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## HOW TO TREAT THE TRADITION FROM CONFUCIUS TO LU XUN

Reading Li Ling's *Stray Dog: My Reading of the Analects*

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*This is a review of a new commentary on the Analects by Li Ling, a student of classical Chinese thought at Peking University. The author, also at Peking, teaches contemporary Chinese literature, specializing in Lu Xun (real name: Zhou Shuren; 1881-1936), the major pioneer of modern Chinese vernacular fiction. Li Ling's book and Qian Liqun's review of it are both products of and reactions against the revived interest in traditional Chinese culture. During the Mao era Confucius and his like were considered "feudal" or worse (proponents of "slave society," something even more backward than feudalism); but in the generation and more since the death of the Chairman both the ruling authorities and much of the public at large has found merit in traditional Chinese thinking; and approval of the tradition sometimes serves as a surrogate for Chinese nationalism and self-assertion.*

*So on the one hand, Li Ling is determined to bring Confucius down to earth; but on the other hand, he argues that the real Confucius, not the exalted sage, is the Confucius who has value today. Li Ling irreverently compares Confucius to a stray dog. That is, Confucius was always in quest of the truth, always in search of his "spiritual home," but never able to find it. This, according to Li Ling, shows the real spirit of the intellectual. (And the Christian might also think of Jesus: "Foxes have their lair and birds their nest, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.") At the same time, though, Confucius aspired to be the "teacher of the state," to whisper into the ear of princes, guiding them on the right path: something the princes of this world had no use for, and which for Confucius was a little degrading in itself. The idea, perhaps, is that Chinese intellectuals both in imperial times and today have generally been in the service of those in power, and always faced with the need either to compromise with evil, to collaborate with it, or to remain impotent and neglected. Li Ling's ideal, apparently, is that intellectuals should deliberately disassociate themselves from power, should choose to remain rootless, outside of things and so free to criticize. This ideal (reminiscent of various western constructions of the intellectual as an outsider) is perhaps closer to the Taoist spirit of Zhuangzi than to Confucius.*

*Qian finds Li Ling's Confucius to be similar to his hero, Lu Xun. Lu Xun was vehemently antitraditional and critical of at least the Confucianism of his day (and not particularly respectful to the historical image of Confucius). Lu Xun is also the favorite author of the older generation of communists and especially of the radical Maoists (although Mao once said that had Lu Xun lived into the era of the People's Republic he would probably either have to stop writing or go to jail), and in his own day he was quite an iconoclast. Perhaps because of this, one suspects the younger generation in*

*China may consider him something of an old fogy. At any rate, Qian argues that despite their differences, the spirit of Lu Xun is close to that of Confucius, or Li Ling's picture of Confucius. Lu Xun in no way (allegedly) aspired to be a teacher of the state; but he, too, was a stray dog, unwilling to compromise his principles and so unable to find a comfortable home.*

### **1. Why Be So Loyal to Reading the Classics?**

One reads the classics not only to enhance one's knowledge but even more to acquire spiritual resources. One must be open in selecting and reading the classics. One must read not only ancient classics but newer ones as well; not only eastern classics but those of western nations; not only literary classics but those in the social studies, humanities, and natural sciences; so forth and so on. One must not treat any particular classic as absolute or sacred, something hanging dead on a tree. At the same time as one reads the classics one must also read the "great book" of life. One must concern oneself with and join in the creativity of real life and, through the experience of life, deepen one's understanding of the classics. In sum, one does not read the classics for the sake of reading the classics. The goal is to foster one's spiritual growth. We read the classics in order to establish ourselves as human beings [a Confucian expression].

All of this is germane to the question of how to read the classics. Li Ling's book has been a great revelation to me in this aspect. Li Ling says: "When I read the *Analects*, I am reading the original classic. To see what Confucius thought one must read the original. All of my explications make use of the words of Confucius himself." This is very much to the point. The purpose of explaining the classics is to lead people to read the classics—each word, each sentence, each section, each chapter, to really, really read. Li Ling is a widely recognized specialist in ancient literature and ancient writings. He has made full use of his strengths, combining his own studies with the achievements of past scholars and the new insights from the discoveries of new bamboo strip writings during the 1990s. He has made a study of the language and of difficulties in the text. He writes fluently and explains in detail. He has studied the *Analects* both in terms of the personages mentioned in it and in terms of the concepts it contains.

