

BOOK REVIEWS

Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary. By Roger T. Ames. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2011. Pp. xvii + 332. \$39.00.

Eminent scholars who make a case for highly original reinterpretations of the major concepts in their respective fields are bound to attract severe critics. Roger Ames is no exception to this rule, and Ames has received more than his fair share of potshots, perhaps, because he endeavours to bring into conversation two especially prickly disciplines, those of Sinology and philosophy. With respect to his latest effort, I myself will register criticisms below. But I venture to state at the outset of this review, unequivocally, that my comments are meant to cheer Ames on—and not merely because I am mindful of the enormous contribution that Ames’s formidable organizational skills and publishing ventures¹ have made to the health of the early China field in the US today, as well as the praise that some of Ames’s writings have garnered among first-rate philosophers working outside the China field.

An outgrowth of Ames’s Qian Mu 錢穆 Lectures at The Chinese University of Hong Kong entitled “Appreciating Confucianism,” this book expands upon several East–West contrasts laid out in Henry Rosemont’s paper, “Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons.”² At the same time, Ames intends this book to respond to harsh critics, three of whom are cited in the Introduction: Paul Goldin, Michael Puett, and Zhang Longxi 張隆溪.³ Most of Ames’s critics deny the possibility of making informed generalizations about China, the Chinese people, Chinese history, or Chinese culture. Either China is too protean and too various a world to be captured in

¹ E.g., *Philosophy East and West*, SUNY Press, and the University of Hawai‘i Press all have Ames as editor.

² See “Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons,” in *Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette*, ed. Mary I. Bockover (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991), pp. 71–101.

³ Ames has had the good grace to pass over the oddly savage review David Schaberg gave the *Analects* translation by Ames and Rosemont, even as he acknowledged its merits. See his “‘Sell it! Sell it!’: Recent Translations of *Lunyu*,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* (CLEAR) 23 (2001), pp. 115–39. Also unnamed are several critics like Liu Xiaobo 劉曉波 who argue, like the May Fourth Movement iconoclasts, that Confucian teachings are at best irrelevant and at worst impediments to modern institutions.

any language whatsoever,⁴ or China is so exceptional that it lies entirely outside the corrupting clutches of Western language and thought.⁵ Such lofty denials ignore the realities of teaching and research.

Eschewing moral purism, national exceptionalism, and cultural incommensurability alike (p. 20), Ames—very much in the spirit of Qian Mu—aims to strike a balance between stressing the distinctiveness of early Confucian teachings and exhorting readers, inside and outside East Asia, to consider incorporating features of Ames’s vision of the distant past into their daily lives (ibid.). Nearly alone among philosophers today—though Herbert Fingarette made this point several decades ago and Rosemont continues the refrain⁶—Ames argues that early Confucian learning “has important lessons to teach the world today *on its own terms*,” and not merely as adjunct “to one or another Western philosophical system or style, past or present.”⁷ Needless to say, historians and philosophers both must piece together larger patterns from the inevitably partial views collected person by person. (Ames invokes Whitehead on this point, though he might just as well have cited Walter Benjamin⁸ or the findings of modern neuroscience.) Based on his survey of the distant past, Ames argues that Confucian democracy is no oxymoron, given the strong prescriptions for a civil society in *Mencius*, in *Xunzi*, in Fan Zhongyan’s 范仲淹 writings, and in those of equally daring self-described Confucian thinkers. Influenced by Pierre Hadot’s vision of “philosophy” as a “way of life and discourse determined by the *idea* of [practical or therapeutic] wisdom” (p. 8–9),⁹ Ames grows impatient with such polite fictions as the “rational mind” and “moral autonomy,” believing, as he does, that several early

⁴ According to Ames, the “Zhongyong” itself insists that “since events are never duplicated, their proliferation is unfathomable” (cited p. 76); Ames says, “the processual and provisional nature of things makes them ultimately resistant to rationalization and predictability” (p. 80), but that may not be enough to satisfy his more vociferous critics.

⁵ Relevant here is Nathan Sivin’s trenchant observation that human creativity seems to emerge from a “rather small stock of [shared] ideas” (cited p. 41, n. 1) that then undergo permutation after permutation.

⁶ Joel Kupperman is yet another thinker who thinks the Western tradition will seem dead to the degree that it invokes principles and abstractions, rather than social cultivation.

