Dao Companion to the *Analects*
While “philosophy” is a Western term, philosophy is not something exclusively Western. In this increasingly globalized world, the importance of non-Western philosophy is becoming more and more obvious. Among all the non-Western traditions, Chinese philosophy is certainly one of the richest. In a history of more than 2500 years, many extremely important classics, philosophers, and schools have emerged. As China is becoming an economic power today, it is only natural that more and more people are interested in learning about the cultural traditions, including the philosophical tradition, of China.

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to the *Analects*
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Amy Olberding

Few texts in any cultural or philosophical canon are as influential as the *Lunyu* 論語, or *Analects*. The text has been received as one of the earliest and most authoritative accounts of the life and thought of Confucius, Kongzi 孔子, and thus as a founding document in the tradition associated with him. The *Analects* has inspired generations of readers, informed the work of myriad philosophers, literati, and critics, and exercised considerable power over the cultural imagination. Likewise, Confucius, the thinker and moral exemplar at the heart of the text, enjoys an uncommon stature in both Chinese history and in the world’s wisdom traditions. He is, as the *Analects* tells us, akin to sun and moon, achieving heights of learning and sagacity others simply cannot approach (19.24). It is difficult to overstate the sweeping and profound influence of this text and its protagonist. The work assembled in this volume aspires to provide an orientation to the *Analects* and to the thought of Confucius as it ostensibly features in that text. This brief introduction, then, simply provides short sketches of the history of the text, of Confucius, and of the structure of the volume itself.

The *Analects*

While Tae Hyun Kim and Mark Csikszentmihalyi provide, in Chap. 3 of this volume, a detailed and sophisticated account of the textual history of the *Analects*, it is nonetheless useful to say here, in far briefer form, a bit about the text itself. Popular perceptions of the text, throughout much of Chinese history and perhaps even now among its global readership, have held that the text is a largely accurate and coherent record of Confucius’ views and life composed by his students or their
followers at a time closely proximate to Confucius’ own life. The compositional history of the text should, however, make us wary of such assumptions.

The version of the *Analects* with which most readers are familiar, what is typically deemed the “received text,” dates from several generations after Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), from the Han 漢 Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). As Kim and Csikszentmihalyi detail, it was during this period that the text began to enjoy considerable scholarly attention. The *History of the Han* (Hanshu 漢書) records that there were three different versions of the *Analects* in circulation early in the Han, one of which was said to be “ancient” and discovered concealed in the walls of a home believed to have belonged to Confucius. None of these three versions of the text survives today, however. Instead, the received text is the product of effort by Han Dynasty scholars to synthesize a single version of the text out of those available to them. Two notable early scholars of the text, Zhang Yu 張禹 (d. 5 B.C.E.) and Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 C.E.), each compiled his own version of the text by editing together material from the texts then in circulation, the latter also appending commentary aimed at illuminating the text. These versions of the text, though very popular in their time, are also lost to us. The received version apparently derives from them, however. It is the work of He Yan 何晏 (190–249 C.E.), who compiled his own eclectic version of the text by drawing on the works of Zhang and Zheng. Thus while presumably rooted in earlier versions of the text, the received version of the *Analects* is of relatively late date, quite temporally distant from Confucius and those who immediately followed him.

What we know of the origins of the received *Analects* of course immediately defies any assumption that this version of the text is the product of Confucius’ immediate intellectual descendants. However, the origin story of the *Analects* is more complicated still and it is clear that we cannot even assume that the received text is, in any straightforward or complete way, rooted in the work of Confucius’ near intellectual descendants. For there are reasons, internal to the text itself, to think that the material assembled therein was crafted over a far more generous temporal span than such an account of its origins will allow.

Beginning in the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644–1912), scholars of the *Analects* began to query closely the significance of the text’s stylistic and linguistic variety. The tradition of textual scholarship they initiated continues to this day and, while there are many ongoing debates about just what conclusions may be drawn, what is clear is that the variations in linguistic conventions, syntax, and literary or argumentative style found within the *Analects* indicate that it is a text composed over several generations. It is, put simply, a pastiche of multiple historical strata, with some passages clearly dating to significantly later periods than the traditional popular view of the text could permit. To give but one uncontroversial example, the last five books of the *Analects* appear to be of later vintage than the rest of the text. Book 19, for example, is entirely composed of claims made by and dialogues between Confucius’ students, with no direct purported quotation of Confucius himself. More generally, Books 16–20 abandon the practice in the prior books of referring to Confucius as “zi 子,” or “the Master,” instead using “Kongzi 孔子” (“Master Kong”) or his style name Zhongni 仲尼. So too and perhaps most
basically, many the passages found here are simply strikingly and dramatically longer than what is found in the rest of the text. These and other indications internal to the text itself have led scholars to conclude that Books 16–20 represent a late stratum and perhaps multiple later strata of the text.