Mr. Wu Si has said that when he read Li Ling's book he was able to correct a great many of his own past misreadings. I feel the same way. For example, nowadays everyone speaks of the spirit of Confucianism in terms of harmony. As Confucius said, "A gentleman values harmony but not conformity." The original saying struck me as very inscrutable, and the more I thought about it the more confused I became. But in reading Li Ling's book I came to understand. Here "harmony" (*he*) means accommodation, while 'conformity' (*tong*—"sameness") means equality. Confucius did not advocate conformity, but accommodation." "Accommodation means to bring actual inequality into the realm of ritual, so that those of different stations and endowments are able to live together in peace without incident." As I see it, Li Ling's explication of this is pretty close to Confucius's original meaning. And once I

understood the original meaning, I also understood much else. This shows a couple of things: One is the importance of understanding the original meaning so as not to be misled by misinterpretations. The second is the difference between adhering to the original meaning, or something close to it, and distortions of the original meaning. We cannot explain things just any old way we wish.

This shows the importance of reading the original text. I thus noticed that there are really two volumes in Li Ling's work. One is "My Reading of the *Analects*." These are the drafts of Li Ling's lecture notes. The other is the original text of the *Analects* itself, along with explanatory notes and a chart of the personages appearing in the *Analects*. And at the end there is an index of the names of the persons mentioned. There is a theory behind this kind of editing. The explanations of the author or teacher are only one guide. What is most important in the end is to induce the reader or student to read the original. When I lecture on Lu Xun or write about his works, I generally stress that I am only a bridge. My task is to arouse in the readers and students an interest in Lu Xun, to stimulate their desire to read Lu Xun's writings. My mission is accomplished once the student reads Lu Xun himself and draws near to Lu Xun. At that point I hope that the reader or student will forget my explanations, throw them away. As the saying goes, "After crossing the river, tear down the bridge" [a zen saying]. I have achieved my goal if the readers and the students are able in the end to read for themselves the original works and come to their own independent understanding without the shackles and limitations of my exegesis. This is the best sort of teacher or textbook.

But the question before us now concerns an explication of the *Analects*, not the original text itself. There are hundreds and hundreds of explications of the *Analects*. But are there hundreds and hundreds separate publications of the original text? Or is the number of publications of the original even 80 percent of the number of explications? Even that would be a great achievement. If we today have a hard time reading the classics, and the younger generation or the general public do not read the original text but only the explanations by other people, this would be a great mistake. It would have very bad consequences, even worse than reading nothing about the classics at all. Lu Xun once said, "What is seen in 'selections' or 'digests' often lacks the qualities of the author, but reflects instead the vision of the one making the selection. . . . The pity is, the one making the selection is often short-sighted and covers up much of the author's true features. This is a kind of literary plunder." When today we read only selections and explanations, we are subjecting ourselves to being plundered.

## **2. In What Way Do We Regard Confucius as a "Stray Dog," and Other Topics**

As a result of one mind carving another, Li Ling has discovered Confucius as a "stray dog." . . . When I read these words I felt there was an air of mockery about them, but even more a kind of hardness and sorrow.

This book of Li Ling's is, in addition to being a close reading of the *Analects*, also his own explication. Li Ling has

added a subtitle: “My reading of the *Analects*.” What he probably means to stress is that this is his individual interpretation. If different people were to read the *Analects*, they would no doubt have their own different interpretations of the work and of Confucius. Explaining Confucius in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Li Ling states outright and very plainly: “In this book, I want to let everyone know that Confucius is no sage.” So he belongs to the “no sage school.”

As I see it, this way of perceiving Confucius is related to Li Ling’s view of Confucius’s psychology and to his method. He says his “analysis turns on the fate of the intellectual; it is the work in which the mind of one intellectual tries to understand the mind of another. It is reading the *Inner History of the Confucian School* from the perspective of the *Outer History of the Confucian School*.”<sup>[1]</sup> In that way, Li Ling and Confucius share the same spirit. This is something I greatly approve of. As I see it, Li Ling’s method and psychology of one mind carving another is a special quality of his reading of the *Analects* and also his great contribution. The reader or student may disagree with particular concrete analyses and viewpoints and yet still be enlightened through that kind of psychology, method, and insight.

