

The Chinese Classic of Family Reverence: A Philosophical Translation of the Xiaojing. By Henry Rosemont, Jr., and Roger T. Ames. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009. Pp. xv + 132. \$46.00 cloth, \$22.00 paper.

The fruitful partnership between Henry Rosemont, Jr., and Roger T. Ames which earlier yielded *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*¹ has delivered another fine translation and study of a major Confucian classic—namely, the *Xiaojing* 孝經, rendered here as the “Classic of Family Reverence” but perhaps more commonly known to English readers as the “Classic of Filial Piety.” The translation will be welcomed by students of Chinese literature. The study of *xiao* that accompanies it should provoke much discussion and debate.

Traditionally ascribed to Confucius or his disciple Zengzi 曾子 (Zeng Shen 曾參), the *Xiaojing* was hugely influential in pre-modern China and the Confucian world at large. As the authors point out, Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) reports that “Confucius regarded Zeng Shen as a person able to truly penetrate the way of family reverence, and accordingly passed on his teachings to him. Zeng Shen compiled the *Classic of Family Reverence . . .*” (pp. 11–12). Ban Gu’s 班固 *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty) in its classification of literature lists the *Xiaojing* under the classical “Six Arts” (*liuyi* 六藝) and adds, “The *Xiaojing* is [a record of what] Confucius explained to Zengzi concerning the way of *xiao*” (孝經者，孔子為曾子陳孝道也).² The word *jing* (classic) in its title should not be taken to mean that it was accorded canonical status from the start. As Rosemont and Ames observe, in this context, prior to the formation of the mature Confucian canon, *jing* signifies more generally “constant guidelines” or “basic precepts” (p. 18). Nevertheless, this does not detract from the enormous prestige of the *Xiaojing* or its privileged place in the Confucian imagination. The fact that it counts the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) as one of its commentators further testifies to its importance in traditional China. Yet, the *Xiaojing* is also one of the least studied Confucian classics today.

The *Xiaojing* is a short text of fewer than two thousand Chinese characters. Its language is relatively simple. In the past, probably most if not all educated Chinese would have been taught the *Xiaojing* from young. Today, few people would know it well. Certain statements or ideas from the text may have entered the popular Chinese linguistic and cultural consciousness—e.g., the statement from the first chapter that because we have received our body from our parents, we should ensure that no harm would ever come to it, including one’s “hair and skin” (身體髮膚受之父母，不敢毀傷) is fairly well known; and the idea that *xiao* constitutes the proper order of the universe from Chapter 7 (夫孝，天之經也，地之義也) has evolved into a set phrase or “proverb” (*chengyu* 成語),

¹ New York: Ballantine Books, 1998.

² *Hanshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1962), *juan* 卷 30, p. 1719.

tianjing diyi (天經地義), asserting the incontrovertible, unchanging and self-evident rightness of an act or state of affairs—but on the whole, I suspect, the *Xiaojing* would be known only as a title and can be said to be a largely forgotten classic.

As early as the Song dynasty, questions were raised about its authenticity. Indeed, the consummate Neo-Confucian master Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) considered the bulk of the work to have been fabricated by later scholars.³ However, this is not the main reason why the *Xiaojing* has been relegated to the background of contemporary Confucian discourse. The issue is rather that the text seems to champion an oppressively authoritarian view of *xiao*, reflecting the values of a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal state that have little meaning or relevance to the modern family and society. What can we possibly learn from the *Xiaojing* today, save as a testament to the Chinese “feudal” past? This may be why there are few translations of the *Xiaojing*.

The authors are keenly aware of this challenge and have devoted much of the book to explicating and defending the philosophical significance of the *Xiaojing*. As an indication, whereas the translation proper takes up only 14 pages, inclusive of notes, the Introduction comes to over 100 pages, comprising a 64-page study, a “Lexicon of Key Chinese Philosophical Terms,” and extensive notes. The translation itself, based on the standard 18-chapter “new script” (*jinwen* 今文) version of the *Xiaojing*, is carefully crafted and requires little comment. One may quibble over certain details, but generally they do not affect the understanding of the work. I will mention only a few examples here.

1. Chapter 7: 是以其教不肅而成，其政不嚴而治。

The translation reads, “This is the reason that education can be effective without being severe, and political administration can maintain proper order without being harsh.” (p. 108)

Because the subject is not specified, it may be justifiable to render *qi jiao* 其教 and *qi zheng* 其政 generally as “education” and “political administration,” respectively; however, grammatically the presence of *qi* 其 indicates an implied subject, perhaps “the former kings” in this instance. In chapter 9, where these phrases are repeated, the subject there is the “sage.”

