First Assemblage

Tradition and Timeliness

In the first section of this chapter, I shall discuss the problematic notion of tradition in somewhat general terms and then indirectly infer its status and role in the Confucian philosophy with regard to li. Since there is no explicit general notion of tradition that emerges, say, through an opposition to reason, some Sinological detours will be required to detect its status in the Confucian discourse. Ritual propriety being a certain kind of practice, I shall complement the discussion of tradition by correlating it with a general discussion of practice.

By practice, I intend any kind of human action that is considered meaningful by a certain group of people, whose meaning is roughly shared by the members of that group and that therefore has become an established action within it. That the action is established does not mean that it is necessarily of a formal repetitive kind, but rather that it can be rendered symbolically or immediately meaningful on the basis of the interplay between the situation and the cultural milieu in which it is performed. I believe that such a wide definition is both sufficient and necessary to encompass everything that can belong to li.

In the latter half of the section, I shall turn to the role of time in ancient Chinese and, in particular, Confucian thought. Time is another semiveiled concept in the ancient Chinese tradition that has to be extrapolated by means of other concepts and issues. I first discuss the general conception of time in Chinese thought and then move to a more concentrated discussion of the concept of *zhong* 中, "focus," or, as I prefer translating it, "hitting the mark." Zhong sheds an illuminating light on the ways in which time affects the conception of li. Finally, I shall bring together the results of the section as a whole and show that through the medium of the Confucian notion of correct timing, ritual

propriety appears not only as a transmitter of cultural tradition, but also as the most creative and innovative means for broadening it.

From Aversion to Rehabilitation: The Modern Discourse on Tradition

The notion of tradition is important to my analysis for two reasons: the first rests upon the thorough integration of li as a practice and the Chinese cultural tradition. For the former is not merely a product of the latter. Operating on all levels of human interaction, from the most mundane to the most formal, ritual propriety embodies the Chinese tradition in its most extensive manifestation.[1] It is moreover questionable whether the more extensive notion of practice can be made sense of in isolation from tradition, and vice versa. Some light may be shed on this claim through a brief etymological analysis.

The English word "tradition" is derived from the Latin verb *tradere*, "to hand down" or "to transmit." It refers to the continuous act of handing down to posterity what are believed to be the intrinsic features of a particular culture whereby that culture is maintained. The etymology of the modern Chinese word for tradition, *chuantong* 傳統, is similar. *Chuan* 傳 originally means "to transmit" or "to deliver" and is consistently used in this meaning in classical literature. *Tong* 統 refers to the main threads in a silk weave and has the further implication of "the essentials." Thus, chuantong could be understood as the "handing down of the essentials (of a culture) to posterity."

There are, of course, many things that are "handed down" from generation to generation; there are many "traditional" things. But the main purport of that which is handed down, "the essentials" of a tradition, consist in practices. We could say that practices "articulate" traditions. It would in any case be hard to make sense of traditions without them. However, whereas there may seem to be many practices that are not, strictly speaking, traditional, I argue that all practices derive their meaning from some tradition or another. Some practices could be, on the surface, based on a "private tradition," for example in the sense of a personal habit. However, as long as they are to be considered in any way meaningful, they can only be so within or vis-à-vis the broader context of a communal tradition. If they were not, they would suffer from the kind of inconsistency that Ludwig Wittgenstein found with the notion of private language. A practice is ultimately always, be it in the most remote sense, communal.

The other reason for concentrating on tradition concerns the present status and appraisal of tradition both in the West and in the People's Republic of China. Political and social events in both places have rendered the concept of tradition highly suspect: more often than not, it is now taken to signify a reactionary force hampering both scientific and social progress. While the actual events that have led to and enforced this view have been specific to each culture and location, the philosophical streams of thought that kindled them essentially share the same source. This source is the European philosophy of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was characterized by a belief in progress on the basis of an independent and individual use of reason, and the renunciation of traditionalism and authoritarianism, which included the rejection of ritual practice. In 1784, when Immanuel Kant wrote in his celebrated "What Is Enlightenment?" that the advent of this movement of thought signifies "the human being's mental emancipation from self-incurred immaturity,"[2] he set the tone for a mode of thought that since then has by and large dominated the Euro-American political and intellectual scene. This is not to say that such a tension between reason and tradition in the West began with the Enlightenment. It has been present in European culture at least since Plato. However, it undoubtedly found its full force during the Enlightenment and the subsequent period known as modernity. Since then, and until fairly recently, the tendency within philosophy has been toward a prima facie rejection of any appeal to the authority of tradition as a sort of irrational parochialism or obscurantism. This applies not least to the philosophy of Marxism, an offspring of the Enlightenment mentality combined with the effects of the social conditions in the early phases of industrial capitalism in Europe. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx makes the following remarks on tradition:

> The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And it is precisely in periods of revolutionary crises, when they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and their surroundings, with creating something unprecedented, that they panickly summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing their names, marching orders, outfits, in order to enact a new scene in world history, but with this time-honoured guise and this borrowed language.[3]

As we all know, Marxism has been a most influential force in shaping the contemporary Chinese outlook on tradition, sometimes with devastating consequences.[4]

