”**

6. *Trans-form-ing*. The continuing process of embodying experience (*ti* 體) through achieving propriety in one’s roles and relations (*li* 禮).

7. *Ti* 體 as 體: 金文 with *shen* 身 :  竹簡 with *rou*

肉:



8. *Ti* 體 with the “verbal body” (*gu* 骨) classifier as *tihui* 體會: a process of “configuring, embodying, and knowing” the world. We use our inclusive psychophysical sensorium to make determinate, conceptualize, and theorize the human experience.

*Ti* with the “lived, existential body” (身) classifier: the vital, existentially aware, lived-body in its dynamic social relations with others.

*Ti* with the “flesh” (肉) classifier: the carnal body—body as flesh and bones. Somaesthetics.

Root variants: 体 躰 體

9. *Xiaojing* 孝經

: 身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。Your physical person with its hair and skin is received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins . . .

10. Sima Qian 司馬遷 “The Grand Historian”

11. The “living person” (*shengshen* 生身) is a metaphor for one’s parents, “bones and flesh” (*gurou* 骨肉) for one’s children, “hands and feet” (*shouzu* 手足) for one’s brothers, “stomach and heart-mind” (*fluxin* 腹心) for one’s friends, and “of the same womb” (*tongbao* 同胞) for one’s countrymen.

12. The body is the site of a conveyance of the cultural corpus of knowledge—linguistic facility and proficiency, religious rituals and mythologies, the aesthetics of cooking, song, and dance, the modeling of mores and values, instruction and apprenticeship in cognitive technologies, and so on—as a continuing, intergenerational process through which a living civilization itself is perpetuated.

13. The explanatory vocabulary of Confucian role ethics as a phenomenology of moral experience: personal identity achieved through “optimizing propriety in roles and relations” (*li* 禮), “lived body” (*ti* 體), “consummate conduct” (*ren* 仁) “optimizing appropriateness/meaning” (*yi* 義), “family reverence” (*xiao* 孝), “remonstrance” (*jian* 諫), “fraternal deference” (*ti* 悌), “mentorship” (*you* 友).

## X. WHAT IS “CONFUCIANISM”?

1. Is it “Confucius” + “ism” (i.e. systematic Western scholarship looking for an equivalent for “Christianity” or “Plato”-nism invented by an Englishman in 1836), or is it:

2. The continuing transmission of a *ru* 儒 scholarly class of literati or intellectuals dating 50 generations back to the Shang dynasty and including 80 generations of *Ruxue* 儒學 since Confucius?
3. *Book of Changes* “change and persistence” (*biantong* 變通) in the production of harmony (*he* 和).
4. From Shang dynasty (ca. 1570-1045 BCE) bronzes of the “gentlefolk” (孺, 臚, 六藝) to the Zhou dynasty (1056?-256 BCE) aestheticization of the human experience through achieving propriety and elegance in one’s roles and relations (*li* 禮).



***Gu* ritual drinking vessel  
Shang dynasty (ca. 1570-1045 BCE)**

## Freer Gallery of Art

5. **Analects 6.13:**

子謂子夏曰：如為君子儒，無為小人儒。 **The Master remarked to Zixia, “You want to become the kind of *ru* literatus who is exemplary in conduct, not the kind that is a petty person.”**

6. **Analects 7.1:**

子曰：“述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。” **The Master said, “Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients—in these respects I am comparable to Old Peng.”**

7. **Analects 13.39:** 子曰：“人能弘道，非道弘人。” **The Master said, “It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person.”**

8. **Analects 15.16:**

子曰：“不曰‘如之何如之何’者，吾末如之何也已矣。” **The Master said, “There is nothing that I can do for people who are not constantly asking themselves: ‘What to do? What to do?’”**

9. **Analects of Confucius 6.25:** 觚不觚觚哉觚哉 “**A *gu* ritual vessel that is not a *gu*—a *gu* indeed, a *gu* indeed!**”

10. **Icons and artifacts: art works as a transformation *li* 禮 discourse, from animality to haute cuisine.**

11. *Analects* 2.12: 子曰：君子不器。The Master said, “Exemplary persons are not functionaries.”

12. Setting the Confucian project: *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*)1b-2a:

古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。物格而後知至，知至而後意誠，意誠而後心正，心正而後身修，身修而後家齊，家齊而後國治，國治而後天下平。自天子以至於庶人，壹是皆以修身為本。其本亂而末治者否矣，其所厚者薄，而其所薄者厚，未之有也！此謂知本，此謂知之至也。

The ancients who sought to demonstrate real excellence to the whole world first brought proper order to their states; in seeking to bring proper order to their states, they first set their families right; in seeking to set their families right, they first cultivated their own persons; in seeking to cultivate their persons, they first knew what is proper in their own heartminds; in seeking to know what is proper in their heartminds, they first became sincere in their purposes; in seeking to become sincere in their purposes, they first became comprehensive in their wisdom. And the highest wisdom lies in seeing how things fit together most productively. Once they saw how things fit together most productively, their wisdom reached its heights; once their wisdom reached its heights, their thoughts were sincere; once their thoughts were sincere, their heartminds knew what is proper; once their heartminds knew what is proper, their persons were cultivated; once their persons were cultivated, their families were set right; once their

families were set right, their state was properly ordered; and once their states were properly ordered, there was peace in the world. *From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots are not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly. This commitment to personal cultivation is called both the root and the height of wisdom.*

13. What does the aestheticization of the human experience through personal cultivation mean: “achieving propriety and elegance in one’s roles and relations (*li* 禮)”?