As noted above, the work of parsing the Analects in order to identify probable historical strata within it is ongoing. Identifying stylistic and linguistic anomalies is one element in this effort. Another is comparing the multiple styles of the text to those found in other texts of more certain vintage in order to trace, through such comparisons, rough probable dates for particular passages or groups of passages in the Analects. This work is the subject of much scholarly debate and secure conclusions remain elusive, but what is indubitably clear is that the traditional popular view – a view that ascribes historical accuracy and authenticity to the text’s account of Confucius by way of dating the text’s origin in temporal proximity to Confucius’ life and the lives of those who knew him – cannot be sustained. While individual passages or groups of passages may have a relatively early date, the text as a whole unambiguously does not. Some passages are certainly apocryphal and, moreover, we cannot assume that all reflect a common purpose or agenda.

While the mystery of the Analects’ origins is likely to remain insoluble, it is important to observe an additional front in efforts to understand the text’s history, the recent archaeological finds that have given us “new” versions of the text that antedate the received version. In recent decades archaeology has opened up new territory in scholarship on early Chinese texts as excavations of ancient tombs have yielded copies of canonical works that pre-date received versions. In the case of the Analects, the most notable discovery has been the Dingzhou Analects, a copy of the text found in 1973 in a tomb in Dingzhou that dates to 55 B.C.E., over 200 years older than any previously discovered editions. A second version of the text dating from this approximate period has also lately been excavated in North Korea, though scholarly access to this version has so far been quite limited. While the Dingzhou Analects does not radically depart from the received version, its modest differences in passage arrangement and use of variant characters suggestively indicate ways in which the text may have undergone alteration over time. More generally, the discovery of earlier versions of the Analects and the possibility that others may be found is a potent signal that understanding of the provenance of the Analects is, and will likely remain, incredibly fluid.

Just as efforts to map the compositional history of the Analects are ongoing, so too articulating the hermeneutical implications of this history is an enduring subject of discussion among scholars of the text. That is, although scholars agree that the text is effectively a pastiche, what this bodes hermeneutically for interpreting the text philosophically is an open question. There are of course rather obvious hermeneutical implications of the Analects’ mixed origins. For example, while any philosophical text may contain inconsistencies, shifting emphases, or embed

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1 Ames and Rosemont 1998 is a translation of the Dingzhou text and additionally provides notes and summary material on how the Dingzhou text differs from the received text.
in its reasoning subtle alterations in its claims, the compositional history of the *Analects* makes such elements especially challenging for interpreters. Ordinary hermeneutical practices, such as application of the principle of charity where shifts in reasoning are discerned, are complicated by the need to recognize that any apparent tensions in the text may result from differences in authorial sources. The wider issue in play and the governing question that informs all interpretation is whether and to what extent the text, despite its complex compositional history, evinces a conceptual and thematic unity that renders it available as a piece of philosophy rather than many fragmentary pieces of what may be multiple philosophies.

In addition to presenting Kim’s and Csikszentmihalyi’s astute survey of the text’s history, the chapters assembled here come at the text from multiple vantage points. *How to read the Analects* is, put simply, a question that this volume invites readers to entertain rather than seeks to answer. Some of the chapters gathered here address their themes with attention to the variety of voices the *Analects* presents, highlighting the way in which distinct tones or movements in the text reflect the development of its concepts over time. Other chapters approach the text by considering the effects of the text’s diverse voices drawn in chorus, treating the *Analects* as a volume that, whatever its mixed origins, was historically received by many readers as a presumptively unified totality. In presenting these contrasting approaches together, this volume mirrors the diversity of hermeneutical approaches to the text employed in contemporary scholarship. A plurality of hermeneutical methods need not, and in this volume is not, conceived to be a “problem” in need of resolution, but is instead conceived as an opportunity to entertain the happy complexity of an impossibly rich text and efforts to capture for understanding what it offers.