⁷ See Carine Defoort and Henry Rosemont, Jr., “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Roger Ames: Confucian Philosopher and Teacher*, a special issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought: Translations and Studies* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2010), p. 5.

⁸ Walter Benjamin (1968), “Thesis 6”: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

⁹ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2002).

Chinese concepts are far more likely to facilitate reforms of the ways we currently think and operate.

The justifications offered by Ames for this book are certainly the right ones. First, *all* cultural traditions must be “translated” anew for every new time and place, if they are to retain vibrancy and power for new populations, as the *Analects*’s slogan *wengu* 溫故 implies.¹⁰ Second, classical learning (Ruxue 儒學) in China has itself undergone multiple “creative adaptations,” most notably after the introduction of Mediterranean ideas via Buddhism, after the wave of foreign influences coming in late Ming with the Jesuits and continuing through the Qing, Republican, and Communist eras, and even after the most recent formulations offered by today’s third- and fourth-wave New Confucians, producing by now the quite bewildering range of “Confucians” and “Confucianisms” contending for supremacy in China and on the larger world stage. On the first point, translation inevitably carries the potential to harm “rhyme and reason,” but it can just as easily breathe new life into serious works, imparting to them an added measure of “meaning and elegance” (p. 39).¹¹ Meanwhile, in attempting to liberate current readings of the main Confucian texts from earlier interpretations rooted in Christianity, in neo-Platonic ideals, and in secular humanism (pp. 19–20 *passim*), this book raises troubling questions about the *deformation professionelle* of prominent theorists, not the least of them John Rawls, who called for prejudice-free, autonomous thinkers able to survey events with a magisterial dispassion never yet seen in my lifetime.

The word “appreciation” conveys several senses, but Ames clearly wants to “increase the value” (p. 2) of Confucian teachings in the competition for ideas, for those inside and outside China. As Ames notes, not a few early Chinese texts describe the allied impulses of thinking and longing (both *si* 想) in ways that evade the Cartesian trap privileging the rational mind over other avenues to insight (p. 32). In light of that alliance, Ames’s chapter on Relational Virtuosity (*de* 德) ascribes centrality within the Confucian discourse to that emulation of consummate models and patterns that we call “cultivation” (the weight being more on social cultivation than on self-cultivation in the early texts, as opposed to those of Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130–1200] and his followers). Cultivation alone, in the Confucian view, prompts the gradual realization of the aesthetic satisfactions and real-time benefits that accrue from “becoming a [fully ritualized] human being,” instead of basking in a privileged ontological status as a member of *Homo sapiens* with unique capacities.

¹⁰ That means that the early Chinese insights are as “foreign” to persons of Chinese descent today as they are to those outside that descent group.

¹¹ Cf. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Collins [Fontana], 1973), pp. 69–82.

This chapter can easily stand on its own as one intelligent response to those who find value in early China thinking only to the degree that it parallels the virtue ethics of classical Greece or Rome.¹² As Ames observes, Confucian ethics is something that we must (a) do with others and (b) do with our whole hearts and bodies, for splendid isolation affords few opportunities to perform social roles in compelling ways. But is dedication enough, I would ask, to qualify a given thinker as a “Confucian” model worth emulating in the twenty-first century? Ames welcomes Zhu Xi and the Cheng 程 brothers into the big tent of the Confucian fold he celebrates, whereas some in the early China field find these neo-Confucianists a bit too hard to swallow.¹³ Put another way, are some standard constructions of Confucius/Kongzi too far on the right of the Ru 儒 spectrum, too complicit in the political economy of autocracies, to be worth resurrecting in these troubled times so deaf to the basic requirements for human flourishing?¹⁴

As a historian, I spend much of my professional life sniffing out disabling anachronisms that prevent deeper insights into the period(s) under examination. Down the halls of academe, philosophers spend their days in search of larger truths that may transcend time and place. Longstanding disciplinary habits compel me, then, to flag a few of the word choices in this book, even as honesty and humility compel me cheerfully to admit that Ames’s determination to craft a new and more serviceable version of early Confucian teachings renders such flags largely irrelevant to Ames’s main arguments:

1. on the reduction of Ruxue (“classical learning”) to “literati” values (p. 1): Book learning was hardly the primary goal or method of classical learning in early manuscript culture; no one earned a living from writing and few learnt the classical traditions that way either. When Kongzi professes to be an exem-

¹² The response is hardly likely to persuade all the ethicists who continue to believe that the West is the only civilization to spawn great thinking about intellectual subjects.