Few extremes, however, persist without generating resistance to them, and alongside the modernist glorification of progress other philosophical and cultural streams developed, the most radical of which rejected reason and embraced tradition as the supreme moral authority. These streams, many of which were actually quite diverse, are often fit together under the heading of "romanticism." It is not necessary to enter the details of the romantic critique of the Enlightenment here. Suffice it to say that these opposite modes of thought have created a certain synthesis that is brought to expression by a number of twentieth-century thinkers. This synthesis consists in a reevaluation of the negative attitude to tradition and of the sharp contrast drawn between reified forms of tradition and reason. Subsequently, the antitraditionalism of modernity has increasingly been subject to various kinds of criticism. Many authors have seen it as insensitive to, if not downright naïve about, the important role that tradition plays for the integration and the sustention of the human community. Conversely, they have viewed the idea that reason alone can serve as the foundation of social and ethical values with growing suspicion. Critical scrutiny reveals that even the supposedly most theoretical forms of constructive ethics are essentially rationalizations of the cultural or personal values of the authors themselves, but hardly ever derivations from "pure" reason.[5]

Ironically, this contemporary suspicious attitude to the claim and authority of reason can at least in part be traced to the Enlightenment itself. For by undermining the authority of tradition, which in the West strongly involved undermining the truth claims of the Christian religion, the "critical" spirit of the Enlightenment also inadvertently contributed to the collapse of traditional metaphysics and thus to the collapse of the supposedly independent grounds of reason.

It seems appropriate, then, to provide some theoretical considerations about the extent to which tradition ought to, and, indeed, *does*, relate to human beings' modes of relating to themselves, to each other, and to society at large. In the following, I shall briefly elucidate some seminal attempts to rehabilitate the notion of tradition which all have in common a certain acknowledgment of its inescapable role in forming the human habitat. As is to be expected, I shall be highly selective in my discussion and focus especially on accounts that I believe may provide me with helpful perspectives from which to approach the notion of li. While focusing here on the more positive appraisals of tradition, I shall, in a later section, partly join forces with the Enlightenment spirit by considering the dangers of traditionalism with a special regard to ritual propriety.[6]

Many modern philosophers have concentrated on the situation of the human being as being, by birth, "cast into" a predominantly social environment. Such a situation has been variously termed as "situatedness," "embeddedness," or "facticity." Seeking to rehabilitate the notion of "habit," to which I shall turn later in more detail, John Dewey wrote already in 1922: "If an individual were alone in the world, he would form his habits (assuming the impossible, namely, that he would be able to form them) in a moral vacuum. They would belong to him alone, or to him only in reference to physical forces. Responsibility and virtue would be his alone. But since habits involve the support of environing conditions, a society or some specific group of fellowmen, is always accessory before and after the fact."[7] We can of course find statements with similar tones much earlier in Western intellectual history. In the *Politics*, Aristotle states that "man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals" and that "a social instinct is implanted in all men by nature."[8] But there is an important difference between these claims. Dewey stresses the actual situatedness of human beings in societies as a necessary starting point for a science seeking to understand and to improve the human condition. It is precisely this social situatedness, according to Dewey, that constitutes the peculiarity of what it means to be human. Aristotle, on the other hand, speaks from a metaphysically teleological point of view as if nature had "intended" for human beings to fully realize their potentialities within society.

Many recent ethical thinkers have, knowingly or unknowingly, shared Dewey's social-philosophical approach. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, has pointed out that the only way to come to an understanding of an action or a practice is to view it from within some kind of narrative, which, again, receives its meaning from the larger tradition to which it owes its existence: "[T]he narrative phenomenon of embedding is crucial: the history of a practice in our time is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer history of the tradition through which the practice in its present form was conveyed to us; the history of each of our own lives is generally and characteristically embedded in and made intelligible in terms of the larger and longer histories of a number of traditions."[9] Considering the context, it may seem peculiar to refer to MacIntyre, an outspoken Aristotelian striving to revive the concept of virtue as a central notion of ethics. But MacIntyre is a good case in point, because while being an Aristotelian, he does not seem to subscribe to Aristotle's metaphysics of natural or cosmic teleology, according to which society is the human being's "preordained" place. By focusing on the goods internal

to practices in every tradition, he seems, instead, to share the view with many modern thinkers that it is the culture to which we belong that provides us with meaning and value. Despite the vast difference between Dewey and MacIntyre, these thinkers would probably both be in agreement that the possibility of meaning can only arise within an interacting community of individuals that have a shared sense of history and tradition.

Perhaps the most explicit attempt in modern times to rehabilitate the notion of tradition, however, can be found in the hermeneutical philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer denies that there is any sharp contrast between tradition and reason. He argues, first of all, that the Enlightenment critique of authority involved a too narrow concept of authority, because true authority, that is, one recognized or accepted as being legitimate, is not founded upon a mere act of submission, but on one of acknowledgment and realization: "That is, the realization that the other's judgment is superior to one's own, and that therefore his judgment comes first, that is, has priority over one's own judgment. It is for this reason that authority cannot simply be conferred on to someone—it is earned, and it has to be earned if that someone wants to claim it. It rests upon acknowledgment and upon an act of reason insofar as it, conscious of its own limits, trusts that others may have better insights."[10] Gadamer elucidates this different meaning of authority because he believes it approximates the way in which the romantics understood the concept when they argued for the authority of tradition. In his view, then, the romantic critique was an important corrective to the Enlightenment by pointing out that, for example, our mores as a matter of fact do and will largely retain their validity simply by virtue of being handed down to us from the past: "They are freely adopted, but their creation or the justification of their validity does not at all derive from free understanding. On the contrary, this is precisely what we call tradition: to be valid without rational justification."[11]

The fact that we often, indeed, every day, submit de facto to the authority of convention and tradition when making up our minds on various issues demonstrates our situatedness within the inescapable frameworks of our culture and its traditions. Without it, we would not be able to orient ourselves within society among other people. An adequate appropriation of tradition provides us with a sense of the more appropriate ways of interacting with others that also facilitates the efficiency of those of our actions that to some degree depend on the *reactions* of others.[12]

