

LOUBNA EL AMINE



Classical Confucian
Political Thought

A NEW INTERPRETATION

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For my parents

Adnan El Amine and Fadia Hoteit



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Acknowledgments



There is an old Arabic saying, sometimes attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, that goes, “Seek knowledge, even in China.” The idea of China as a faraway—the furthest away—land had not completely disappeared from the social imagination in the Arab world by the time I was an undergraduate. That I ended up writing a book on China’s central intellectual tradition was the result of an unexpected journey that started with my professor and mentor at the American University of Beirut, Yahya Sadowski. He encouraged his students to think about the Arab world comparatively, often using East Asia as an example. When I started graduate studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, it was Robert Eno’s class on Classical Chinese philosophy that introduced me to Confucianism, with which I have stayed since.

This book is based on my dissertation work at the Department of Politics at Princeton University and I cannot sufficiently express my gratitude to my advisors. Charles Beitz and Alan Patten encouraged this project from its inception, providing continuous help and meticulous feedback. Neither my background nor my research interests were typical, and they, and the Princeton political theory program more generally, were never anything but supportive. Willard Peterson openheartedly gave up much of his time to make sure that I was adequately versed in Chinese history. Stephen Angle’s mentorship, both through the example of his own work in Chinese philosophy and through his tireless commentary on my chapters, was crucial. His characteristic generosity also extended to seeing me through the ups and downs of academic life.

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I sometimes wonder, given the centrality of family to Confucian thought, whether I would have been drawn to it in the same way I was, ten years ago, had I not grown up in a happy family. My brothers Mehdi and Ramzy both react to the world with a healthy dose of humor and *bon sens*, gently tugging at me when I get too tied up in the throes of academia. My parents are both academics; we were raised amongst books, and dinner conversations at home always involved intellectual, political, and ethical issues. But seriousness was also balanced with light-heartedness, and combined with a freedom for each of us to choose our own way in the world. This book is dedicated to my parents who made it all possible.

Note on Translations and Transliterations



Unless otherwise indicated, I have quoted from Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1979) for all translations from the *Analects*. I have also consulted Confucius, *Confucius: Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003). Chapter and section numbers follow Lau. For the *Mencius*, I have quoted, unless otherwise indicated, from Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (rev. ed.; London: Penguin, 2003), and consulted Mencius, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Bryan Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008). Chapter and section numbers follow Lau. For the *Xunzi*, I have quoted, unless otherwise indicated, from Xunzi, *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, 3 vols., trans. John Knoblock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988–94), and consulted Xunzi, *Xunzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). Chapter and section numbers follow Knoblock.

I have adopted the Hanyu Pinyin system for the romanization of Chinese characters throughout except for proper names that are predominantly romanized according to the Wade-Giles system in English-language texts.

Classical Confucian Political Thought



Prologue



Confucianism has become popular again in recent years. With the failure of communism as a state ideology, the Chinese government has been turning more and more to long-vilified Confucius for inspiration. The motto of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会), strewn on banners throughout Beijing in preparation for the 2008 Olympics, was meant to signal the Confucian renaissance of the country. More recently, China’s president, Xi Jinping, has been known to reference Confucius and other Chinese Classical thinkers in his speeches. The government also projects its reinvented identity worldwide, exporting cultural centers, known as Confucius Institutes, to countries around the world. This revival of Confucianism is not, however, limited to the political level; it also pervades contemporary social life in China.¹

On the other hand, Confucianism has also witnessed a resurgence in Western and Chinese academia, fueled by post–Cold War debates about the compatibility between non-Western traditions and liberal democracy, and more specifically by the debate that became known as the “East Asian Challenge to Human Rights.”² It has also benefited from increasing interest in political theory and in philosophy in non-Western traditions, which has led to the emergence of subfields like comparative philosophy and comparative political theory.

¹ See Daniel Bell, *China’s New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

² See, for example, Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell, *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); William Theodore de Bary and Tu Weiming, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); and Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong, eds., *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Inspired by these two trends, this book investigates Classical Confucian political thought: its conception of government, of the relationship between ruler and ruled, of the methods of ruling, and of the obligations of individuals toward the political community. In other words, the book does for Classical Confucian thinkers what political theorists have long done for thinkers from the Western tradition, from Plato to Nietzsche.

Ethics and Politics in Classical Confucianism

Confucianism might not at first appear as the most likely candidate for a project that is motivated by an interest in non-Western conceptions of politics, for its wisdom has usually been understood to be of a moral or spiritual rather than political nature. This is not especially surprising insofar as the Classical Confucian texts, the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, include many sayings that express the Confucian masters' judgment about a person's conduct in society. To illustrate, the first entry in the *Analects* goes as follows: "The Master said: 'Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to take offence when others fail to appreciate your abilities?'"³ Social relationships are indeed central to the early Confucian texts. The latter are full of guidelines about how to treat parents, siblings, neighbors, friends, and superiors. Anecdotes about the proper relationship between parents and sons especially abound. Mencius, for example, relates the story of Shun who persisted in his obedience to his parents despite their cruelty toward him. As the story goes, Shun's parents once asked him to fix the roof of the storehouse and then set fire to it while he was repairing it. On another occasion, they forced him down the well and then covered the well with him inside. Nevertheless, Shun remained unwavering in his respect for them, an accomplishment that, recognized by the extant emperor, was to earn him the position of next emperor.⁴

The preponderance of anecdotes about social relationships should not, however, mask the fact that the anecdotes relating to government are also plentiful, easily constituting half of the content of the texts. The *Mencius* begins with a presumed encounter between Mencius

³ *Analects* 1.1.

⁴ *Mencius* 5A.2.

himself and King Hui of Liang in which Mencius encourages the king to give up concern for profit in favor of *ren* 仁 and rightness (*yi* 義).⁵ The *Xunzi* includes chapters on the regulations of kings, on enriching and strengthening the state, on the duties of ministers, and on military affairs, among others. In fact, it is precisely the intriguing question of the relationship between its ethical and political components that makes Confucianism an interesting case to study. To return to the story of Shun, we can glean already from the anecdote reported above the intertwining of ethics and politics, for it reveals the importance not only of filial piety per se, but also of filiality in a good ruler, which Shun was to become.