**Confucius**

Just as the origins of the *Analects* remain somewhat mysterious, so too any accurate historical account of Confucius, the protagonist at the heart of the text, is elusive. Confucius is, put simply, a man about whom much has been said and little can be verified. The traditional account of his life largely rests on the biography offered by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–c. 86 B.C.E.) in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*). Sima Qian’s account, however, is again quite temporally distant from Confucius’ life. More significantly, his account, like many accounts of Confucius, interweaves hagiography and legend, and cannot be considered biographical in conformity with standards contemporary historians would recognize or employ. The struggle to capture the historical Confucius, put simply, rests in just this, in separating the man from the many legends that surround him. For Confucius has long featured in Chinese history as a figure whose “biography” is often presented and understood in ways strategically pitched to answer to present needs and purposes. As recent work by Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson shows, Confucius is a figure with plural “lives,” as iterations of his biography are often rhetorically
inflected and embellished to serve the needs of a particular time and place (Nylan and Wilson 2010).

There are some general features of Confucius’ life we can remark with some confidence. Confucius was from the state of Lu and while little is known of his early life, Confucius himself notes in the Analects that he is of humble origin, ascribing his possession of many “menial” skills to just this (9.6). He suggests here that he has lived as one who, absent the privileges and perquisites of status, has had in some measure to make his own way in the world, acquiring his learning and refinement by effort rather than enjoying them as birthright. What we indubitably know is that Confucius came of age and lived during a time of increasing political and social instability, and this profoundly influenced his thinking.

Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn period (Chunqiu 春秋, 722–481 B.C.E.) of the Eastern Zhou 周 period (770–221 B.C.E.), a time marked by the weakening of traditional political authority. Where once kings enjoyed reasonable command in a feudal order that located authority in the king and relied on lineage and kinship systems for the governance of individual fiefdoms, the period surrounding Confucius’ lifetime was marked by a steep decline in monarchial authority. Provincial lords and nobility were increasingly asserting autonomy from the Zhou king, vying with each other for power and territory, and assuming for themselves both political authority and the symbolic ritual prerogatives that accompanied it. So too, the feudal nobility sometimes saw its own power challenged and usurped as ministerial advisors began to seize at opportunities to secure their own advantage and accumulate influence. During this time, the Zhou king was but a titular ruler and the locus of real power was ever shifting. It was, in short, a time in which the old order was giving way, but there was little sign that any coherent and stable new order would replace it.

Confucius’ responses to the political and social realities of his age can be seen to ground the governing logic of his own life. Much of what Confucius says in the Analects can be read as resulting from reflections generated by the chaos of his society, his claims about everything from familial life to effective rulership borne of his efforts both to make a moral way for himself in a corrupt age and to discover wider remedies for its ills. That is, while the Analects is often aspirational, ambitiously describing harmonious familial and political relations, as well as investing the person of virtue with uncommon power, its aspirations are forged in disappointment. The world Confucius philosophically imagines and wishes to see realized is not the world he inhabits, a world he perceives as morally, politically, and socially adrift. Much of his teaching thus remarks in its recommendations just what he thinks is lost in his own age. During his lifetime, however, Confucius enjoyed little success in winning an audience for his views.

However much admiration Confucius received from his students and, through their propagation of his teachings, came to enjoy the admiration of generations that would follow, he was little recognized in his own age. Confucius’ aspirations to serve as advisor to a ruler and thus to exercise political influence in the improvement of his society largely came to naught. Confucius’ efforts to participate actively in politics took place on two fronts. He sought political employment in his home state of Lu, and when those efforts did not yield satisfying result, travelled
elsewhere, to neighboring states in search of better opportunities. He was, the *Analects* makes clear, sometimes solicited for his counsel on various matters, but whether at home or abroad, found no stable position. The highest post he achieved—a position, in his home state of Lu, roughly equivalent to police commissioner—was of relatively brief duration and did not lead to further promotion or opportunity. Confucius’ own lack of significant success in securing a stable and meaningful position in government is of course another pronounced thematic element in the *Analects*. We find in it Confucius’ reflections on good government, reflections that effectively recommend him for just the sort of work he was denied in life. And we find many comments that both sensitively acknowledge the struggle to live virtuously in an age that rarely rewards virtue and encourage equanimity where one fails to win public recognition of one’s merit.

Denied any formal role in politics, much of Confucius’ activity consisted in teaching students who, like himself, aspired to achieve posts of influence in government, and it is Confucius’ efforts as teacher that summon the lion’s share of the *Analects’* attention. Confucius’ direction of his students simultaneously acknowledges their shared aspirations to improve society and the need to articulate carefully the abiding rewards of living ethically even should they fail in these aims. The sense of a community linked by common hopes and shared devotion to developing moral character permeates the *Analects’* presentation of Confucius’ interactions with his students. Indeed, the *Analects’* depiction of Confucius and his students is often treated as a describing what was effectively the first “Confucian community.”