2. Chapter 10: 雖日用三牲之養……

The authors translate, “even though someone were to fete their parents on beef, mutton, and pork . . .” (p. 111)

Perhaps a word like “daily” (for the word *ri* 日) should be added to make the translation more complete.

³ Li Jingde 黎靖德, ed., *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), *juan* 82, pp. 2141–43.

3. Chapter 12 (p. 112): 故敬其父則子悅，敬其兄則弟悅，敬其君則臣悅。敬一人而千萬人悅。所敬者寡，而悅者眾。

“Thus, the son finds pleasure in respecting his father; the younger brother finds pleasure in respecting his elder brother; the minister finds pleasure in respecting his lord; and all of the people find pleasure in respecting the Emperor. Those who are respected are few, but those who find pleasure in showing this respect are legion.”

More intuitively, because of the position of *qi* 其 after the main verb, one would probably take the subject of the first three clauses to be someone other than the son, younger brother, and minister (or more generally, any official serving the ruler); that is to say, in the sense that if someone shows respect to *their* father/elder brother/ruler, the sons/younger brothers/officials would be pleased. However, Rosemont and Ames might be right if the sentence “敬一人而千萬人悅” could be taken to mean that “all of the people find pleasure in respecting the Emperor.” Usually, this would be linked to the previous statement concerning the respect shown to someone else’s father, elder brother or ruler: “[You] only show respect to one person but thousands would be pleased [by that action].”

4. Chapter 14 (p. 113): 是以行成於內，而名立於後世矣。

“Thus, when one is successful in what one does at home, a name (*ming*) is established that will be passed on to posterity.”

The context here suggests that the “name” or reputation is not established on account of what one does at home, but rather that if he serves his parents with *xiao*, he would assuredly be able to serve his ruler and country well with virtues that derive from *xiao*, and consequently rise to the top of officialdom and earn a lasting reputation that would make his family proud. Perhaps the authors take it that the context is sufficiently clear to warrant a more direct and literal translation of the final clause. Nevertheless, the passive construction may give rise to misunderstanding. A parenthetical intervention to the effect that “a name is established [because of his achievement in office]” would provide added hermeneutical safety.

What is of greater interest, to my mind, is Rosemont and Ames’ account of *xiao*. The authors begin by explaining their choice of “family reverence” over the more common “filial piety” and outlining what they perceive to be the “negative perspectives” (p. 3) that seem to pervade the understanding of *xiao*, at least among intellectuals, in both modern China and the West (pp. 1–6). *Xiao* is indeed difficult to translate, for it encompasses a range of attitudes and emotions that attend deep familial relations. In the *Xiaojing*, “love” (*ai* 愛) and “respect” (*jing* 敬) figure prominently as core ingredients of *xiao* (Chapters 2, 5, 7, 9, 15, 18). While “piety” is somewhat vague and is “usually associated with the

Abrahamic traditions” (p. 1), does “reverence” capture adequately these essential traits? Reverence privileges respect over love; it also invokes a sense of awe, which may not best describe *xiao* as an ideal if it is taken as inducing fear. Admittedly, unless one tolerates awkward constructions like “filial love and respect” or “family bonds and responsibilities,” there is probably no happy solution to translating *xiao*, and “reverence” does have the advantage of intimating the hierarchical structure of family relations in the Confucian frame.

Rosemont and Ames next provide a summary of the structure and content of the *Xiaojing*, an introduction to Confucius and Zengzi, and a discussion of “the text and its historical context” (pp. 7–22). This last gives sufficient information for a philosophical translation—dating the original text to “the height of the convulsions of the Warring States period” and finding in favour the view that it was compiled by second-generation disciples of Zengzi (p. 19)—although I think readers would enjoy and benefit from a fuller discussion, given the interesting history of transmission of the *Xiaojing*, especially the reintroduction of the commentaries by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) and Kong Anguo 孔安國 (*fl.* second century B.C.E.) from Japan. The study of *xiao* that follows (pp. 22–64) focuses on its place in early Confucianism, its socio-political and religious dimensions, and particularly its ethical significance (pp. 34–59). A more detailed analysis of the socio-political background seems warranted. If the assertion is that the Confucian rendition of *xiao* introduced a new and profound ethical sense that transformed its older meaning based on kinship ties and obligations—just as Confucius redefined the concept of *junzi* 君子, “exemplary person” in this translation, from a hereditary title of nobility to an ethical ideal—the understanding of *xiao* and the institution of the family in pre-Confucian China demand closer attention. However, understandably the philosophical agenda of the book sets certain limits on the allowable extent of historical coverage.