As Benjamin Schwartz has argued, one should think of the Confucian texts as working along two dimensions: an ethical dimension concerned with “self-development” (*xiu shen* 修身, *xiu ji* 修己) and a political dimension concerned with the “ordering of society” (*zhi guo* 治國) and the “pacification of the world” (*ping tianxia* 平天下).

The relationship between the two is fraught with a certain tension, indicated by Schwartz’s use of the concept of “polarity” to characterize it.⁶ Schwartz has also argued that the concept of the *Dao* (道)—the Way—in the *Analects*, refers, in its most expansive meaning, to the whole sociopolitical order. This usage includes the different social and political roles to be performed—starting in the family—and the rituals governing the performance of these roles. On the other hand, the *Dao* also “emphatically” refers to the “inner” moral life of the individual. Schwartz contends that “a central problematique of the *Analects* involves the relation between the two.”⁷

In much of the recent literature on Confucianism, the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism has been presented

⁵ *Mencius* 1A.1. A wide controversy surrounds the translation of *ren* into English. Stephen Angle translates it as “humaneness,” Hsiao Kung-chuan as well as D. C. Lau as “benevolence,” Edward Slingerland as “goodness,” Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont as “authoritative conduct,” while others, like Benjamin Schwartz, prefer to leave it untranslated. I follow Schwartz in leaving it untranslated. I will return to the meaning of *ren* in Chapter 4. *Yi* (rightness) differs from *ren* in that *ren* indicates an internal disposition to relate to others in a reciprocal way, while *yi* denotes the application of external principles of proper behavior to given circumstances.

⁶ See Benjamin Schwartz, “Some Polarities in Confucian Thought,” in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. David Nivison and Arthur F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 52. The other two polarities that Schwartz identifies in Confucianism are “knowledge versus action” and the “inner versus outer realms.”

⁷ Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 62.

as a one-sided relationship where politics is wholly dependent on ethics, thus failing to capture the tension between the two. Indeed, prominent writers on Chinese political thought, including Joseph Needham,⁸ Hsiao Kung-chuan,⁹ Fung Yu-lan,¹⁰ D. C. Lau, and Herbert Fingarette, have assumed that Confucian politics is the logical conclusion of Confucian ethics and that the second is therefore more important than the first. Thus Lau writes that “Mencius’ political philosophy . . . is not only consistent with his moral philosophy but is derived from it. Ancient Chinese thinkers all looked upon politics as a branch of morals.”¹¹ Sor-hoon Tan contends that “the early Confucians themselves subordinated politics to ethics.”¹² Heiner Roetz has argued that Confucian politics is “subordinated to a moral goal,” which is “the cultivation of man . . . his moral elevation.”¹³ Similarly, in an introductory book on Chinese philosophy, JeeLoo Liu writes that “Confucians believe that morality is an indispensable element in politics: the ideal ruler should be a sage king; the ideal function of government is to morally transform its people.”¹⁴ Paul Goldin also contends that “the only legitimate purpose of [Confucian] government” is to bring about “moral transformation in the populace.”¹⁵ Kwong-loi Shun argues that Confucius and Mencius “regarded the transformative power of a cultivated person as the ideal basis for government.”¹⁶

⁸ Needham argues that “in early Confucianism there was no distinction between ethics and politics.” See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 9.

⁹ Hsiao compares Confucius to Plato, arguing that they both value ethics over politics. See Hsiao Kung-chuan, *A History of Chinese Political Thought*, trans. Frederick Mote (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 113.

¹⁰ When discussing Confucius’s thought, Fung does not discuss any of his political ideas. See Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 43–75.

¹¹ D. C. Lau, introduction to *Mencius*, xxxviii.

¹² Sor-hoon Tan, “Democracy in Confucianism,” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 5 (2012): 295.

¹³ Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 77.

¹⁴ JeeLoo Liu, *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy: From Ancient Philosophy to Chinese Buddhism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 187.

¹⁵ Paul Goldin, *Confucianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 20.

¹⁶ Kwong-loi Shun, “Mencius,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/mencius/>. May Sim writes that for Confucius, like for Aristotle, “the aim of government is to make people virtuous.” See Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167. Similarly, Shaohua Hu writes that “Confucian doctrine is less political theory than it is ethical teaching.” See Hu, “Con-

Some commentators identify core Confucian virtues and then argue that the preferred Confucian political arrangement is the one that allows for the development of these for all members of society. For example, in Herbert Fingarette's short book, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (1972), which set the tone for much of the contemporary philosophical reappraisal of Confucianism, the emphasis is on ceremonial ritual and its centrality to moral flourishing. Fingarette interprets Confucius's political vision as being aimed at propagating the same value of ceremonial ritual through an emphasis on cultural unity for the competing regional states of the day, on the grounds that culture is necessary for the development of ceremony.¹⁷

William Theodore de Bary has argued that the dependence of Confucian politics on ethics, specifically with relation to the idea of a "sage king," is "the trouble with Confucianism," "there from the start, to become both a perennial challenge and a dilemma that would torment it through history."¹⁸ In a similar line of thought, Stephen Angle describes the "interdependence" between morality and politics as a "central tenet" of Confucianism, and as the main challenge in adapting Confucianism to a modern, democratic politics, given the weight it gives to the presence of a virtuous ruler on top of the political system, to the detriment of institutional constraints on the ruler's actions.¹⁹

Recent attempts to rethink Confucianism have thus centered on recasting core Confucian ethical values into a more democratic political vision than the one offered in the early texts. Angle's solution to the sage king problem rests on rethinking the implications of key Confucian ideas, such as the idea that each and every person can become virtuous, and the idea that virtue requires political involvement, to imagine a more inclusive form of politics.²⁰ David Hall and Roger

fucianism and Western Democracy," in *China and Democracy: The Prospect for a Democratic China*, ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: Routledge, 2000), 66. Yang Guorong argues that Mencius's political thought has a tendency toward "a pan-moralist vision of political life." See Yang, "Mengzi and Democracy: Dual Implications," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 31, no. 1 (2004): 100.

¹⁷ Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1972), 64.

¹⁸ William Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 1.

¹⁹ Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 180, 193.