¹³ E.g., Zhu Xi’s letter urging footbinding for women as a distinctive cultural marker for ethnic Chinese; his insistence of the conceptual priority of *tianli* 天理 (heavenly principles) over *qi* (material stuff); his insistence on the necessity to commit suicide under duress (i.e., after a rape); his denunciation of Han learning; etc. I have argued elsewhere that Zhu Xi and his followers have accepted the Buddhist hierarchies of gender, status, and ontology that Marshall D. Sahlins identifies with “the West” in his *Western Illusion of Human Nature: With Reflections on the Long History of Hierarchy, Equality and the Sublimation of Anarchy in the West, and Comparative Notes on Other Conceptions of the Human Condition* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2008).

¹⁴ For Ames, “family” is the governing metaphor in Confucian teachings (p. 94), but not everyone would agree.

plar who “cares deeply for learning” (*haoxue* 好學) and “studies what is near at hand,” he—or his compiler-ventriloquist—probably refers to worthy people “near at hand” rather than to books (p. 91).¹⁵ Presumably, Ames’s equation between Confucians and literati is strategic, for it gives him a good vantage point from which to relate his current concerns to those expressed by modern educated Chinese. I wonder, however, whether Ames’s stress on “becoming a human being” would not benefit from decoupling it from specific groups. After all, the Confucian instruction is to treat *all* others with the courtesy due recognized dignitaries.¹⁶ Of course, Li Zehou’s 李澤厚 (b. 1930) ready conflation of Ru with “intellectuals” (*zhishi fenzi* 知識份子) is far worse, since it begs the important question of who in China today (or outside it, for that matter) aspires to real independence from government and party diktats.¹⁷

2. on aesthetic vs. rational cultures: This particular binary opposition has a long and unsavoury history when applied to East and West. As historian, I think it best to alert readers to that fact. James Barr’s *Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961) already reflected upon academia’s propensity to associate the Greeks with “rationality” (good) and the Jews with “emotions” and “irrationality” (bad). Much of feminist theory addresses the popular associations of rationality with men (good) and aesthetic concerns with women (bad). Ames’s ascription of aesthetic values to early Chinese thinkers is likely to leave some readers with the erroneous impression that Ames concedes rationality to the Western tradition. Germane here is Rosemont’s observation that the *Analects* discusses “praxis-guiding” wisdom (*zhi* 智) more often than *ren* 仁. Over the years Ames has become increasingly nimble in extricating himself from the pitfalls of essentializing the “aesthetic character” of Chinese civilization,¹⁸ and just a bit more elaboration of the links between wisdom, ritual performance, and *ren* conduct may suffice.

¹⁵ Nylan, “Textual Authority in Pre-Han and Han,” *Early China* 25 (2000), pp. 205–58; idem, *Yang Xiong and the Pleasures of Reading and Classical Learning in Han China* (New Haven, CT: The American Oriental Society, 2011).

¹⁶ *Analects* 12/2.

¹⁷ Here I think of the recent publication of *Shengshi: Zhongguo, 2013 nian* 盛世：中國·2013年 (published in the UK as *The Fat Years*) by Chan Koonchung 陳冠中.

¹⁸ Ames often refers to Whitehead’s distinction between rational vs. aesthetic orders, where for Whitehead “rational order” tends to mean “oppressive harmony” and universal rule-making, to the diminishment of the vast range of human experiences made up of “unique particulars.” See Ames, pp. 10–11.