The consequence of Li Ling’s mind carving on mind is the discovery of the “stray dog” Confucius. That is the distinct nature of Li Ling’s vision of Confucius and also one likely to arouse controversy. So in reading this I thought there was an air of mockery but even more one of sorrow. Li Ling says he felt a sense of isolation. Thus, he has this kind of explanation of Confucius as stray dog: “He died in his own home—but in fact he had no home. Whether he was right or wrong in his thought, in his person I see the general fate of the intellectual. Li Ling’s understanding of the intellectual is that of Edward Said (?): “He leaves his home and family, remains outside the main current and on the margins. His status is that of a superfluous man, an outsider.” Li Ling says, “All those who cherish ideals, who cannot find their spiritual home in the real world—all of those are stray dogs.” That is to say, Confucius is an idealistic intellectual. He had utopian ideals. In the west there is a theory of Confucian utopianism. Confucius’s Utopia is the “rule of the Duke of Zhou.”<sup>[2]</sup> That is his spiritual home. The problem is that he cannot find his spiritual home in the real world—he cannot even find in the real world any possibility of realizing his spiritual home. On the one hand this motivates his critique of the real world. Li Ling says Confucius was a “man of learning and morality who, without any power or influence, dared to criticize the authorities of his age.” He was a “political dissident unsatisfied with contemporary reality.” Li Ling shows how he was outside the mainstream, in a marginal position, how he wandered far from his homeland like a “stray dog with nowhere to go.” In spite of all of this, his energy did not flag but for his whole life searched for this spiritual homeland, continuing to search even when search was vain. . . .His behavior was lovable and worthy of respect, but also ridiculous. This, I think, grasps Confucius’s real nature as well, possibly, as the real

nature of all true intellectuals. Some say Li Ling himself is a stray dog, and that is why I join in the general praise for him.

But the complexity of the issue is that there is another face to Confucius, and this leads to different interpretations of “stray dog.” Confucius may have in fact spent his life outside the mainstream and in a marginalized position, but there was never an instant in which he did not hope to enter the mainstream. He had the aspiration to be the “teacher of the state.” He thought that he had a good plan for bringing peace to the country and order to the state; and he also stipulated that this could be realized only if he and his ideas were accepted by the rulers. Thus, as Li Ling says, on the one hand he criticized the authorities of the age; but on the other hand he wandered to the four corners seeking the approval of the rulers, urging them with all his might to correct their behavior. But this remained an empty hope, for there was no ruler willing to place a “teacher of the state” above himself daily to pick at and carp at everything he did. And if by chance some ruler did accept his opinions, it was because it was to his own advantage. What rulers want are intellectuals content to help them in their work and entertain them in their leisure. Confucius was not willing to do this. In my mind this is what is valuable in Confucius. No matter how many illusions he had about rulers, he always maintained his own ideals and his independence. And it is precisely because of this that he was never put to use by rulers, so becoming a “stray dog.” In any case he never became a lap dog. This is why he has value to and respect from posterity. As Li Ling says, “Happiness comes from trouble.” But no matter what, as far as Confucius is concerned, there is a complex significance to the notion of stray dog. There are at least two levels to it. On the one hand, he held to his utopian ideals and critical attitude and so was marginalized. But he also had the ambition of becoming “teacher to the state,” and was fated not to be employed by any of the rulers. This gave his thought the potential to become ideologized to a certain degree. Li Ling says, “The function of utopia is to negate the existing order, while the function of ideology is to uphold the existing order. Movement from utopia to ideology is the perennial fate of intellectuals.” The Confucius Li Ling identifies with is obviously the utopian Confucius, the stray dog who tirelessly seeks his spiritual home. But he does not entirely repudiate the stray dog who seeks to be the teacher to the state. The relationship between Li Ling (and perhaps also intellectuals such as myself) and the stray dog Confucius is a complicated one: this is because our vision of Confucius is a vision of contemporary intellectuals.

We can go further. Is there a problem with Confucius’s attempt to realize utopian ideals itself? I fully identify with this thesis of Li Ling’s: “Intellectuals have the highest wisdom, the highest morality, the highest ideals. If you let them run the country, everyone will be at ease. In fact, this is a dangerous thing to put your trust in.” “Truth has a low tolerance of error. Intellectuals’ hearts and minds are clear, and they know better than anyone else. Once they get a hold of a knife, those who will die first will be their own kind.” Li Ling also criticizes “the intellectuals’ ideal state”:

Whether it is Plato in the west or Confucius in the east, “their ideal states all give dictatorial power to wise and moral intellectuals.” “Its spirit is that of Sparta: military communism added to slavery.” In the end, after repeated failures, Plato himself sighed and said, “My most ideal kind of state can be found only in heaven; earthly states are better governed through laws.” As I see it, this is Li Ling’s conclusion about the historical experience of lots of eastern intellectuals, Confucius included. It is the most concrete lesson to be learned from his reading of the *Analects*.