But does this establish the full authority of tradition to which we must submit blindly and unconditionally? Certainly not. Gadamer argues that one of the problems with the Enlightenment-romantic controversy over tradition was that the concept as such was understood too narrowly. It was considered as being contrary to rational freedom and thus identified as a historically given object comparable with nature, from which the Enlightenment and the romantic thinkers then drew contradictory conclusions. While both parties contrasted tradition and reason, the first identified reason with progress and tradition with regress, and the second identified reason with conflict and tradition with stability.[13] Such a sharp contrast between reason and tradition, however, is misleading. For even the most solid tradition does not maintain itself merely by virtue of some kind of natural inertia, but requires affirmation, apprehension, and nurture. Tradition is certainly a preservation of a kind:

> Preservation, however, is an achievement of reason, while admittedly one characterized by inconspicuousness. It is due to this that innovation, the pre-planned, purports to be the only act and achievement of reason. But this is mere appearance. Even when life finds itself in tumultuous changes, as during revolutionary periods, much more of the old preserves itself in the ostensible transformation of all things than anyone can ever know, and merges with the new to acquire new functions. At any rate, preservation is no less an attitude based on freedom than overthrow and innovation.[14]

Gadamer attempts to raise to consciousness the power that tradition, willy-nilly, exercises in our daily lives. Without knowing the extent of this power, reason has no means to appraise it and, consequently, no means to seek to either circumscribe or preserve it. One cannot confront an invisible or unknown challenge. It may therefore be appropriate to speak of tradition as a "carrier" or "bearer" of reason, for reasoning always takes place in a discourse belonging to some traditional mode of thought. Reason and tradition are thus far from being opponents in the world of action—they complement each other. In fact, it is questionable whether one could really exist without the other. It is tempting, in this respect, to modify a dictum from Kant and say that tradition without reason would be blind, and reason without tradition would be empty.

Tradition as *Dao* 道:
The Early Confucian Approach to Tradition

In the *Lunyu*, Confucius expresses a thought quite similar to the modified Kantian dictum above: "Learning without reflection results in confusion, reflection without learning results in peril."[15] One important implication of learning (xue 學) is the appropriation and transmission of the cultural tradition, which, I believe, is the dominant meaning of xue in this passage.[16] If we consider, then, for the moment, only its second part, Confucius is arguing that mere reflecting (here the functional equivalent of reasoning) without regard for cultural tradition will have as a consequence that one fails to grasp the appropriate ways of dealing with situations and will therefore endanger oneself and/or others. What sort of endangerment could he have in mind? According to Zhang Weizhong 張衛中, it consists in uncertainty or doubt, or the inability to establish anything at all,[17] and can thus be understood as losing one's foothold in reality, a reality that can only be adequately apprehended through the categories shared by one's culture. From this perspective, then, such endangerment is tantamount to a form of alienation in which the endangered subject loses itself in skepticism, in an evacuation of meaning, in a Durkheimian form of *anomie*, or, to use the words of MacIntyre, in an inability to "grasp . . . those future possibilities which the past has made available to the present."[18]

As many commentators have observed, Confucius clearly considered it to be his personal mission to transmit the Zhou dynasty culture, which in turn, as Confucius states himself, was a continuation of the tradition derived from the Xia and Shang dynasties.[19] This may seem a trivial point, considering that few, if any, would hold that Confucius did not endorse a form of traditionalism. However, it becomes less trivial as soon as we see that his particular kind of traditionalism rests upon a realization of the profound function that a cultural tradition has for human understanding, identity, integration, and orientation, a realization that has been emerging on a global scale in the last few decades. To Confucius and his followers, however, this function of tradition seems evident, even "common sense."

It is illuminating, in this respect, as Benjamin Schwartz has pointed out, that the classical Chinese language did not have a general word for "tradition" as we understand it today, and that chuantong, which I have discussed above, while Chinese in origin, is in fact a much later neologism taken from modern Japanese.[20] What does such a lack suggest?

It clearly does not suggest that the Chinese were unaware of tradition. In fact, the contrary is more likely to be true, that their life-world was so pervaded by tradition that a general word would have been inapplicable. Such lack may in fact be comparable with the lack of general words for "snow" or "ice" in some Inuit languages, which instead have a number of words to describe various formations and manifestations of snow and ice.[21]

An important reason not to be forgotten is, as many have pointed out, that the classical Chinese language is generally characterized by a relative absence of abstractness.[22] This does not mean that general terms cannot be formed, but it is not dualistically influenced in such a way that a metaphysical opposition has formed between the universal and the particular. Classical Chinese does not, as is the tendency among Indo-European languages, depend on a superordinated class to which referents are held to belong by virtue of their fulfilling the conditions of the formal definition of the class itself. Thus, there are no proper "universals" that can be used to convey abstractness. Instead, the meaning of words is mainly established in one of two interrelated ways: contextually, through the interplay between words in a text, and correlatively, through the dynamics of discourse. These linguistic-hermeneutic features also shed light on the ambiguity and allusiveness of the language as such. It is important to note that the discourse takes place either internally in the text itself or externally between the text and the reader, which accounts, at least in part, for the particular Chinese scholarly tradition of writing commentaries to canonical texts. For the commentaries do not merely attempt to explain the original text, which would normally be considered the proper aim of Western commentaries, but continue the dialogue in the hermeneutical sense that the ideas expressed in the texts evoke the commentators' own ideas and inspire them to elaborate them further.[23] In the *Lunyu*, however, we have a particularly conspicuous case of internal discourse, where vague comments and statements are complemented and enriched through the given response.[24] It seems, therefore, that Hall and Ames's description of the language of Confucius as "deferential," whereby "meaning is disclosed and/or created by virtue of a recognition of mutual resonance among instances of communicative activity," is most appropriate.[25]