14. a) “Scholar’s Garden” 文苑圖 by Tang dynasty Han Huang 韓滉 (723-789)

b) Detail of a late 13<sup>th</sup> C. handscroll, “Scholars of Liu-li Hall”, Song dynasty, artist unknown, Metropolitan Museum of Art

15. What is culture (*wenhua* 文化)? Gentle, refined, civil. Personal articulation through the refining practices of literary/artistic/cultural pursuits. Literature (learning provided by *wen*) 文學, civilization (illumination provided by *wen*) 文明, culture (transformation provided by *wen*) 文化, character 文字, text 文本, elegant 文采, astronomy 天文學.

16. “Art”—painting, poetry, calligraphy as “the outside of an inside” (not *poietike*) in the process of making the ordinary extraordinary.

17. Aspiring to be consummate: *ren* 仁 “person” 人 + “two” 二

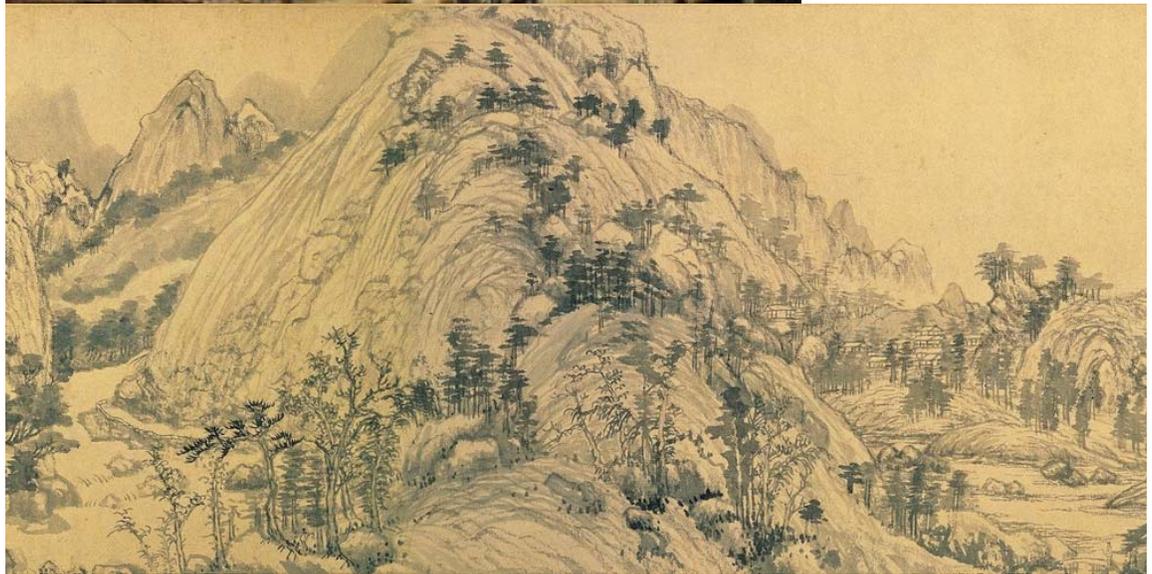
18. Aspiring to be exemplary: *junzi* 君子 “to bring order to” 尹 + “mouth” 口

19. Aspiring to be sagely: *shengren* 聖人 with “ear” 耳 + “mouth” 口

XI. Primacy of relations: Paintings and handscrolls as narratives that tell of an episodic, interactive, spiritual journey (*dao* 道) including a particular place, artists, friends and colleagues, generations of connoisseurs—and you—that conduces to refinement and “re-creation”.



XII.



**Huang Gongwang 黃公望 (1269-1354)**  
**“Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains”**  
**Yuan dynasty (1279-1368)**  
**Two parts of a handscroll**  
**Palace Museum, Taipei**

3.

HUANG Gongwang 黃公望  
(HUANG Kung-wang,  
1269-1354)  
*Summer Mountains (after  
Dong Yuan, act. c. 937-975)*  
*hanging scroll, ink and slight  
color on silk*  
131.7 x 55.6 cm  
Cleveland Museum of Art



4.



**Dong Qichang 董其昌(1555-1636) “painted in early spring 1616 copying the brushwork of Huang Gongwang”**

**7.**

*Wang Shimin/Wang Shih-min  
王時敏/王时敏 (1592-1680)  
Landscape in the Style of  
Huang Gongwang  
1638, late Ming dynasty  
hanging scroll, ink on paper  
59.6 x 33.7 cm  
Yale University Art Gallery*



8.

*Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (Wang  
Yüan-ch'i, 1642-1715)  
Color Landscape after Dong  
Qichang's Interpretation of  
Huang Gongwang  
1710  
hanging scroll, ink and color on  
paper  
128.2 x 55.9 cm  
Shanghai Museum*



Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (Wang  
Yüan-ch'i, 1642-1715)  
*Landscape in the Manner of Ni  
Zan and Huang Gongwang*  
1710  
*hanging scroll, ink and color  
on paper*  
96 x 45 cm