²⁰ Angle, *Sagehood*, 212–13. He develops this line of thought more fully in *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012). Similarly, Ranjoo Seodu Herr argues that Confucianism is compatible with democ-

Ames suggest, on the basis of “the unsuitability of the central tradition of rights-based liberalism for the Chinese situation,” that essential Confucian tenets, like the emphasis on rites, “might well be translated into a communitarian form of democratic society.”²¹ Likewise, Sor-hoon Tan takes her lead from core Confucian ideas like *ren* (仁) and rituals to offer a distinctive form of “Confucian Democracy” that combines Confucianism and the pragmatism of John Dewey and that builds on the idea that “ethical ends are political ends, and vice-versa, in early Confucianism.”²² Finally, Daniel Bell, while explicitly rejecting what he calls the “depoliticization” of the *Analectics* (a reference to the approach of contemporary best-selling Chinese author Yu Dan, who focuses on the spiritual dimension of the text), also discusses the moral values advanced by the early Confucians more than he discusses their own political vision. Bell advocates the work of contemporary Chinese theorist Jiang Qing, who is interested in what he describes as “Political Confucianism,”²³ and whose proposals, such as a tricameral legislature (representing popular, sacred, and cultural legitimacy), owe more, as Bell says, to Jiang’s “political imagination than to ancient texts.”²⁴ Bell argues, however, that such imagination is precisely what is necessary in a forward-looking interpretation of core Confucian ideas, like hierarchy, ritual propriety, and merit that would yield a distinctively Confucian form of democracy. Jiang Qing is indeed one of many recent Chinese intellectuals, often referred to as the “New Confucians,” grappling

racy by focusing on the Confucian notion of equality. Democracy follows, according to Herr, from the Confucian recognition of the equal potential of all for moral perfection. See Herr, “Confucian Democracy and Equality,” *Asian Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2010): 280. See also Chenyang Li, “Confucian Value and Democratic Value,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 31, no. 2 (1997), where Li, rejecting the argument that Mencius’s conception of government is democratic, inquires about core Confucian values and their compatibility with core democratic values.

²¹ David Hall and Roger Ames, *Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 13.

²² Sor-hoon Tan, *Confucian Democracy: A Deweyan Reconstruction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), 131.

²³ Jiang Qing favors the development of the Gongyang tradition, associated with the Han dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE), who advocated Confucianism as an ideology for the Han imperial state, and later revived by Kang Youwei (1858–1927), in opposition to the Xinxing tradition, concerned with “self-cultivation.” See Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, 176.

²⁴ Bell, *China’s New Confucianism*, 180. For Jiang’s proposals, see Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order: How China’s Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

with the question of the relationship between ethics and politics in their attempt to offer a vision of Confucianism for the modern world. As David Elstein puts it, “Almost all modern Ruist [Confucian] thinkers see a tension between the ethical and political sides of Ruism and make a choice about which is more important.”²⁵

The tendency to favor a set of core Confucian moral values can arguably be understood as a reaction to the critique of Confucianism by modernization enthusiasts, both Chinese and Western. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various Chinese reformers called for the repudiation of Confucianism and the establishment of constitutionalism, democratic freedoms, and individual rights. In the middle of the century, the Chinese communists attacked Confucianism for its patriarchal conception of the family, its hierarchical leanings, its relegation of the least educated to the lowest rung of society, and its promotion of hypocrisy on the part of the ruler toward the masses.²⁶ To counter these charges, it was felt necessary to elicit the best in Confucianism, and build upon it a modern politics. This was the strategy pursued in the interlude between the May Fourth Movement and the Cultural Revolution, when disillusionment with Western ideals encouraged the reevaluation of Confucianism through a turn toward “the interpretation of Confucius’ ethical concepts.”²⁷ It is this same approach that has been pursued since the 1970s. As the eminent Chinese American historian Yu Ying-shih puts it, “In the West today we are more inclined to see Confucianism as a way of life involving faith and spiritual values,” in contradistinction to “a crude but once dominant notion that Confucianism was no more than a political ideology that functioned to legitimate imperial authority.”²⁸

²⁵ David Elstein, *Democracy in Contemporary Confucian Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 23. Elstein discusses this tension in the thought of Xu Fuguan (69–74), Mou Zongsan (49–52), Lee Ming-huei (98–100), and Jiang Qing (146.) On Mou Zongsan, see also Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy*, 24–35.

²⁶ Kam Louie, *Critiques of Confucius in Contemporary China* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1980), 7, 105.

²⁷ Louie, *Critiques of Confucius in Contemporary China*, 177.

²⁸ From the introduction to Hoyt Tillman, *Confucian Discourse and Chu Hsi’s Ascendancy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), ix. Yu also argues that “if we trust Confucius’ *Analects*, then the sage’s original vision was focused decidedly more on personal cultivation and family life than on the governing of the state. Or, we may say, Confucius was primarily concerned with moral order and only secondarily with political order.” From de Bary et al., roundtable discussion on the *Trouble with Confucianism*, *China Review International* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 27–28, quoted in Angle, *Sagehood*, 190.

Thomas Metzger also describes Chinese intellectuals of the 1970s and 1980s as “sifting through the impure ore of their past to extract a ‘spirit’ of morality which could serve for the future.”²⁹

Another reason why Confucian politics is relegated to a secondary status in comparison to Confucian ethics can be traced to the great Confucian commentator, Zhu Xi (1130–1200). At the risk of overgeneralization, it might be contended that, until the twentieth century when efforts to look at Confucianism afresh multiplied, most Chinese interpreters after Zhu Xi read Confucianism through the lens of moral self-cultivation. Zhu Xi is considered the most influential proponent of what is now known as Neo-Confucianism, characterized by a concern with the development of the inner self. Zhu Xi was in fact so influential that his selection and commentary on four Classical texts (the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Great Learning*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean*),³⁰ known as the “Four Books,” became the canon for learning and formed the foundation of the curriculum for the Chinese imperial civil examination system used from the fourteenth century until 1905. In recent attempts to present Confucianism to the modern world, Zhu Xi’s influence is still felt. For example, William Theodore de Bary and Tu Wei-ming have contributed much to Confucian scholarship by unearthing a “liberal” strand in Confucianism based on its concern with the individual’s inner life. Thus, in *The Liberal Tradition in China* (1983), de Bary illuminates what he considers Confucius’s reformist creed and the “vitality,” “creativity,” “critical temper,” strong individualism, voluntarism, and concern with self-development characteristic of the Neo-Confucianism of the Song period (960–1279 CE).³¹ Similarly, in *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (1985), Tu showcases Confucian authors and ideas that exhibit a concern with self-realization.³²

Zhu Xi’s ascendancy has overshadowed alternative interpretations of Confucianism. For example, consider the interpretation offered by

²⁹ Thomas Metzger, *Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China’s Evolving Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 7.