Given that there is no general term for tradition in classical Chinese, and that tradition is nevertheless a pervasive element in the ancient Chinese, or at least the Confucian, world, one would expect to find numerous terms alluding to the different aspects of tradition in

much the same way as the Inuit languages have many words for different manifestations of ice and snow. This is certainly the case, but not merely in the straightforward sense that there are specific terms that refer to tradition and others that do not. It is rather in the *mode* of discourse that the shades or tonalities of tradition are brought to expression. More specifically, when discourse becomes prescriptive, it enjoys its prescriptiveness largely by virtue of its (mostly implicit) allusion to the authority of tradition. For example, a character such as zheng 政, "to govern," "government," takes in certain contexts the meaning of "proper governing," or "appropriate governing," in which case it alludes to the model government of the early Zhou emperors.[26]

The core of this prescriptive mode is contained in Confucius's idea of zhengming 正名, which is usually rendered in English as "rectification of names." The final and hence most disastrous consequence of not using names correctly, Confucius says on one occasion, is that people will not know what to do with themselves; they will literally "not know where to place their hands and feet."[27] Such dismay or disorientation is another formulation of the alienation or the state of *anomie* in the above-mentioned endangered subject, a situation where norms are unstable or ineffective and which arises as a consequence of "reflection without learning."

The classical understanding of Confucius's proposal of zhengming is that the names of social posts and familial relations should call for the implied duties and responsibilities that were ostensibly contained in those names during the glorified Western Zhou dynasty. Such interpretations have portrayed the thought of Confucius as unfairly conservative and reactionary. In Ren Jiyu's 任繼愈 *History of Chinese Philosophy* from 1966, it says that "Confucius believed that 'reality' [shi] ought not to have changed, and intends to make use of 'names' [*ming* 名] (stipulations of Zhou rituals) in order to correct aspects of 'reality' that have already changed or are in a process of change."[28]

Apparently, this outlook has not changed to a significant degree, at least not in the People's Republic. In a recent study on the concepts of Chinese philosophy, Ge Rongjin葛榮晉 says that with his theory of zhengming, Confucius "attempts to correct actual situations that have undergone changes by means of old names."[29]

These interpretations are problematic in two ways. First, the idea of zhengming, as Confucius presents it, is here understood in light of Xunzi's 荀子 elaborations on this idea. As John Knoblock points out, however, Xunzi took many ideas from the sophisticated linguistic and

logical inquiries of the later Mohist 墨家 school and the Jixia Academy 稷下學宮, both of which did not arise until the fourth century BCE, or almost two centuries after Confucius.[30] Ren Jiyu and Ge Rongjin both interpret Confucius's demand for zhengming on the basis of the much later theory of the relationship between names (*ming* 名) and actuality (shi 實), and therefore come to the conclusion that by rehabilitating the old sense of certain words, Confucius's intention is to recreate a former state of things.

Second, the interpretations confuse consequences with intentions. Ge Rongjin, in fact, reveals this confusion when he adds to the passage quoted above as if to explain what role zhengming was always meant to play: "This single idea of 'zhengming' was later to serve the feudal rulers for a long time, applying it as they did as a prime tool of the system in order to strengthen the feudal ethical code and hierarchy."[31]

It is certainly true that zhengming models itself on the Zhou dynasty. But the idea is not a call for a simple return to the previous use of these names: it is rather an attempt to revive the *mode of thinking* that Confucius believes characterized the Western Zhou dynasty. Such a mode of thinking takes language seriously by seeing words not merely as labels, but as containing profoundly prescriptive elements. It is this cultural *tradition*, proceeding from the Zhou emperors, which he wants to carry on. Thus, it seems more apposite to say that Confucius wanted to return to the *path* initiated by the Zhou emperors.

We may, in light of this Confucian vision, describe tradition as the path on which the present arrived from the past, and which, provided we attend to its maintenance by constantly adapting it to new situations, will lead the present into the future. Such a description is in fact most appropriate. For I suggest that the word in classical Chinese that comes closest to the general English term "tradition" is dao 道, which is most often translated as "way" or "path." I argued in the introduction that the Daoist conception of nature as an ever flowing process is comparable to the Confucian approach to society. If we understand the Daoist use of the word dao as signifying the overall process of our natural environment, or, even more generally, like François Jullien, as "the course of things,"[32] then dao would seem to be a good candidate for approximating our term for "tradition." An etymological analysis of dao would further lend credence to such an understanding. The character is formed out of two elements, *pi* 辵 "foot," or "to lead through," and *shou* 首, "head," also in the sense of "leader," or, as Ames and Hall point out, "foremost,"[33] which surely can be extended further to the idea of

"the most important" or "the essential." Thus, it would seem entirely in order to understand dao as the "leading forth of what is essential."