3. on Ames's pleas to develop new vocabulary: Historians, philosophers, and comparativists working across disciplines routinely formulate hypotheses using such complex concepts as *nous*, *eidos*, *phusis*, and *alethea*, yet a surprising number of China scholars continue to use such unsuitable terms as "Confucian orthodoxy," "heterodoxy," and "deviance" that can have little meaning in the orthopraxies of China.¹⁹ Ames's work is free of this sort of elementary error, but I confess my own queasiness when confronted with the very term "Confucianism," since (a) there is nary a system ("ism") in sight until Zhu Xi, and (b) chapters within the so-called "Five 'Confucian' Classics" often contradict one another.
4. on the translations for *xing* 性 and *qing* 情: I would respectfully submit that we badly need to excise from our customary modes of thinking about early China the strong whiff (stench?) of the "Western illusion of human nature" hovering around our translations. The term *xing* embraces not only the "inborn nature" but also that "second nature" that may have improved (or gotten worse) as a function of our own habits and commitments. Ames's two translations for *xing* ("initial conditions" and "unique and incipient human tendencies") overstress, perhaps for Westernized sensibilities, that degree of "uniqueness" that may properly be imputed to each human story. Sadly, that extraneous overlay may well defeat Ames's larger purposes (pp. 72, 73). A closer rendering of Xunzi's famous dictum "Human nature is evil" would be "The inclinations at birth are not a pretty sight to see." Such a translation forces a sea change in our readings, if only because it forestalls leaps to ontological states and/or original sin.²⁰ It should be equally possible for Ames to sharpen the language of *qing*, perhaps defining it as the bundle of proclivities each person has at any given moment, rather than "what something really is for its context" (p. 73), i.e., its true condition.
5. on "time" (*shi* 時), "fate," and "cosmology": In early Chinese texts, *ming* 命 (generally equated with timing and timely opportunity) seldom relates to abstract time, let alone determinism. Rather it refers to the happenstances or conjunctions that limit the range of responses an individual person can formulate to changes (p. 62). If this is right, the default translations of *ming* as "decree" or "mandate" don't work well. One of the central problems of early philosophy raised by the historical example of Kongzi himself is how best to convert misfortune into good fortune, given the constraints each person faces.

¹⁹ Increasingly, I am worried about the phrase "heart/mind," which only tends to reify the dichotomy in ways that contradict constructions of the body in early China.

²⁰ Hence Herlee Creel's vision of a "purposive Daoism" found in the *Laozi Daode jing* and the *Han Feizi* with its stress on ambition, greed, and cruelty.

6. on common sense as “distilled wisdom”: This idea, which comes from Dewey (p. 43) and James (p. 45), needs further clarification, if the language of “common sense” is not to be read as mere cover for dead convention. I. A. Richards once noted the tendency in “all modern people, Eastern or Western, to impute structures and a kind of analysis into teachings that may be free of same” (p. 45). Ames’s impulse to substitute “a *narrative* account” for the old [pseudo-] *analytical* account does not mean that narrative does not impose certain structures of meaning while ignoring others. I have often wondered how well any set of Confucian teachings on ritual and tradition would stand up to arguments posed in books like Michel de Certeau’s *Practice of Everyday Live*, Daniel Boyarin’s *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*, or Bourdieu’s thick tomes on the fragility of cultural reproduction. What precisely are those “enduring” aspects of Chinese civilization, its “persistent cultural core,” beyond the use of certain graphic forms that developed over time? These purported aspects verging on the metaphysical are more often posited than demonstrated in writings about China, although Ames and others may be right when they insist that certain autochthonous orientations to problems persist. (One would never mistake the Roman empire’s view of manliness with that adopted in Han Confucian texts, for instance.)
7. on the characterization of *qi* 氣 as “continuous field” (p. 68): Ames defines *de* 德 as intensive “focus” and Dao 道 as both extensive “field” and ultimate model to emulate (pp. 66, 68 *passim*). But what discussion is clarified by the explication of *qi* as “continuous field,” given that “field” and “focus” are precise terms drawn from the science of optics? Most early Chinese texts identify *qi* as one of the carriers or drivers (*yu* 御) of the body’s potentially volatile desires to interact with the outside world; in Mencius’s formulation in 2A/2, “the will [of the exemplary person] is commander over the *qi*,” during such interactions. However, as soon as a person’s mundane interactions are elevated to cosmos status, in recognition of their exponentially accruing influence (p. 69), a type of “transcendence” may be inferred, some would say, so long as we realize that this lofty state never departs from this present world composed of *qi* (*ibid.*).²¹ Ames writes, “Nothing happens unilaterally

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Ames, in company with Tang Junyi 唐君毅 before him, prefers to see the Confucian language of “harmony” as “unbounded,” something that cannot be boxed in, closed, or completed (p. 83). But he retains an older emphasis on “completion and perfection” nonetheless. Perhaps individual acts can be “complete” and “perfect,” but soon there are other acts to be performed, so the person faces the same dilemmas over and over again, with her best hope the idea that her resolve and vision may be incrementally strengthened and clarified after each socially constructive act.

and in isolation” (p. 71), as the very notion of *qi* insures that “the one and the many are inseparable.” That said, I fail to understand why Ames considers his account of correlative cosmology (not to mention TCM or Traditional Chinese Medicine)²² a crucial guide to Confucian teachings, since major Confucian masters like Xunzi seem to set aside those cosmologies when sketching the processes by which integrity and wholeness (*cheng* 誠 = *quan* 全) may be acquired and deployed.