³⁰ The *Xunzi* was excluded because of Xunzi’s argument that human nature is bad. According to Paul Goldin, Xunzi’s decline in favor started in the Eastern Han, but quickened during the Tang and Song, reaching its climax with Zhu Xi, “who declared that Xunzi’s philosophy resembled that of non-Confucians [statecraft/Legalist thinkers] such as Shen Buhai . . . and Shang Yang . . . and that he was indirectly responsible for the notorious disasters of the Qin dynasty.” See Goldin, *Confucianism*, 67–68.

³¹ William Theodore de Bary, *The Liberal Tradition in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 8–9.

³² Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

Chen Liang (1143–94), a contemporary of Zhu Xi. Chen and Zhu lived in a dwindling Chinese empire, at the time threatened by the Jurchens from the north. In the face of the crisis, Chen favored the turn within Confucianism toward a utilitarian ethics focused on social and political effects over Zhu Xi’s “morality of personal virtue.”³³ This involved Chen in emancipating Confucian concepts “from the confines of current [Song Dynasty] usage,” for example, in recasting in positive light the category of rulers known as hegemons (*ba*),³⁴ and in glossing the idea of the golden age of antiquity when sage kings ruled as a useful myth rather than an actual historical reality.³⁵ Chen Liang remained a much less well-known figure in Chinese history than Zhu Xi but is tellingly associated with the Confucian school known as “statecraft,” or more literally, “ordering the world” (*jing shi* 經世). This school of thought was concerned with administrative matters (flood control, the provision of grain, etc.) and political matters (the prerogatives of the ruler, power politics, etc.), and rebuked the emphasis on abstract ethical and metaphysical issues characteristic of mainstream Confucianism.³⁶

The Thesis of This Book

My argument in this book is that the approach to politics offered in the Classical Confucian texts does not follow from Confucian ethics in any straightforward manner. This argument can be said to be orthogonal to the debate on the contemporary application of Confucianism: by showing that the Confucian political vision is not necessarily one of a sage king seeking the moral edification of his people, I raise some doubts about the accusation of the conflation of ethics and politics in Classical Confucianism and therefore about this being “the trouble with Confucianism.” However, how Confucianism can be tailored to the modern world is not otherwise the concern of this book. Rather, my aim is to

³³ Hoyt Cleveland Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism: Ch'en Liang's Challenge to Chu Hsi* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 133.

³⁴ More on hegemons in Chapter 1.

³⁵ Tillman, *Utilitarian Confucianism*, 135–36.

³⁶ See William Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 155–215. William T. Rowe explores the tension between moralism and practical management in the thought of the Chinese official Chen Hongmou (1696–1771) in *Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). I thank Leigh Jenco for this reference and for directing me to the statecraft writings.

reconstruct the political vision offered in the early Confucian texts through a close interpretation of them.

With this goal in mind, I take the political discussions in the Classical Confucian texts as my starting point.³⁷ In other words, instead of considering the discussions of rulers, ministers, political exemplars, rituals, and regulations as secondary or antiquated, I take them to be central to understanding early Confucian political theory, and Confucianism more generally. By emphasizing aspects that interpreters have mostly pointed to only in passing, and deemphasizing areas that have received much more attention, the approach I take will reveal a “pattern” underlying Confucian political thought that differs from the conclusions drawn by the ethics-first approach. My approach will thus not so much yield a radically different interpretation of Confucian political thought as much as a reconfiguration that, I argue, better accounts for the textual evidence.

More specifically, I contend that what commentators miss by adopting the ethics-first approach, and what my own reconfiguration reveals, is the Confucian concern with political order (*zhi* 治). Indeed, on my view, Confucian political philosophy is motivated by the same problem that Sheldon Wolin identifies as central to Western political philosophy, namely, the problem of how “to render politics compatible with the requirements of order,” that is, “how to reconcile the conflict created by competition under conditions of scarcity with the demands of public tranquility.”³⁸ I argue that the success of political rule in Confucianism is judged by its own standard, distinct from the standards the Confucians use for the assessment of individual life.³⁹ The standard in politics

³⁷ In *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, Yuri Pines also takes as a starting point his “wish to reverse the loss of interest in the political sphere of pre-imperial Chinese intellectual history in the West during the last twenty years.” See Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 6–7.

³⁸ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 10–11.

³⁹ Similarly, Xu Fuguan identifies two distinct standards in Classical Confucianism: a standard for self-cultivation centered on virtue, and a standard for politics centered on people’s livelihood (*renmin de ziran shengming* 人民的自然生命), that is, their material well-being. See Xu Fuguan, *Xueshu yu zhengzhi zhi jian* 學術與政治之間 [Between academia and politics] (Taizhong: Zhongyang shuju, 1957), 178–79. See also Angle, *Sagehood*, 191; Honghe Liu, *Confucianism in the Eyes of a Confucian Liberal: Hsu Fu-Kuan’s Critical Examination of the Confucian Political Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 72–82.

is therefore not virtue (the moral edification of the people), but rather the establishment and maintenance of political order.

While I elaborate on the idea of political order in the chapters that follow, I should clarify here my claim about the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism. One could read my endeavor in this book through the lens of ideal versus nonideal theory, and thus take this book as highlighting the nonideal parts of the Confucian political vision to complement the ideal theory aspects (the need for a sage king and the importance of the moral edification of the people) that other commentators have focused on. This is not, however, how I understand it. My argument in this book actually pushes back against the idea that the early Confucians offer an ideal political theory at all, if what is meant by the latter is a political theory that directly follows upon their moral theory. A comparison with Aristotle might be instructive here.