To what extent, then, was tradition considered an authority? Confucius famously stated that he was simply a transmitter of past wisdom and not an innovator.[34] This statement is often taken as evidence of the conservative spirit of his teachings, but it should probably rather be seen as merely exemplifying Confucius's own modesty as well as his respect for cultural tradition. For the aim is not mere preservation. In the first part of the apothegm quoted above, Confucius states that learning without reflection leads to confusion. This is a clear disapproval, and disavowal, of mere preservationism. The word *wang* 罔, which I have translated as "confusion," can also mean "disorientation," and, in fact, Zhang Weizhong explains it as "disorientation that leads to nothing."[35] Evidently, those who simply stick to old methods and norms without reflecting on how to adapt them to new situations are unlikely to be successful in their efforts. They will effect nothing at all. In the *Zhongyong* 中庸, Confucius is reported to have said that those who are "born into the present age and yet return to the ways [dao] of the past will cause themselves misfortunes."[36] In the *Lunyu*, moreover, Confucius says that "one who realizes the new by reviewing the old can be called a proper teacher."[37]

Confucius thus emphasizes the importance of reevaluating what is traditional. Tradition is surely of vital importance as a foundation for proper behavior, but it should not dictate in a dogmatic manner how one should behave. Instead, proper behavior should be formulated with regard to a critical reexamination of tradition itself.[38] The most concrete form of such an examination entails personalizing the values and practices that constitute the given tradition, for new situations continuously call for new responses within the framework of its paradigms. Such responses, when thoughtful and creative, take into consideration the relevant values and past practices belonging to the tradition. However, it is up to the agents as concrete persons to reinterpret the significance and meaning of these values and practices by constantly adapting and re-adapting them to the current circumstances. "Proper behavior" is therefore not only proper in the sense of conforming to traditional values and practices; it is also "proper" in the sense of being the manifestation of a personal "appropriation" of the tradition as such. By responsibly continuing the tradition, persons make it their own—that is, they make it "proper" to them.[39] And, obviously, this can be done in a multiplicity of ways. Confucius would therefore surely agree with

MacIntyre's argument that "[t]raditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict."[40] The point is not to *return* to the ancient ways, or the ancient tradition. The frequently discussed *junzi zhi dao* 君子之道, the way of "refined," "cultivated," or "edified" persons,[41] the way within the way, refers precisely to the endeavor to continue forging the path that constitutes the tradition, to continue *making* the tradition—for without such an endeavor, the tradition runs the risk of becoming a thing of the past, a dead tradition.

The Temporal Sequence of
Practice and the Chinese Notion of Time

In the introduction, I pointed out some reasons for the generally antagonistic attitude to ritual in modernity. As an archetype of traditionalism par excellence, ritual action is by and large regarded as consisting in a fixed sequence of mechanistic and repetitive gestures both devoid of and inhibiting individual and creative thought. According to this view, which has been fostered by historical, political, and social factors, ritual is appropriately associated "with the primitive, tribal, and nonrational."[42] This view was duly reflected in anthropological and sociological treatments of ritual until after the midtwentieth century, in particular those influenced by Durkheimian and Marxist approaches that make a strict demarcation between the religious and the profane or secular.

The social sciences, ever since their rise in the late nineteenth century, have been marked by a struggle to establish themselves as a proper discipline of science. This has resulted in a methodological ambivalence as to how to approach their subject matter and what kind of results to seek. Thus, whereas most social scientists have appreciated and emphasized the particularity of their human objects of study, they have at the same time been constrained to yield to the scientific demand for objectivity, explainability, and, therefore, generalization. The consequence of such an imperative has been a certain conflation of disparate, yet conceptually related, social practices. For the demand for an objectifiable, generalizable explanation has led to an imposition of a mechanistic model upon these practices or to their categorization and reification in some form. It has led to the tendency to view culturally established practices as following a fixed and an ostensibly "logical" sequence in which the components all have a direct and decipherable symbolic reference to the cultural tradition as a whole. Pierre Bourdieu

has launched a criticism of this view that has particularly instructive implications for our discussion.

In his seminal study, *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu is concerned with the epistemological status of the social sciences. The objectivist approach that I sketched above was later met with a phenomenological or a subjectivist reaction that had the potential of resulting in some kind of productive synthesis. Bourdieu deplores, however, that the social sciences have been left with an artificial and unfortunate dichotomy between these approaches, both of which suffer from serious shortcomings for the aim of understanding the dynamism of the human habitat. He therefore attempts to go beyond both objectivist and phenomenological approaches in pursuing "a reflexive return to the subjective experience of the world and also the objectification of the objective conditions of that experience."[43] The former of these two aims shall, so to speak, stalk my discussion in this section on time and temporality.

According to Bourdieu, one of the chief problems with the scientific approach to practice consists in the discrepancy between the presupposed notion of time in the scientific outlook and the way in which time unfolds in actual practice. Scientific analysis is inherently detemporalized in the sense that it arrives after the fact, and, having at its disposal sufficient time to overcome the effects of time, it then reconstructs the events according to a synchronized or static scheme or synopsis. Hence, a gap arises between the supposedly "objective" spectator and the "subjective" agent of the practice. The former, when reconstructing the process, tends to see a fixed or mechanized sequence of actions, each of which has a determinate symbolic reference to the culture to which the agent belongs, while not necessarily being transparent to the agent. The latter, however, being immersed in and living the process, obviously sees it in a very different manner. He experiences all the uncertainties and cognitive challenges that accompany practically any temporal succession of action. If social scientists had considered closely the rituals that they themselves perform every day, Bourdieu writes, such as a polite conversation, "the seemingly most mechanical and ritualized of exchanges,"

> they would have discovered the unceasing vigilance that is needed to manage this interlocking of prepared gestures and words; the attention to every sign that is indispensable, in the use of the most ritual pleasantries, in order to be carried along by the game without getting carried away by the game beyond the game . . . the art of playing on the equivocations,

innuendoes and unspoken implications of gestural or verbal symbolism that is required, whenever the right objective distance is in question, in order to produce ambiguous conduct that can be disowned at the slightest sign of withdrawal or refusal, and to maintain uncertainty about intentions that always hesitate between recklessness and distance, eagerness and indifference.[44]

A well-performed ritualized action, then, while certainly following a preestablished pattern to a certain degree, is performed well precisely by *not* being a simple automatic repetition. Bourdieu makes a compelling comparison with the performance of music:

> Practice unfolds in time and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys. Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning. As with music, any manipulation of this structure, even a simple change in tempo, either acceleration or slowing down, subjects it to a destructuration that is irreducible to a simple change in an axis of reference. In short, because it is entirely immersed in the current of time, practice is inseparable from temporality, not only because it is played out in time, but also because it plays strategically with time and especially with tempo.[45]

Bourdieu's insight into the discrepancy between the temporality of science and that of practice serves us well in this respect. Apart from reminding us of the inevitable gap that arises between "external reconstructors" and "internal agents," his observation also prompts us to observe that one's way of relating to practices and events will be largely influenced or even conditioned by one's presupposed, and, for the most part, implicit notion of temporality. This takes us to the very particular Chinese conception of time, which, in fact, suggests that the notion of ritual necessarily involves individuality, creativity, and a keen sense for the situation at hand.

Tang Junyi 唐君毅, in his study of the special characteristics of classical Chinese cosmology, has pointed out that the Chinese notion of time is inseparable from the notion of space and is thus an inherent quality of all things. Classical Chinese contained no independent concepts for time and space until they were imported into the language

by Buddhist thought.[46] This indicates that Chinese temporality is characterized by a high level of concreteness and cannot easily be abstracted or objectified into a one-dimensional, linear, sequential movement of divisible units, as has been the dominant understanding of time in the West, at least since the seventeenth century.[47] Tang takes the example of the modern Chinese word for "cosmos," *yuzhou* 宇宙. In classical Chinese, *yu* 宇 means "up, down, and in all four directions," indicating extension or space in its totality, and *zhou* 宙 means "going back to the past and arriving in the present," indicating duration or time in its totality.[48] The cosmos is thus understood as the combined totality of time and space, neither of which can be clearly separated.[49] This also explains the dynamic concept of constantly changing reality in Chinese thought, for if time and space, and hence matter, are ultimately inseparable, there can be no room for an understanding of reality as static.[50]

The idea of the totality of time and space is, moreover, not an idea of an absolute totality, but of one relative to human experience. This can be derived from the way in which the notions of time and space are originally formulated. Tang says that "[t]o say 'going back to the past and arriving in the present' and 'up, down and in all four directions' is to place ourselves at the centre. Thus, 'tracing back from the present to the past' means 'past and present,' 'left, right, in front of and behind' means 'the four directions,' and 'above our head and under our heels' means 'up and down.'"[51] Ancient Chinese thought is consistent in its tendency to explicitly consider things from the point of view of the human being. The emphasis is on "function," not on "essence"—on the way in which things "work" or what they "do," not on what they "are." The role of philosophy and knowledge, therefore, consists in enhancing the ability of human beings to realize a harmonious relationship with their environment. This particular epistemological, or perspectival, anthropocosmic orientation is a partial explanation for the lack of conceptual oppositions so important in Western thought such as appearance/reality or subjectivity/objectivity. Provided that we can detect some kind of *telos* in the Chinese approach to reality, it is certainly not the attainment of an "objective truth" to be conceptualized, but rather a "practical skill" to be mastered, demanding openness, perspicacity, and engagement with regard to an ever-changing reality. Such a *telos*-as-skill can thus never be attained once and for all. On the ancient Chinese outlook on reality, François Jullien says that "reality—every kind of reality—may be perceived as a particular deployment or arrangement of things to be relied on and worked to one's advantage. Art, or wisdom, as conceived by

the Chinese, consequently lies in strategically exploiting the propensity emanating from that particular configuration of reality, to the maximum effect possible. This is the notion of 'efficacy.'"[52] Given the fundamental role of time in the Chinese worldview, one might pose the provocative question whether Confucius and his followers were even capable of regarding ritual observance as a mere mechanistic repetition of a fixed sequence of actions. It seems at least clear that persons who aim at such repetition rather prove themselves as decidedly unskilled, concentrating as they do on "copying" a past deed instead of maintaining vigilance and responding appropriately to the particular circumstances in which they find themselves.[53] This view can be reinforced through an analysis of the particular role of time in the Confucian tradition.

Despite the comparative lack of reference to cosmological issues in the *Lunyu*, it contains a memorable passage where Confucius offers us his view of the flow of time: "While standing on a riverbank, the Master said with a deep sigh: 'Doesn't time pass by just like this, never ceasing day or night!'"[54] By comparing the ongoing succession of days and nights with the flow of water in a river, Confucius is entirely in accordance with other more cosmologically oriented thinkers of classical China who describe reality as a process of constant change. In fact, although Confucius and his immediate followers generally focused on social and ethical issues and, unlike the Daoists, tended to refrain from cosmological elaborations, few if any would hold that their worldview did not rest upon some conception of cosmology.

Much has been written on the difference between the Confucian and the Daoist philosophical outlooks. The Chinese scholar Fang Dongmei 方東美 once summarized the main difference between Confucians and Daoists by characterizing them respectively as "persons of time" (*shijian ren* 時間人) and "persons of space" (*taikong ren* 太空人).[55] Praising Zhuangzi's indifference to the affairs of the mundane world in his soaring through space by riding the clouds, Fang (following, in fact, Bertrand Russell) maintained that the ostensible Daoist view that "understanding time is of little importance" was "the gate to wisdom."[56]

Tang Yinan 唐亦男 argues that Fang's (and Russell's) interpretation of the Daoist attitude to time is mistaken, and demonstrates that Zhuangzi's view of time and space was in fact much in line with Tang Junyi's account of the general Chinese view of time and space as inseparable modes of reality. However, he acknowledges that Fang's characterization of the Confucians as "persons of time" may be befitting, for the notion of time plays an enormously important role in the Confucian philosophy.