There is another important issue here. Is the movement from “utopia to ideology” in fact the perennial fate of intellectuals? I doubt it, and propose a thought experiment in which the thought annihilates the thinker and at the same time the thought is returned to the thinker. Li Ling says: “I read the *Analects* primarily as intellectual history.” That is the most important aspect of his reading, as well as his quest. He wants to get rid of the ideologized Confucius. But in addition to the ideological Confucius there is the Confucius of intellectual history treating Confucius as a “thinker” or a teacher of traditional thought. For Li Ling, however, one who acts as a critic of the conventional thought of a society is actually an intellectual (in this Li Ling agrees with Said’s definition of an intellectual), and that is where Confucius’s real worth is.

### **3. How to Regard Some of the Manifestations of Today’s “Confucius Fad” or “Classics Fad”**

Li Ling admits that his motive for reading the *Analects* was today’s fad for Confucius and for the Classics. That is to say, in China at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century his theme that “Confucius is no sage” was right on target. Speaking frankly, the reason I approve of him strongly is precisely because I agree with him on this. That is to say, there are aspects of the enthusiasm for Confucius and for the Classics that have made me think and have alarmed me.

The first thing I noticed was that there were particular motive forces behind the fads for Confucius and the Classics. One motive force was a desire to use the *Analects* as a way to bring about psychological cohesion; the second was to display Confucius to the entire world as proof of China’s soft power. This had to do with the question of the “rise of a great power.” I have always had doubts about this notion of the rise of a great power. First, in talking about a “rise,” will we be blindly optimistic, covering up so many of our real problems? Also, behind this talk of a “great power” I also sense a certain hunting by Sinocentrism: this is an ancient vice of our China that emerges whenever there is the opportunity. As Li Ling puts it nicely, there is a problem with our national psychology, a tendency both toward self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation. But whatever tack we take, we will always be quoting Confucius to demonstrate it. Now, probably because of our rapid economic development, we are inclined to brag and will treat Confucius as the “savior of the world.” There is no problem with normal international exchanges or a desire to introduce Confucius to foreign friends. But if we push Confucius onto the world as “soft power” and a “savior,” not only is this fatuously self-serving but it also discards the real Confucius. We are not only vainglorious ourselves but we make Confucius

vainglorious.

In my opinion, when Li Ling treats Confucius as a “stray dog” “unable to find his spiritual home in the real world,” he is giving a true picture of Confucius, one that shows his true worth. Li Ling says, “I have no use in raising the banner of Confucius over the whole world.” I agree.

There is also the commercial part of it. Li Ling is correct: “The fad for Confucius today is not really about Confucius. Confucius is only a label.” I want to add something here: for some people, Confucius is merely a brand. This is what Lu Xun called the “modernization” of “the sage Confucius.” Nowadays there is this or that “academy” for the “revival of national studies.” I’m sure they want to revive something, but it is only a brand. There is a simple standard: how much time and effort are you willing to put into mastering the original texts; or do you just want to hawk the *Analects*, or download them to a mobile phone? I have great respect for the first kind of scholars, those who desire to master the original texts. But I’m wary of the second kind. The problem is, to my cold eye, those who are willing to make great efforts in the context of the current fad are very, very few, while the hawkers and the hypesters are plentiful. As Li Ling says, it’s an old Chinese habit: we’re either cursing our ancestors or hawking our ancestors. Right now the more popular thing to do is to hawk our ancestors.

I approve of Li Ling’s attitude: “Don’t either howl along with the intellectuals or kiss the ass of the popular masses.” I’d add one more thing: Also, don’t go along with warmed-over empty ideology. Remain calm, aloof, independent, and clear-eyed in these current fads for Confucius or the Classics.