8. on *cheng* 誠 as “creativity” (a feature or result), rather than a precondition for a flourishing life (p. 243ff.):²³ The “Zhongyong” line (cited p. 243) says it all: “Only the person with absolute wholeness and integrity 至誠 will get the most out of his or her inclinations.” Doubtless it takes real creativity, not to mention endless hard work, to derive the most out of social relations. But as a human value, some have argued, “creativity” emerges only in the nineteenth century, within the capitalist context. In the Abrahamic traditions, for instance, true creativity belongs to god, and humans only can offer pale imitations of that (p. 251).

That, apparently, is precisely the reason why Ames imputes creativity to humans within the Confucian scheme, and part of the profound impact of Ames’s formulations surely lies in his articulations of the “co-creative” potential of humans as part of the sacred Trinity or Triad 參 of heaven–earth–human. But, when all is said and done, *can* is a difficult concept to wrap the mind around for those who lack mystical leanings. Meanwhile, the word “creativity” tends to drag in a host of unsuitable associations, including that of the “solitary genius” (an oxymoron in Confucian ethics). Some may further object that Ames’s stress on creativity ignores, at its peril, the fraught history of the nearly suicidal “voluntarism” that plagued twentieth-century China under Mao, and led to anything but “the concerted growth of meaningful relations” ending in a form of “spirituality” developed after members of a community committed themselves to each other, and to achieving each others aspirations (p. 92).

If, when all is said and done, for Ames the core insight of Confucian teachings boils down to “putting oneself in the other’s place” and “doing one’s best” (p. 268) in order to realize the potential for developed humanity in oneself and others, there’s nothing particularly Confucian in Ames’s vision. John Donne or Dorothy Day (if not Hildegard von Bingen) could subscribe to Ames’s call to arms. But Ames ultimately taps into a still more powerful picture of humanity—one that denies the

²² That TCM is not “traditional” is a point widely known among historians of medicine.

²³ Ames avoids “sincerity” as a translation for *cheng*, thank the Lord. After all, Hitler was sincere.

worth of both Dionysian or Apollonian activities (no easy task), one that would have us accept our human limitations even as we work to hone our distinctly human capacities to cooperate in more perfect unions. Ames asks us, finally, to rethink our current identities rooted in short-term, competitive interests, if only because first, the concept of well-defined “special interests” has not been around very long, only since the eighteenth century in Europe, and second, so far that concept has had fairly disastrous consequences on our senses of ourselves as deliberative social beings.²⁴ I have a friend who says “Some ideas are too bad to die.” As a confirmed optimist, I prefer to place my bets on people like Roger Ames.

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Ancestral Leaves: A Family Journey through Chinese History. By Joseph W. Esherrick. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 374. \$60.00 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

Ancestral Leaves takes its readers on a journey covering half a millennium of Chinese history through the experiences of a single family lineage—the decedents of Yuan dynasty literati Ye Sheng'er 葉盛二. While the book focuses primarily on the twentieth century it also provides a lively and engaging narration of the clan in imperial China through its experiences of major dynastic transitions, the Taiping 太平 and Nian 捻 rebellions, and natural disasters such as floods and famines. In its discussion of the clan's experiences of the tumultuous twentieth century readers are taken through the collapse of the Qing, the rise of the republic, the chaos of war,

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Mark Lilla, “The President and the Passions,” *New York Times*, 19 December 2010, p. MM13, citing Albert Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), on leading figures of the Enlightenment—Montesquieu and David Hume, among them—who began exploring the idea of “interests” as a way to bring the person's rational faculties and passions into balance. Such thinkers believed that the drives, which they considered more essential to our nature than reason, might be channelled in less violent and more productive directions, if a third psychological force (the universal desire to improve one's own condition) were allowed to operate freely. The terms “sedimentation” and “cultural-psychological formation” appear in Li Zehou's *Huaxia meixue* 華夏美學 (The Chinese aesthetic tradition), but they are common parlance outside of the China field as well.