A seminal source for the largely implicit early Confucian conception of cosmology is the ancient *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經). Although incorporated into the list of Confucian "classics" during the Han dynasty, this work expresses a worldview predating all the schools of thought in China of the Warring States period and can thus be regarded as representing something like a pan-Chinese cosmological vision.[57] Most contemporary scholars would now agree that both Daoists and Confucians alike shared the philosophy of the *Yijing* as a kind of cosmological foundation.[58]

The *Yijing* presents an art of divination dating back to the Shang dynasty, although the book itself was probably composed in the Zhou dynasty—hence its alternative and original title, *Zhouyi* 周易, or *The Changes of Zhou*. The *Yizhuan* 易傳, or the *Appended Remarks* (also called *Shiyi* 十翼, or *The Ten Wings*), which interprets the *Yijing*'s prognostications and elaborates on its relation to cosmology, is a much later composition. The *Yizhuan* was long believed to be the work of Confucius himself and is in fact ascribed to him by Sima Qian 司馬遷, the great Han dynasty historian, in his *Historical Records* (*Shiji* 史記). This attribution was later questioned and has now been disconfirmed by textual analyses of *Yizhuan* bamboo scrolls excavated among the Mawangdui archeological finds in 1973. These scrolls strongly indicate that it was written no earlier than the end of the Warring States period, or around 200 BCE, and certainly by more than one author.[59] The *Yizhuan*, however, is undoubtedly a Confucian work, written in response to Daoist challenges in order to give expression to Confucian views of cosmology.[60]

The *Yijing* is an elaborate expression of the Chinese cosmological view that reality is in a constant flux of generative change. In the classic, these changes are symbolized by means of broken and unbroken horizontal lines, later to be identified with the cosmic interactive tendencies attributed to yin 陰 and yang 陽. Three lines arranged in vertical order compose a so-called "trigram" (*sanhua gua* 三畫卦). By exhausting the different combination of lines, there are a total number of eight different trigrams. Two trigrams placed on top of each other make up a "hexagram" (*liuhua gua* 六畫卦). The hexagrams, sixty-four altogether, form the substance of the divinatory symbolism. It is important to remember that by embodying the processes of reality, the hexagrams themselves are conceived of as being in a constant process of transformation. The lines are displaced from the bottom to the top and thus a displayed hexagram is always about to yield to a new one. Thus, the constant process of

generative (and degenerative) change through time can never be left out of consideration.

The system of the *Yijing* has been regarded as one of the more obscure products of the Chinese tradition. The main reason for this obscurity is beyond doubt its fluidity. The hexagrams are meant to provide an indication as to whether taking certain measures in a particular situation is auspicious or not on the basis of the symbolic combination of its broken or unbroken lines. The interpretation proceeds by mutually correlating either the lines or the trigrams of which the hexagrams are composed, whereby each interpretive element represents a complex set of propensities based on the rich symbolic polarity of yin and yang. However, there is no one fixed method for such an interpretation. The interpreter can choose from virtually unlimited possibilities of correlation and hence reach practically any desired conclusion. A. C. Graham has suggested that this extreme fluidity of the system is not without significance: resting upon the Chinese worldview of the unpredictability of events, it has the heuristic function of unblocking the mind to possibilities that would otherwise not have been envisaged: "An openness to chance influences loosing thought from preconceptions is indispensable to creative thinking. In responding to new and complex situations it is a practical necessity to shake up habitual schemes and wake up to new correlations of similarities and connexions. . . . The *Yi* . . . is designed for responding to unique and complex situations in which correlative thinking must be fluid."[61] Graham's observation underscores the importance of personal vigilance and perspicacity in the ancient Chinese view of reality as ever changing and indeterminate. A similar point has been made by Tu Weiming 杜維明. Rejecting notions of the Chinese worldview as being either cyclic or spiral, he argues that it is "transformational": "The specific curve around which it [reality] transforms at a given period of time is indeterminate, however, for numerous human and nonhuman factors are involved in shaping its form and direction."[62]

The processual and transformational nature of reality necessitates a conscious awareness that excludes the possibility of a fixed or given order and, in a sense, is prepared for anything. Such awareness necessitates in turn a high evaluation of the skill required to respond to one's environment in the most appropriate or expedient way. It moreover sheds light on the generally cautious approach to things found in Chinese thought and culture. One always observes carefully before acting. Summarizing his brief analysis of the role of time in Chinese thought, Zhang Dainian

張岱年 emphasizes both of these points: "Persons of initiative should advance only after having followed the advances of the moment. Moreover, they should be capable of initializing an action that is proper to every aspect of the situation."[63]

Hitting the Mark: *Zhong* 中, *Shizhong* 時中, and *Zhongyong* 中庸

There is more to gain from the ancient *Classic of Changes* on the notion of time. In the *Yizhuan*, which, we might recall, was composed by Confucian thinkers in the Warring States period, there is much to suggest that the important but disputed Confucian idea of zhong 中 is closely associated with time and timeliness. The character zhong occurs frequently and in various contexts in the ancient Chinese corpus. Zhong's most common meaning is prepositional, functionally equivalent to the English "in," "inside," or "between," which, in fact, corresponds to the *Shuowen* lexicon's explanation of the term through the character *nei* 內. The *Shuowen* also associates it with the character zheng 正, "upright," "straight," or, as Ge Rongjin comments, "not biased and not partial, properly placed."[64] Despite the apparent differences between these meanings, we can detect their semantic relationship.[65] To be inside or between, that is to say, to be central, has also the implication of being "properly placed." There is at least one unambiguous case in which Confucius uses zhong in this prescriptive sense, where he says, in explicating his idea of "correcting the application of names" (zhengming), that "if government decrees and penal law are not on the mark [zhong], the common people will not know where to place their hands and feet."[66] To be "not on the mark" thus carries the meaning of inappropriateness.