Like the early Confucians, Aristotle is often read as proposing a politics that is a conceptual development of his ethics. Richard Kraut has argued, for example, that “Aristotle conceives of the [*Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* as following a logical progression” in that the latter provides “the further detail that allows his examination of human well-being [undertaken in the *Ethics*] to be put into practice.”⁴⁰ On a closer look at Aristotle’s *Politics*, however, it appears that the evaluation of political regimes is not always based on whether or not they allow for human flourishing for all. Instead, Aristotle often seems concerned with stability (as opposed to well-being and the excellences) in his judgment about different kinds of political arrangements.⁴¹ Based on this revisionist reading, one might think of Aristotle’s *Politics* as operating according to the two registers of ideal and nonideal theory: in the first, elaborated in Books VII and VIII, ethical ideas are embodied in the life of the community; in the second, implicit in Books III to VI, concerns about stability render the assessment of different constitutions relative to environmental, historical, and other contingent conditions.

The early Confucians, on the other hand, do not offer the corresponding ideal vision at all; they never delineate a society where all

⁴⁰ Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

⁴¹ For example, in his argument in favor of a middle-class constitution. See *Politics* 1295a5–45.

members are engaged in a life of virtue, pursuing reciprocal relationships of care and trust, and coming together in a harmonious society, merit-based and ritual-centered, allowing all to flourish. In his new book, Joseph Chan uses the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory to argue that the “ideal ends” of Confucian political thought include “the flourishing of human virtues” and “a grand ideal of social harmony”⁴² (whereas a “Confucian nonideal political theory” would treat the former as a “regulative ideal”⁴³ while being more sensitive to “the constraints of reality”).⁴⁴ To illustrate the ideal ends, however, Chan refers to a chapter in *The Classic of Rites* whose “Confucian authenticity,” he writes, “has been disputed in the history of Chinese thought” because it contains Daoist elements.⁴⁵ Chan adds that the “general consensus today” is that the ideal of “Grand Union” (and of “Small Tranquillity”) offered in the chapter is “basically no different from the early Confucian masters’ understanding of ideal politics and society.”⁴⁶ In this book, I ask if it is in fact the case that the Confucian political ideal amounts to “the flourishing of human virtues” and hence whether it is not actually what Chan describes as “nonideal political theory” that is key to Classical Confucianism.⁴⁷

My reading of the early Confucian political vision actually suggests more similarities to the Platonic vision in *The Republic* than to Aristotle’s political theory. For there is no expectation in Plato’s ideal state that anyone other than the philosopher-king and the guardians more generally will attain high virtue; what is expected instead is justice (where each member of society will perform the task they are most fit

⁴² Joseph Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

⁴³ Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 5.

⁴⁴ Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 1. What Chan proposes to do in his own book is to offer a Confucian nonideal political theory that would be compatible with contemporary circumstances, or what he calls “the reality of modernity” (4). He also argues that the early Confucians were “keenly aware of the fact that their ideal . . . was unlikely to be realized in their times” (3).

⁴⁵ Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 6.

⁴⁶ Chan, *Confucian Perfectionism*, 6.

⁴⁷ Similarly, while Eirik Harris favors understanding Xunzi’s thought as comprising both an ideal and a nonideal theory, his discussion and the accompanying textual evidence concern the latter, not the former. The evidence that Harris adduces for Xunzi’s ideal theory is his statement that anyone can become a sage like Yu (*Xunzi* 23.5a). I will show in Chapter 1 why this statement is actually in tension with the Confucian political vision. See Eirik Lang Harris, “The Role of Virtue in Xunzi’s Political Philosophy,” *Dao* 12 (2013): 93–110, 94.

at performing)⁴⁸ upon which follow harmony and order.⁴⁹ The analogy between the philosopher-king and a ship's captain also suggests that the goal is survival, security, and stability (preventing the ship from going off track, or even sinking).⁵⁰ On my reading, the political vision of the early Confucians is geared in the same way toward an encompassing political order in which not everyone is required or expected to develop the cardinal virtues.

This conclusion is more surprising in the case of the early Confucians than in the case of Plato because the former do emphasize the potential for all members of society to become virtuous, while Plato is clear that only a few can ever become philosophers. Yet, though the Confucian case is less obvious than the Platonic case, it is neither mysterious nor contradictory. On my interpretation, Confucian political theory does not follow upon Confucian ethics in the way recent interpreters propose because it is attuned to the material world in a particular way. To unpack this attunement, I will address three questions: the extent to which Confucian political thought is sensitive to empirical facts, whether it points toward an end-state or merely to a transitional phase, and finally whether and how it deals with the problem of noncompliance.⁵¹

The first question is the extent to which a theory is sensitive to "facts" or "reality." It is difficult to answer this question without also asking the one that it begs, namely: *what* facts? On my view, the early Confucians were mostly sensitive to what might be described as sociological facts (enduring but not unchanging), for example the level of technological development in society, the state of the economy, and the broad socioeconomic makeup of society. This largely explains, as I will argue in Chapter 1, why they do not expect most people to become virtuous.⁵²

The Confucians are also sensitive to more specific political circumstances around them, such as the continual threat of interstate war during their time. This explains the distinction I will draw in the first three

⁴⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, 433b.

⁴⁹ Plato, *The Republic*, 430e.

⁵⁰ Plato, *The Republic*, 488a–e. For an argument in this vein, see G. R. F. Ferrari's introduction to *The Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xxvi.

⁵¹ These questions are drawn from Laura Valentini's "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map," *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–64.

⁵² As Benjamin Schwartz argues, "we find in China the clear development of a 'sociological' approach to the lives of the masses." See Schwartz, *World of Thought in Ancient China*, 105.

chapters of this book between two levels of political order: On a basic level, political order means the absence of chaos, produced through the fulfillment of the basic security and welfare needs of the common people. The Confucians recognize a political society that fulfills this level of order as acceptable, and rulers who, like hegemonies, help achieve this level of order win Confucians' approbation. On the other hand, in its more exalted, and thus more durable, form, order is not merely the absence of disorder. It is harmony. Harmony (*he* 和) is not a concept that the early Confucians use much, but it is useful for my purposes here because it is a normative standard that signals high-level coordination among different segments of society. A harmonious society is achieved through the maintenance of a system of rituals (*li* 禮) that all members of society abide by. While they show a preference for the second level of order, the early Confucians, because of their sensitivity to political circumstances, also accept the first level of order when conditions such as internal political disturbances and interstate wars do not permit more.