The modern critique of *xiao* charges that it is imbued with authoritarian communal values, justified in terms of public interest, that stifle individuality and limit freedom. The sense of family obligation runs deep, according to this view, so that the Chinese remain subservient to their parents and elders, and for that matter any figure of authority, and continue to live, as it were, under the shadow of their ancestors, as Ba Jin’s 巴金 (1904–2005) famous novel *Jia* 家 (Family), for example, readily testifies. Confucian *xiao* also seems to run counter to meritocratic principles and perpetuates a male-dominated world order. What Rosemont and Ames did was to ask us to take a step back and examine the basis of such claims.

In practice, of course, inadequacies, excesses, and abuses in the name of *xiao* are unexceptional and indeed inevitable—family bonds, precisely because of the depth of feelings involved, can easily turn into a kind of “bondage”; but as an ethical ideal, which is the authors’ main concern, *xiao* signals a “role ethics” that offers an alternative to Western moral theories. Fundamentally, the ethics of *xiao* reflects a different way of configuring the world in which individual and communal flourishing may take place. It situates the self in relationships, which entail specific roles and responsibilities, and

locates the possibility of ethical excellence in the fulfilment of these roles. In this relational universe, the way of *xiao* does not recognize the kind of “individualism” that dominates Western thinking since the Enlightenment. Individualism has its strength, with its emphasis on rights and autonomy, lest we think that Rosemont and Ames are simply indulging in an “anti-Enlightenment” polemic. Nevertheless, individualism rests on a particular conception of rationality that informs a very different view of morality.

Confucian role ethics is radically different from both Kantian deontological ethics and utilitarianism (pp. 37–39). Rather than tracing morality to universal axioms, it grounds the pursuit of ethical excellence in the concrete particularities of everyday life. Is it a version of “virtue ethics,” then, as some scholars have argued? For Rosemont and Ames, and to me this is the most interesting part of the discussion, Confucian role ethics should also be distinguished from virtue ethics because the latter, “with its conceptual foundation of individualism and developed by rationality” (p. 45), “seems to require the postulate of universal character traits as a part of human nature,” whereas early Confucian thought focuses on the dynamic process of self-cultivation in becoming fully, ethically human (p. 41).

At the heart of early Confucianism, then, is a “relational understanding of oneself” (p. 54) as “role-bearing” rather than “rights-bearing” individuals (p. 31). So understood, the ethical life is realized in “striving to achieve the most productive and meaningful relations in all that we do” (p. 49). The family forms the bedrock of one’s ethical existence; it is through the family that one becomes initiated and immersed in “ritual propriety” (*li* 禮), the “communal grammar” (pp. 23, 38) that not only regulates human conduct but more importantly enables human beings to live—not “play,” as the authors emphasize (e.g., p. 32)—their roles optimally or in Confucian terms, the attainment of ethical and spiritual harmony in relationships. Further, as Rosemont and Ames maintain, because circumstances always vary, the performance of *li* cannot rely on rules but requires both sincerity and careful attention to the “appropriateness” and in this sense, “rightness” (*yi* 義) of each act. *Xiao* is identified as the foundation of ethical excellence precisely because it is in and through family nurturing and education that one not only becomes proficient but also finds joy in fulfilling one’s various roles and responsibilities with *li* and *yi*.

While the family is critical, the authors make clear that *xiao* does not stop at home. As one grows in *xiao*, one extends the same spirit of love and respect to the wider community. In this way, *ren* 仁, “consummate or authoritative conduct” (pp. 23, 81), the height of ethical attainment characteristic of the Confucian gentleman or “exemplary person” (*junzi*), may be achieved. Family relations should properly be hierarchical, but it does not follow that family reverence may be reduced to obedience. As the *Xiaojing* states in no uncertain terms, “remonstrance” (*jian* 諫) is critical to being *xiao* in serving, for example, one’s father or lord (especially Chapter 15, p. 113, also see p. 71). Family ties are indeed special, but like other hierarchical Confucian relations, they are underpinned by the same dynamic exchange between “benefactors” and “beneficiaries” (p. 49). Viewed in

this light, according to Rosemont and Ames, much of the difficulty in appreciating the wider ethical significance of *xiao* may be resolved. Obviously not to be interpreted in any crude sense of a “creditor-debtor” relationship, *xiao* as an ethical ideal presupposes that both the giving and the receiving are invested with heartfelt love and respect, and transacted with *li* and *yi*. Incidentally, this may also help explain the prevalence of “gift” culture in Confucian East Asia. More to the point, a person is at once benefactor and beneficiary in the manifold relations that mark the existential landscape. Even in a single relationship, such as that between father and son or husband and wife, both parties are as much benefactors as they are beneficiaries. In short, through family reverence one learns to negotiate with a firm moral compass the complexities of relational life, and in so doing finds his or her own self-worth and contributes to the well-being of the community. Finally, the authors argue that Confucian role ethics also harbours an “a-theistic” but nonetheless deeply profound spiritual consciousness, a “human-centered religiousness that affirms the cumulative human experience itself as sacred” (p. 60).