Does this collected and unemotional attitude demean Confucius’s ideas and value? Of course not. Li Ling says: In reading the *Analects* keep a calm mind and peaceful spirit—avoid politicizing it, avoid moralizing it, avoid making it a religion—and only then will you get the real Confucius. I would add: Don’t commercialize it. A politicized, moralized, religious, commercialized Confucius, elevated to an “incomparable sage” is an empty Confucius, and this is a kind of falsification. If we expel all those things held about the man that are false, then his true value will emerge and we will see the true Confucius: an original thinker and a teacher who was at the same time an intellectual tirelessly and painfully seeking the truth. It is in this kind of Confucius that we will find the source of the thinking and spiritual tradition of our nation. In the world today, where “ritual has collapsed and music is ruined,” we may—indeed, we must—engage in a spiritual dialogue with him. He won’t point the way for us, but he will give us something to think about, inspiration for our own exploration. And that is enough. Li Ling says: “There are two sayings in the *Analects* that are the hardest to understand. One is: ‘The Three Armies can have their commander taken away by force; but not even an ordinary person can be deprived of his will by force.’ The second is: ‘Wealth and status without righteousness to me are floating clouds.’ Those today who are screaming to learn about the *Analects* should first study these two passages!” As far as I’m

concerned, these two passages alone are enough for us. These two also serve as the touchstone distinguishing true from false understanding, true from false study.

#### **4. How to Understand the Relationship Between Confucius and Lu Xun**

There is no question that Lu Xun and others of the May Fourth generation had many criticisms of Confucius. In my opinion there are two layers to this criticism. First, the spearhead of their criticism was directed against a divinized and religionified Sinocentric traditional culture. At the time it was this kind of Sinocentrism that prevented the Chinese people from absorbing the other cultures of the world. The vanguard of the May Fourth movement opened up the gates of that prison, letting in the world. That was the urgent necessity of those times. Therefore, in the intellectual and cultural realm it was necessary to smash the myths and absolute authority of traditional culture. At the same time their spearhead was directed against the monopoly over culture claimed by Confucianism. The vanguard of the May Fourth New Culture movement, including Lu Xun were undertaking a work of “depoliticization, demoralization, dereligionizing.” They were attacking exactly what Li calls the “artificial Confucius,” purveyor of corrupt thinking, corrupt morality, corrupt culture. “What would be wrong with everybody’s asking Confucius to step down from his position as sage and have a seat with the other masters of the hundred schools? Without making any kind of show of it, that would be equivalent to restoring to Confucius his original visage.”

Naturally there are differences between Lu Xun and Confucius—indeed, very great differences, differences in principle. That is the reason on one level for Lu Xun’s criticism of Confucius. As Li Ling says, Confucius “worries about the well-being of the rulers, putting all his effort into urging them to throw off their evil ways and behave like proper human beings.” This means he is thinking of becoming a “teacher of the state.” But Lu Xun doesn’t want to become any kind of teacher (his reasoning being that since I don’t know the road myself, how can I give directions to young people?), even less a teacher of the state. Even more to the point, Lu Xun had no illusions about rulers. He once said, If a ruler is in danger and his car is about to turn over, don’t go to try to support it: let it fall over by itself. The two had different opinions about rulers, and where there is a difference there is criticism. And this is quite proper. Among intellectuals today there are often arguments and mutual criticism. This does not mean that elsewhere there are no areas of agreement. As Li Ling says, Confucius was one “without power or authority who dared to criticize the powerful and influential of his day. His critique, of course, was from within the system, while that of Lu Xun is self-consciously outside the system. This is a difference, but they are similar in criticizing the powerful and influential. As the saying goes, “Difference within sameness, sameness within difference.” We need neither deny nor exaggerate the differences between them.

In my opinion, despite their differences Confucius and Lu Xun share a certain common spirit. They both represent



generations of Chinese intellectuals seeking but not finding their spiritual home. They each choose a different route, but the unwavering ceaseless pursuit and exploration displays courage, magnanimity, ideals. They embody what is most noble in the spirit of Chinese intellectuals. Li Ling says the most difficult two sayings in the *Analects* are “the ordinary person cannot be deprived of his will by force”; and wealth and power are “floating clouds.” This is the essence of the Confucian spirit; and among contemporary intellectuals it is Lu Xun who most fully displays this spirit.

We may say that a tradition has taken shape from Confucius to Lu Xun. It is fortunate for our nation that we have a Confucius and that we have a Lu Xun. They express what is finest in our nation. They are precious and a pride for our people. If we take an attitude of cultural psychology, it is not only foolish but even criminal always to put them in opposition to each other and to make them fight.

*Xin Hua Wenzhai*, October 10, 2007

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[1] This is a hard to explain pun. In effect, the “Outer [or Unofficial] History of the Confucian School” (*Rulin Waishi*) is a seventeenth century satirical novel directed against the examination elite. There is no such work as the “Inner [or Official] History of the Confucian School.”

[2] The Duke of Zhou was the younger brother of the first king of the Zhou dynasty (founded c. 1122 BC), and the main designer of the institutions of that dynasty. He was Confucius’s hero.