Insofar as the *Analects’* depiction of Confucius and his students can afford some glimpse into their mode of life, the features of this community and its members strikingly cast into relief key elements of Confucius’ teaching. First, it should be observed that Confucius’ students operate throughout the text as his interlocutors, their questions and interactions with Confucius stimulating many of Confucius’ observations. Moreover, as interlocutors, they are a diverse lot, their differing capacities for understanding and stages of moral development often apparently informing what Confucius’ says in his replies. More generally, based on what we see in the *Analects*, it is clear that the program of learning Confucius recommended was pitched at making his students able and competent actors in the politics of their day and that, for Confucius, this entailed making them, put simply, good people. The mechanisms through which this would be accomplished consisted in a rigorous syllabus of classical learning and, more generally, the acquisition of what can be called cultural refinement. Thus Confucius expects his students to master the classical literature of their age and, more broadly, to see the traditions and exemplars of the past as living guides and inspiration for their conduct. As Sor-hoon Tan argues later in this volume, in Chap. 16, achieving command of tradition and thereby deriving direction for present conduct is a strategy that simultaneously roots moral development in the demonstrated excellence of past successes and exemplars, and encourages new growth as the past and its models are appropriated to address present need. Confucius encourages his students to look upon their cultural inheritance as a commanding force, but does so in forward-looking aspiration.

It is beyond the scope of this brief introduction to detail the richly varied personae of Confucius’ students or rehearse the *Analects’* narrative elements that
depict their experiences with Confucius. Suffice it to say that Confucius’ students effectively represent a spectrum of abilities, achievement, and success. For example, Yan Hui 颜回, a young man of low background and considerable poverty, is Confucius’ most adept learner. His capacities are such that Confucius once remarks that he himself is not as good as Yan Hui (5.9) and, on another occasion, pronounces him as beloved as a son (11.11). At the other end of the spectrum are students such as Zaixia 宰我 and Ranyou 冉有. The former features in the Analects as rather indolent and insensitive, provoking Confucius to remark that he is akin to dried dung, a material of little use for building (5.10). The latter, Ranyou, shows more promise initially, but comes to disappoint Confucius rather dramatically. Ranyou does win a position of some influence with the ruling Ji 季 Family, but becomes corrupted under their influence and Confucius heatedly denounces him (11.17). Other students, such as Zi Lu 子路, clearly are both followers and friends to Confucius. Nearer to Confucius’ own age, Zi Lu is a rather brash presence, often challenging Confucius and sometimes criticizing him. In short, the Analects’ depictions of Confucius’ students effectively make us privy to Confucius’ instruction as it sounded and reverberated through the experience of learners of quite different personalities, temperaments, and abilities.

The rich mixture of personalities and temperaments we find in the Analects’ depiction of Confucius’ community of students breathes dramatic life into the text’s account of Confucius’ teaching and views. Perhaps most to the point, it serves to vividly animate Confucius’ many claims about what a life lived virtuously may afford. While political ambitions, many of which are frustrated, inform and structure the lives of those depicted in the text, one comes to see that the many remarks Confucius makes about the joy afforded independently of worldly success has some foundation in the community of shared purpose and friendship he and his students achieve. Confucius’ most immediate legacy, the only legacy he would have known himself to leave consisted in just this. As his life drew to its close, he must have believed himself to have failed in his most ambitious aims. He could not then have imagined that his students would transmit his teachings with the success they did and thereby give birth to a cultural tradition that would dominate China for generations. Instead, the compensations and rewards of his life were far more intimate and modest. The Analects perhaps captures this best in an exchange between Zi Lu and Confucius. In Analects 9.12, Confucius’ is ill and, in a striking misjudgment, Zi Lu has his fellow students pose as retainers so that Confucius will appear to be of higher status than he in fact is, his household populated by attendants his status would not warrant:

The Master was gravely ill, and so Zi Lu sent some of his disciples to serve as retainers. On improving slightly, Confucius said, “It has been a long time indeed that Zi Lu has been up to such pretenses. If I have no retainers and yet pretend to have them, who am I going to fool? Am I going to fool tian 天? Further, wouldn’t I rather die in the arms of my disciples than in the arms of some retainers? Even though I do not get a grand state funeral, I am hardly dying by the roadside” (9.12).²