The second question that the debate around ideal and nonideal theory raises is the question of "End-State" versus "Transitional Theory."⁵³ One might argue that the political order I describe in this book is only a transition stage toward a fully virtuous society. Yet there is no textual material suggesting that the early Confucians saw the matter in this way. On my reading, political order for these thinkers is not a means to an end; it is an end in itself. This is of course related to the question of their sensitivity to sociological facts, in the sense that it is due to the Confucian understanding of the socioeconomic makeup of society that the end of a fully virtuous society is not conceived of at all. On the other hand, the basic level of order just described could be considered as a transition toward the higher, ritual-centered level. Neither, however, is centrally geared toward a fully virtuous society.

The third and final question relating to the distinction between ideal and nonideal theory is the question of how the early Confucians deal with the problem of compliance:⁵⁴ what should individuals do under unfavorable conditions, such as a breakdown of political order, or in the face of a bad ruler? Since the Confucians deal with real-life cases, they do not shy away from this question; I reconstruct their view with regard to it in Chapter 5.

⁵³ Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 660.

⁵⁴ Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory," 650.

Given their sensitivity to sociological (and political) facts, and their recognition of the problem of compliance under adverse conditions, one might take the preceding discussion to suggest that early Confucian political theory is an instance of nonideal theory as such (without a corresponding ideal theory). Whether this is a helpful description at all depends on whether one finds the idea of a nonideal theory helpful in the first place. I should note here that the preceding is not meant to suggest that the Confucians were practical (as opposed to theoretical), or that the early Confucian texts, as is sometimes suggested, should be read as advice to kings. One would indeed be hard-pressed to describe the Confucian vision I will describe in the chapters that follow as “practical” in any meaningful sense, and it is in no way tailored to suit the ears of rulers (more on this in Chapter 1). My contention is that the early Confucian political vision is both theoretical and nonideal through and through.

The question remains: what does the preceding discussion show us about the relationship between ethics and politics in early Confucianism? I said above that the Confucian political standard of order is distinct from the Confucian ethical standard of virtue. To the extent that the political standard is a normative standard, it is difficult to insist that it has nothing to do with morality. This would be true of any vision of politics which is not based on brute force.⁵⁵ But it is true less trivially for the Confucians insofar as, for example, the distinction between the basic and exalted levels of order I mentioned above hinges on the development of civic-like qualities in the people in the latter. Furthermore, as I will argue in Chapter 4, the early Confucians find virtue on the part of the ruler to be important for the establishment of a durable political order. All of this suggests that the realm of politics is not completely independent from the realm of ethics. Yet, what is crucial for my argument is the idea that political order, not moral edification, is the end, and that political order is an end in itself, not a means toward virtue. A virtuous ruler is important because he knows what policies to pursue to achieve long-lasting political order, not because he governs through the force of his example to promote virtue in society.

⁵⁵ I thus disagree with Harris both in seeing the “Legalist” Han Feizi’s position as totally devoid of morality (since his support for the use of consistent, transparent, and universal regulations can be said to partake of a certain kind of political ethic, even if it is geared toward the maintenance of the state, or even just the ruler) and in seeing Xunzi’s vision as moralistic in the way he suggests (since, as I will argue in Chapter 3, rituals are not necessarily coeval with virtue). See Harris, “Role of Virtue.”

The qualities to be developed by the common people, like honesty and industriousness, are neither preparatory ground for central Confucian virtues like rightness and wisdom, nor a diluted version of the latter. Whether they should still be described as “moral” turns on what is exactly meant by “moral.” In other words, what is important for my purposes in this book is to show that Confucian political theory is not just an application of Confucian morality, at least not in any direct way.⁵⁶

Let me address here, finally, a worry. The worry is that my argument in this book is an imposition on the early Confucians, that it is foreign to their self-understanding. They did not after all talk about political standards being separate from ethical standards. They did not even separate their ethical and their political discussions in the first place. The worry is legitimate, but it actually applies to all interpretations of early Confucianism, not mine alone. The early Confucians do not explicitly say that politics follows from ethics either. Indeed, the early Confucian texts, except perhaps for the *Xunzi*, do not offer “meta” discussions about any topic. They might even be seen as uninterested in argument at all.⁵⁷ This is related to the nature of the texts themselves, which I turn to in what follows. Suffice it to say here that the challenge is to propose a theory that makes the best sense of their manifold and sometimes disparate statements, at the acknowledged risk of reading too much into these.

Historical Background

Having outlined, in broad brushstrokes, the thesis of my book, it remains for me to relate it to the historical context in which Confucianism arose. Confucian thought is usually associated with the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), which together constitute the reign of the Eastern Zhou dynasty. The Zhou dynasty was the longest lived dynasty in Chinese history,

⁵⁶ In an article on Xunzi’s conception of hegemony, Sungmoon Kim uses the expression “political morality” to describe the former. See Kim, “Between Good and Evil: Xunzi’s Reinterpretation of the Hegemonic Rule as Decent Governance,” *Dao* 12 (2013): 84. Speaking of the Confucian position on war, Tongdong Bai describes it as “realistic utopia.” See Bai, “The Political Philosophy of China,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. Gerald F. Gaus and Fred D’Agostino (New York: Routledge, 2013), 185. Both these expressions, as well as ideas like “political virtue” and “civic virtue,” capture elements of the Confucian political project as I present it in this book.

⁵⁷ Or so argues Robert Eno, who prefers to see them as masters of ritual and dance. See Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 2–3.

but its glory is concentrated in the first half of its tenure, known as the Western Zhou (1045–770 BCE). As Edward Shaughnessy writes, “Throughout China’s long history, the Western Zhou has served as its guiding paradigm for governmental, intellectual, and social developments.”⁵⁸ The Western Zhou was also “the largest geopolitical unity ever achieved by a single power” until the reunification of the Chinese world by the Qin emperor in 221 BCE.⁵⁹ It stretched around the Yellow River, in the northeastern part of modern China.