In the *Yizhuan*, the character zhong is used to signify the lines occupying the central places of the hexagrams. As the name indicates, a hexagram is composed of six lines. The central places of a hexagram correspond to the second and the fifth lines, which again are the most important in determining whether or not an intended action will be auspicious.[67] Since a hexagram represents a given situation or "time," the trick consists in making opportunities out of the propensities of the moment as indicated by its central lines.[68] Another way of expressing this in the *Yizhuan* is shizhong 時中, which we may translate provisionally as "time centering," where time (*shi* 時) signifies the hexagram as such. Since, however, shi refers to the particular point of time in question, it is

perhaps more appropriately translated as "moment." Further, by associating the meanings of zhong as depicted above, we may construe shizhong as hitting the mark of the moment, which would then make sense of the reference both to the specific prognostications of the hexagrams as well as to one's approach to things in actual reality.

The shizhong reference in the *Yizhuan*, commenting on the hexagram *meng* 蒙, or ignorance, would thus read like this: "As for ignorance [meng] and discernment [*heng* 亨], it is with discernment that one proceeds to hit the mark of the moment."[69] In the *Yijing*, meng is explained through its contrast, heng. In a modern edition of the classic, this passage is explained as follows: "Why the contrasts of ignorance and discernment? Because things change by following circumstances. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge, but having learned, a lack of knowledge is able to turn into knowledge, meng is able to change into non-meng."[70]

It is on the basis of the dynamic interaction of its central lines, the second being unbroken *yang* and the fifth a broken yin, that the hexagram indicates good conditions for ignorance to change into discernment. Tang Yinan argues that the idea of shizhong in the *Yizhuan* suggests an approach to reality that is particularly Confucian—namely, to identify things in their particular location of temporality, observe their transformational development, and then choose the most opportune moment to realize an appropriate or effective action.[71] He quotes the Qing dynasty Confucian scholar Hui Dong 惠棟, who not only identified the notion of shizhong as the core of the wisdom of the *Changes* but also as a supreme illustration of the entire Confucian tradition. Marveling at the *Changes*, he has the following to say: "The way of the *Changes* is indeed profound! To sum up in a word, it hits the mark of the moment." He then continues: "Pointing out the excellence of Confucius, Zisi wrote in the *Zhongyong*: 'A *junzi* hits the mark of the moment.' Mencius also said: 'Confucius was the sage whose actions were timely.' The implementation of the zhong standard began with the *Zhongyong*, in which the standard of shizhong was illustrated by Confucius, even as it was handed down from Yao and Shun as their model of thinking."[72]

The vital role of time in the Confucian philosophy is also emphasized by Ge Rongjin. He notes that the specific formulation of shizhong first appears in the *Yizhuan*, in which, he adds, the notion of time is generally found in the prescriptive context that people's actions ought to try to "hit the mark" (zhong) by following the process of time.[73] He argues, moreover, that the idea is also prominent in the thought of Confucius himself. In one passage of the *Lunyu*, Confucius discusses the

steadfastness of some of the more excellent personalities of the ancient era, but then says: "I, however, differ from all these, for I have no 'must not' or 'must.'"[74] Ge Rongjin comments on this passage as follows: "That is to say, not to limit oneself to conventional rules, not to imitate that which is conventionally considered permissible, but to be flexible at all times, and thereby adapt to the variations specific to any situation—this is to 'have no "must not" or "must".'"[75]

The concept of zhong in its philosophical use, then, frequent in the Confucian literature in combinations such as zhongdao 中道, zhongxing 中行, not to forget zhongyong 中庸, seems to be closely associated with the notion of shizhong and thus with the idea of conduct involving flexibility, adaptability, and appropriateness to the particular situation at hand.

A particularly elusive zhong concept is zhongyong. The work bearing this title, attributed to Confucius's grandson, *Zisi*, and, following its first canonization during the Han dynasty, incorporated into the *Liji*, is not easily decipherable. The Western exegetical tradition of Chinese philosophy has tended to follow James Legge in translating and thereby explaining *Zhongyong* as the *Doctrine of the Mean*.[76] To a student of philosophy, this title immediately calls to mind Aristotle's ethics of the mean (*mesotes*) between two extremes, and in fact, his particular ethical approach has frequently been compared with the spirit of the *Zhongyong*, and even the Confucian notion of zhong altogether. Such a comparison, if sufficiently sophisticated, can certainly be of value. But it can also lead to distortions if either party or both are underrepresented or too simplified in the analysis or if one goes too far in identifying Aristotle's mesotes and the Confucian zhongyong.

I shall, in this discussion, not venture to delve deeply into the philosophy of Aristotle. Suffice it to say that his notion of mesotes implies a criterion for virtuous action in the form of a rationally chosen mean between extremes.[77] Although the mean emerges as a functional category through the mediation between *theōria* and *praxis*, which involves an abstraction that certainly upsets the comparison, let alone identification, with the Chinese notion, it nevertheless retains a strong sense of concreteness by being relative to the circumstances in which it finds its application. The procedure for arriving at the "mean" consists neither in an exact calculation nor in a simple derivation of the particular from the universal, as is sometimes held, but indeed relies on a complex interactive scheme of emotional and cognitive elements. The moral excellence of the Aristotelian exemplars consists largely in having developed a profound sense or "feel" for the situation in which they find themselves and is therefore far from being some kind of "fixed middle."[78]