The centrality of *xiao* in Confucian ethics should not be doubted. Indeed, it may be said to be the hallmark of Confucian ethics and spirituality. A healthy dose of hermeneutics of reconstruction that dispels the common misconception of *xiao* as a means to secure obedience and loyalty is to be welcomed and applauded. Family relations are not a variety of a master/slave relationship. Family love and respect ideally does not curtail freedom but rather empowers the individual to become ethically significant in a world that should be properly recognized as constituted by relationships. Roles are basic to the social fabric of human existence; the Confucian contribution lies in injecting moral and spiritual fibre into whatever roles we are given or choose to fulfil. Relations change, as do roles and responsibilities, but the assertion here is that the way of *xiao* acts as the golden thread that gives lustre to all the roles and relations that make a person truly a member of the community of “all under heaven.”

In initiating a dialogue with Western philosophy on *xiao*, this book deserves high praise. Role ethics captures nicely the relational structure of early Confucian ethical thinking, although there is probably no need to consider role ethics and virtue ethics to be mutually exclusive. Indeed, the idea of a virtue ethics embedded in roles, or a role ethics guided by the cultivation of virtues may well serve to approximate the Confucian view of things. However, the main question I would like to raise here concerns not so much moral theory as the interpretation of *xiao* in the *Xiaojing*.

While there is no disagreement that Confucius’s view of *xiao* as reflected in the *Analects* transformed the family as a sociological institution into an ethical ideal, it may be asked whether later Confucian scholars all understood the concept of *xiao* in the same way. As the recently discovered bamboo manuscripts from Guodian 郭店 and those recovered by the Shanghai Museum attest, there was a vibrant Confucian scene during the Warring States period. For example, a text among the latter assigned the title *San de* 三德 (Three Virtues, or Three Excellences, to follow Rosemont and Ames’ translation of *de*) speaks of harming one’s family as a “transgression” (*zui* 罪), for which “Shangdi” 上帝

(High Sovereign) and “Huangtian” 皇天 (August Heaven) “will not forgive.”⁴ The Guodian text *Liu de* 六德, “Six Virtues,” to take but one other example, recognizes the priority of *xiao* but seems to ground it in kinship ties, emphasizing especially the strong feelings of gratitude, debt and obligation (*en* 恩) that spring from the gift of life and nurture.⁵ These examples show that *xiao* and other key Confucian concepts attracted diverse interpretation. The *Xiaojing*, it seems to me, should also be placed in this hermeneutical context.

In other words, it seems unlikely that early Confucians espoused a uniform understanding of *xiao*. As learned Confucians became increasingly active in the political arena, interpretations of the teachings of Confucius also became increasingly guided by political interest. The *Xiaojing* delineates different ways of *xiao* for the “emperor,” “hereditary lords,” “ministers and high officials,” “lower officials,” and “common people” (Chapters 2–6). For the “common people,” for example, the important point is that they should “take proper care of their parents” by “being circumspect in their conduct and frugal in what they use” (Chapter 6, p. 108). Frugality and circumspection are also singled out as the key to the way of *xiao* for the “hereditary lords,” but the message here is that in being frugal and circumspect, they get to keep their wealth and use that to secure their domain (Chapter 3, p. 106).

Ethical differentiation of this kind based on political status does not appear to have a place in the *Analects*. Similarly, the idea that “in family reverence there is nothing more important than venerating one’s father” (孝莫大於嚴父) (Chapter 9, p. 110) seems to have taken the way of *xiao* in a direction that is tangential to *ren*. Other examples can be cited, but these should suffice to raise for discussion the possibility that the *Xiaojing* has its own distinctive ethical voice, though it evidently shares certain family resemblances with other interpretations of *xiao*. Of course, historical specificities may be distilled to yield a cleaner view of family reverence. This serves to represent Confucian role ethics more clearly to a contemporary philosophical audience. However, the question is whether an appropriate measure of hermeneutics of suspicion may not also be in order to help restore a more complete picture of the *Xiaojing*.

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⁴ *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, vol. 5, ed. Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2005), pp. 287–303. In the Shanghai Museum and Guodian material, the graph *de* is written as 惠, comprising the graph for “straight” on top and that for “heart” at the bottom. How this is related to the more familiar form, 德, with the 勹 radical, is unclear.

⁵ *Guodian Chumu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡, ed. Jingmen shi bowuguan 荊門市博物館 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 1998), pp. 185–90. Cf. Alan K. L. Chan, “Interpretations of Virtue (*De*) in Early China,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, forthcoming.