The Zhou king ruled on the basis of what was known as the “Mandate of Heaven” (*tianming* 天命). Possibly one of the earliest references to this notion can be found in the “Great Proclamation” chapter of the *Classic of Documents* (more on the Five Classics below), which relates the story of the first succession crisis of the Zhou reign. As the story goes, two years after conquering the Shang dynasty, the Zhou leader King Wu died. Precedent had it that King Wu’s son, Song (later known as King Cheng), was to succeed, as sons had succeeded their fathers for the preceding two generations. However, King Wu’s younger brother, eventually known as the Duke of Zhou, announced that Song was too young to rule and that he would therefore act as his regent. King Wu’s more senior brothers were not convinced. From their posts in the east, they rebelled against the supposed usurpation. A civil war followed, which the Duke of Zhou and King Cheng won.⁶⁰ The chapter in the *Classic of Documents* presents the debate between King Cheng and his advisers that preceded the former’s attack on his uncles. King Cheng undertook the usual turtle shell divination to ascertain whether the signs concerning the attack were auspicious. They were. However, his advisers admonished him against such a difficult task. King Cheng insisted on his decision. Crucially, he read the divination signals as a sign from Heaven. What he said was that Heaven had assisted King Wen (father of King Wu and founder of the Zhou dynasty) and conferred its mandate upon the Zhou to rule. This was the first mention of the notion of the Mandate of Heaven in Chinese history.⁶¹

On the administrative level, in contrast to the preceding Shang dynasty, which was, according to Feng Li, an “aggregation of self-

⁵⁸ Edward Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 292.

⁵⁹ Feng Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

⁶⁰ Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 311.

⁶¹ Shaughnessy, “Western Zhou History,” 314.

governing communities,"⁶² the Zhou extended the reach of the central government, especially over the vast terrain to the east of the capital, by appointing princes of the royal family as local rulers. As Li writes, "These numerous states, bound to the Zhou royal court through a unified ancestral cult and by their need of royal support to survive in the new environment, formed the macro-geopolitical structure of the Western Zhou state."⁶³ Li argues against the common description of this system of Zhou rule as feudal.⁶⁴ The local Zhou states were both more independent and less independent than traditional European fiefs. On the one hand, each of the regional states "constituted an autonomous geopolitical entity located in a specific area, and was equipped with a small but complete government that enjoyed the combined rights of civil administration, legal punishment, and military authority."⁶⁵ On the other hand, the relationship between the Zhou king and the local state rulers was "much closer and more dictatorial" than the contractual relation between feudal lord and vassal. Central political authority was maintained through the "Lineage Law," which ensured the submission of "minor lines" to the "primary lines" of royal descent, through the installment by the royal court of the office of "Overseers of the States" in the regional states, and through the visits to the royal court that regional rulers were mandated to perform upon assuming office.⁶⁶

As successful as it was, the Western Zhou dynasty eventually started to lose power, spurring both the new geopolitical realities and the nostalgia for the Zhou that defined Confucianism. The Western Zhou's weakening can be attributed to three factors: first, the increasing pressure and threats exerted by outside powers, like the Xianyun in the northwest and the Huaiyi in the southeast; second, the dissolution of blood ties, cultural commonalities, and, most important, political control between the central court and the regional states; and third, the weakness caused by the continual grants of landed property as a favor from the Zhou king to the aristocrats at the central court.⁶⁷ Since the

⁶² Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 2.

⁶³ Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 2.

⁶⁴ Throughout the book, I will thus refer as "regional rulers" to what is commonly translated as "feudal lords" (*zhuhou* 諸侯). Similarly, I use "ruler" instead of "lord" (*jun* 君, *zhu* 主). I have kept however, the appellation "Duke" as in "Duke of Zhou" in line with common usage.

⁶⁵ Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 111.

⁶⁶ Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 112–14.

⁶⁷ Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 139–40.

Zhou could no longer maintain their capital in the west, they moved east around 770 BCE. This move was accompanied by an eastward move of aristocratic lineages, like the Zheng and the Guo, who established their own states in the east. The move severely diminished the authority of the Zhou court, which became, in the words of Cho-yun Hsu, “virtually a government in exile,”⁶⁸ and concomitantly increased the power of regional rulers, who then competed among themselves for hegemony over the Eastern plain, inaugurating a “new era of interstate military conflict.”⁶⁹ This era lasted until 221 BCE, when the ruler of the state of Qin succeeded at reunification and called himself emperor. The Qin’s reign was short-lived, but it was the precursor to consecutive reigns of imperial dynasties that ruled China until 1911.

The period of the Eastern Zhou (770–221 BCE) is, as I said above, usually divided into the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and it witnessed an increasing intensification of interstate conflict. The rise of territorial, centralized states out of a long period of war is sometimes compared to the rise of the modern European nation-states out of the Thirty Years’ War, whereby in both cases “the state made war and war made the state.”⁷⁰ Victoria Tin-bor Hui argues that “ancient China developed the art of war and the markers of territorial sovereignty light years before Western practices.”⁷¹ These markers included a “centralized authority with bureaucratized administration, monopolized coercion, and nationalized taxation.”⁷² Hui shows how the various states of the period pursued “self-strengthening reforms,” including “universal military conscription,” maintaining among themselves a balance of power that was stable for a long time but was ultimately broken by Qin’s success in pursuing “the most comprehensive self-strengthening reforms and the most ruthless strategies and tactics.”⁷³

Despite the fierce competition of the Warring States period (or perhaps because of it), the period witnessed such intellectual ferment that it became known as the “age of the philosophers.” Before examining

⁶⁸ Hsu, “The Spring and Autumn Period,” in Loewe and Shaughnessy, *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, 551.

⁶⁹ Li, *Landscape and Power in Early China*, 277.

⁷⁰ Charles Tilly, *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 73, cited in John Keay, *China: A History* (London: Harper, 2008), 74.

⁷¹ Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5.

⁷² Hui, *War and State Formation*, 6.

