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The Junzi

Confucius' ideal human being

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INTRODUCTION

The Analects of Confucius

Reading the *Analects* of Confucius for the first time is one of the most disappointing reading experiences you can have. The *Analects* are a collection of maxims composed in Northern China a few centuries before the Common Era, that is, more than twenty centuries ago. They, therefore, reflect a culture that is far removed from our own in time and space. Further, we know that the Chinese language does without articles, plurals, and relative pronouns. It even does without verb conjugations (person, tense, and mood); not to mention that classical Chinese is missing several other things as well. To make matters worse, there is finally the order of the sayings, I mean, the disorder. In fact, the various maxims of Confucius are arranged in the relative book – which we call “the *Analects*” (from the Latin *Analecta*, *Lunyu* in Chinese) – without any logical order of content. For all these reasons, translating the *Analects* from classical Chinese into another language becomes an arduous task. The translations that we happen to have in our hands were made by scholars who, as responsible persons, tried to be faithful to the original text, avoiding as much as possible to introduce personal interpretative elements. In this way, the resulting translation was, to say the least, extremely vague, and in fact difficult to understand. It is not surprising, then,

that reading the *Analects* becomes boring, or even unbearable, right after skimming a few pages.

Indeed, all this is true. The disorder in which Confucius' sayings are found is also a fact. Many have tried to find a logic in their arrangement - as always there is in books, since they are products of human ingenuity - without ultimately succeeding. In the case of *Analects*, it is evident that there must have been a reason for the lack of order, perhaps more than one reason.^[1] In my opinion, the most obvious reason could be that the various maxims, or mini conversations, that make up the book were collected later – after the death of Confucius; indeed, most likely, after the death of his main disciples – based on the various contributions that the editors had received, and that, out of a sense of respect towards the “Master”, they absolutely did not want to manipulate. It is in fact evident that, if someone sat down to put the various sayings in order, he would have gathered them around some clear criteria, perhaps in chronological order, or more likely according to topics, and he would certainly have eliminated inconsistencies and repetitions.

How to read the Analects

The book of the *Analects* of Confucius is a mine of wisdom, which has inspired the people of East Asia for millennia. But it is a very special book, to be approached in the right way. To be able to penetrate this rich mine, you must first have a good translation in your hands, better still two or three “good translations.” It is even more necessary to have a translation that is accompanied by an adequate commentary. Even for a native Chinese speaker, the original text requires translation and commentary. Without helping the reader to perceive, at least in broad terms, the historical context, the existential situation in which a saying was pronounced – what in biblical

exegesis is called the *sitz im leben* – it is not possible to read the book profitably.

When you begin to read the sayings of Confucius, it is not advisable to read them continuously, one after the other, from the first to the last. Such reading is not very profitable; it only tends to bore.

Over the millennia, the recommended reading method has been that of reading and re-reading a single saying, trying to savor it, exploring its dimensions through meditation. It involves reflecting on one's own life experience, and trying to understand what possible relationship the saying may have with one's own life. In the mind of Confucius, and of the disciples who wrote those *Analects*, the doctrines that are gradually subjected to debate have the purpose of directing the reader to mature the so-called "moral cultivation." According to the traditional line of Confucian thinkers, the true meaning of the sayings can only be grasped by seriously applying oneself to the actual practice of moral cultivation, and then eventually by sharing the results with fellow students and with one's own teacher.

A very valid, and I would say indispensable, aid for penetrating the ideal world of *Analects* is to pursue a well-defined topic, simultaneously examining two or more sayings that refer to that specific topic. In this way, the content of Confucius' speeches begins to emerge, and Confucius' mind comes to light. The method I am suggesting is that of using "cross exegesis", of seeking the explanation of a saying in other sayings that refer to the same topic.

It cannot be denied that there is considerable difficulty in understanding the text of the *Analects*, due not only to its origin, so distant in time and space, but also to the extreme conciseness of its lapidary sentences, and to other problems created in the transmission of the texts over such a long period of time. However, using the above-mentioned devices, one can succeed in grasping not a little of the

legacy of thought of Confucius, a thinker at once so ancient and so modern.

The *Analects* are sometimes rightly also called “conversations” or “dialogues,” because, rather than “sayings,” they are a collection of mini conversations, each on a well-defined topic. Dividing the passages of the *Analects* according to the topic to which they refer is equivalent to identifying in each passage the presence of “keywords”. These are the words that come back habitually, and that reveal the cornerstones of Confucius’ mindset.

One of these keywords is *junzi*, a term traditionally translated in English as ‘gentleman’, until in recent years other translations have come into fashion, such as *the superior man*, *the mature person*, *the profound person*, *the exemplary person*, *the paradigmatic individual*, *the perfected person*, and *the noble-hearted man*. The variety of translations immediately lets one perceive the complexity of the concept. It is up to the reader to decide which of these translations is the most valid. Hereby, we will keep using the word *junzi*, following a growing trend, which is to keep the original Chinese term, when it is too complicated, if not impossible, to translate it.

In reading the *Analects*, it is a matter of being able - as advised by Tu Weiming, the best-known Confucian of our time - to become part of a conversation taking place between Confucius and his disciples, or of the disciples among themselves. Again, It was Tu Weiming, who emphasized that the *Analects* are the living memories of a community of people, where the intent is not so much to present theories or record events, but to invite the reader to take part in a conversation already in progress.^[2] Precisely to try to convey this idea, some translations of the *Analects*, contrary to the general practice of translators, use the past perfect instead of the past remote. We find one example of this in the recent French translation by Jean

Lévi (2018); another example in the Russian translation by V. M. Alekseev (1881-1951). The two have purposely made this choice, thinking in this way to better convey the topicality of the conversations that were in progress. Such an idea is not so viable through the English language, unless one writes "the Master just said", instead of the usual "the Master said", or "the Master just replied," instead of "the Master replied." The purpose of the two mentioned translators was to make it clear how the mini conversation in question had just taken place - the day before, or a few hours before - and the disciples now were finding themselves together, to discuss its content, and sometimes to add their own personal comments.

Note: The various chapters of *Analects*, twenty in all, are traditionally called "books," while the individual passages are called "chapters." Anyone who consults different editions, or translations, of the *Analects* will easily come across some slight discrepancies in chapter numbers between one edition and another. Nothing to worry about: the discrepancies are because some sayings – just a few cases - are considered by some commentators as a single saying, while others consider them as two separate sayings, which over the centuries, in the transmission of the text, ended up together, but were originally distinct.

Purpose and Sources of this Book

This book on the "Way of the Junzi" is not intended to be the last word in the exegesis of the *Analects*. It just aims at offering something more than a plain translation, a more in-depth reading of Confucius' sayings concerning the concept of *junzi*. On the *Analects*, there is a remarkable – if not immense – wealth of bibliographical sources, especially in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, but also in