⁷³ Hui, *War and State Formation*, 35.

the social basis of scholarship during this period, it should be noted that, as Martin Kern argues, “even within the limited social group of ancient practitioners of textual knowledge, the particular circle that Western scholarship usually calls the ‘philosophers’ was a rather small minority.”⁷⁴ Kern points to, on the one hand, the link between textual and ritual practice during this period,⁷⁵ since texts were usually inscribed on animal bones, turtle shells, bamboo slips, and, most lavishly, bronze ware, all of which were also used in ritual practices. That said, the disentangling of texts from ritual practices is not necessarily an alien imposition on the Chinese tradition. As Kern declares, “For the longer time of Chinese studies, and partly following choices by the Chinese tradition in reflecting upon itself, much of the culture of the Zhou dynasty and the early empire has been discussed in terms of intellectual history.”⁷⁶ On the other hand, Kern’s point is that “philosophy” in the early period was very much entangled with other kinds of textual practices. The early Chinese philosophical works thus greatly make use of what became known as the “Five Classics,” attributed in the Chinese tradition to the Spring and Autumn period (and often to Confucius himself), but canonized only during the Han dynasty, in 136 BCE.⁷⁷ These include the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), which comprises presumed speeches and edicts of early rulers, the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), a divination manual, the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 詩經), comprising a collection of poems and hymns, the *Classic of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), which includes an account of ancient rites and court ceremonies, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), relating events in the state of Lu. Indeed, these Five Classics, as well as the essential commentaries on them, such as the *Zuozhuan* commentary on the *Annals*, formed a large part of the world of textual knowledge of early China, and thus the world with which the Confucians, as well as the Daoists, the Legalists, the Mohists, and other philosophers of the early period, were versed and which they contributed to. And vice versa: for example, in his study of the *Zuozhuan*, David Schaberg shows how the historiographical project of the commentary partakes of the same normative Confucian project as philosophical texts such as

⁷⁴ Martin Kern, ed., *Text and Ritual in Early China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), viii.

⁷⁵ Kern, *Text and Ritual in Early China*, xi.

⁷⁶ Kern, *Text and Ritual in Early China*, viii, emphasis added.

⁷⁷ For an account of the origins, nature, and importance of the Five Classics, see Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi*, exhibiting similar aims and rhetorical devices.⁷⁸

My focus in this book will be primarily on the philosophers, who offered new visions of life and society for a rapidly changing world. Indeed, it was during the breakdown of authority triggered by the fall of the Western Zhou that “schools” emerged, taking advantage, as Mark Edward Lewis argues, from the opening up of new avenues for social advancement as the prerogatives of birth that had defined the Zhou hierarchical system weakened.⁷⁹ Yuri Pines describes the world of the Warring States as “a huge market of talent, in which a gifted person could seek employment at any of the competing courts.”⁸⁰ The emerging schools consisted of a master and his followers, and sometimes took their names from the master. Although their Latinized name, “Confucians,” draws on the name of Confucius (*Kongfuzi*), the Confucians were actually known as *ru* 儒, a term used for ritual practitioners. This meant, to return to the point just made, that the early Confucians “were part of a broader social grouping of men who did not invariably devote themselves to the transmission of texts.”⁸¹

Lewis explains that scholarship during the Warring States period emerged outside of government courts, but recruitment by competing rulers also meant that scholars entered the governmental sphere. The accession to political circles became significant in the fourth century when it is thought that the rulers of the states of Wei and Qi provided stipends for scholars to lure them to their own courts. In Qi, scholars are said to have gathered near the Ji gate of the capital city, hence the provenance of the much cited “Jixia Academy.” Despite his acknowledgment that the specific nature of the Jixia Academy cannot be ascertained and its importance can be exaggerated, Lewis argues that “it marks a significant development. For the first time on record a state began to act as patron of scholarship out of the apparent conviction

⁷⁸ David Schaberg, *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), 50–56.

⁷⁹ Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 53. For the argument against the idea that “academies” or “schools” existed in early China, see Michael Nylan, “Toward an Archaeology of Writing: Text, Ritual, and the Culture of Public Display in the Classical Period (475 B.C.E.–220 C.E.),” in Kern, *Text and Ritual in Early China*, 4.

⁸⁰ Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 160.

⁸¹ Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, 57. See also Eno, *Confucian Creation of Heaven*, 31 and Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 15–20.

that this was a proper function of the state or as a means of increasing its prestige."⁸²

It is likely, however, that the scholars maintained a certain distance from the state and were able to move between government and society, thus securing for themselves a position that could not be abolished with the disappearance of the local courts upon the Qin unification.⁸³ Schaberg makes a similar point, arguing that the protagonists of his own work, namely the historiographers, "separated themselves from a tendentially characterized ruling class and identified themselves with a ministerial class depicted as steadfastly conservative, prescient, and eloquent."⁸⁴

The tension in the scholars' relationship to government can be gleaned from what we know of the three early Confucians who will be the subject of this book. Kongzi 孔子, better known as Confucius (the Latinized version of his name adopted by Jesuit missionaries to China in the seventeenth century), is said to have lived during the Spring and Autumn period. He held minor positions in the state of Lu where he was born in 551 BCE, was then presumably promoted to a junior position, where some disagreement must have arisen to force him to travel to other states, first to Qi, after which he returned to Lu, and then left again for Wei, Song, Chen, and Cai, hoping to be employed by one of their rulers. His quest proved unsuccessful, and he is said to have died in his native state of Lu around 479 BCE.⁸⁵ The text attributed to Confucius, known in the West as the *Analects* ("Collected Sayings"), poses great difficulties for contextualization given the amount of controversy surrounding its composition. What we are certain of is that Confucius himself did not write any of it, and that whatever his disciples recorded

⁸² Lewis, "Warring States Political History," in Loewe and Shaughnessy, *Cambridge History of Ancient China*, 643.

⁸³ Lewis, "Warring States Political History," 643. Yuri Pines disagrees with Lewis on this point, arguing that "scholars and other *shi* [men of service] who were patronized by a ruler or by a powerful courtier may have been independent of an individual court, for they could shift their allegiances to a different one, but they were not independent of the system of power relations that I call 'the state.' Not only was the ruler's patronage a direct extension of his power as the *de jure* owner of the state, but even the so-called private courts, famous for their support of *shi*, were largely entangled in the state-ordered web of power." See Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 138. To the extent that my purpose here is to highlight the ability of scholars to move from one court to another (as opposed to move out of the state system altogether), the disagreement between Lewis and Pines is not crucial to it.

⁸⁴ Schaberg, *Patterned Past*, 259.

⁸⁵ Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects*, 161–94.