
BOOK REVIEWS

The Analects of Confucius, translated by Burton Watson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 176 pp. US\$19.95 (Hardback). ISBN 9780231141642.

The Unproblematic Confucius

The known virtues of a Watson translation — colloquial ease of language, content so smoothed as to require little explanation — are evident in this *Analects*. Also evident are the corresponding shortcomings: loss of sonority, loss of social difference, loss of political context. We then need only ask: (1) How well does this method work with the *Analects*? and (2) What sort of Confucius does the resulting *Analects* present? The short answers are that it does not work very well, and that it presents a Confucius whose contradictions are left unresolved for modern readers.

I

The Watson method does not work very well because, with the *Analects*, the lost political context is often essential to the meaning. Watson aims to render the *Analects* sayings “in the colloquial English that would be used if those conversations took place today” (p. 13), and leads the reader to hope that this will render them universally intelligible, as “an embodiment of sentiments and ideals that are relevant to all of human society” (p. 12). True to this strategy, Watson as an annotator confines himself to identifying historical figures. He quotes commentaries rarely, and sometimes only to remark that they disagree (LY [*Lun Yu*] 3:22, 13:14, and 14:26). Having implied that the commentary literature is a mere tangle of misunderstandings, Watson cuts the sayings loose to be meaningful on their own. But the *Analects* in its time was closely engaged with political realities, and many of the sayings do not work well as generalized wisdom. Some are simply unintelligible, and Watson often registers his own perplexity (LY 1:13, 2:8, 2:16, 6:26, 7:28, 8:20, 9:17, 12:2, 12:10, 14:10, 14:16, 14:39, 15:26, 16:12, and 16:14). At one point (10:22), he suggests giving up: “Readers are advised to ignore it.”

The device of throwing an enigmatic and unexplained text at the reader thus seems to be in trouble even before the book has left the author's desk.

There are also errors. Embarrassingly enough, some occur in passages which translators on Watson's short list of "Other Translations" (pp. 13–14) have gotten right. One is LY 13:22, where familiarity with the *Yi* would have saved Watson (as it earlier saved Waley) in the last line. That passage is not against divination. It rather wrests ethical value from the diviner's rule that you can't just sit on good luck (or personal virtue); you also have to *do* something. As it might have been rendered in Watsonian English, "You don't just divine and that's it." In a New Testament text which will be familiar to Watson's readers, the Epistle of James (at 2:14–17) notes an analogous need for works — for social doing — to make faith effective: virtue is not enough. One recalls LY 4:25, "virtue is not solitary." Here are parallels that readers might find interesting. The Watson version of LY 13:22 actually reads, "And the Master said, No need to consult a diviner to know that much!" Is this capable of linking up with an "ideal that is relevant to all of human society?" Not so obviously. It's colloquial enough, but it's also opaque.

II

The contradictions of the *Analects* Confucius are left unresolved because Watson declines to resolve them. Waley long ago distinguished between historical and scriptural translations. The need to choose between them is noted by Watson on p. 6, where he seems to opt for the latter, in a translation which will reflect how the text "has traditionally been read and understood over the centuries in China." Fine. But despite this disclaimer (and despite a passing acknowledgement, on p. 12, that the *Analects* was compiled at different periods), he seems in practice to view the *Analects* both as embodying timeless wisdom *and* as going back to the specific Confucius. Watson proposes to read the *Analects* "as a unified whole" (p. 6), and at no point does he refer to any period later than the death of Confucius. It is clearly the historical Confucius, the actual guy of the early 05th century, that Watson sees himself as delivering to the reader, and he sees that Historical Confucius as reflected equally at all points in the *Analects*.

That position is no longer tenable. The *Analects* writers were closely engaged with ways of thought which emerged only long after

Confucius's death. Not only its writing down, but its composition, happened in later centuries. How do we know that this is so? From these:

- The famous remark “the father should be a father” (父父) (LY 12:11), and other familiar phrases in that *Analects* chapter and the next, appear verbatim in Legalist writings which Rickett dates to the 04th century. Confucius did not live in the 04th century.
- The famous definition of the central Confucian virtue *ren* 仁 as “love” 愛 in LY 12:22 is pure Mician. Nobody who is anybody imagines that Confucius lived in the time of Mwodz or his followers.
- The “rectification of names” (正名) famously insisted upon in LY 13:3 (an obvious interpolation, which breaks the continuity of the surrounding text) is a key doctrine of the 03rd century philosopher who, to avoid mystification, we will spell as “Sywndz.”
- The human nature issue, famously debated between Sywndz and his Mencian opponents, is alluded to in LY 17:2, along with several small gibes at the pedagogy of Sywndz. What is Confucius doing here?
- The famous LY 18:5 is a near repeat of a story in a text which Watson used to romanize as Chuang Tzu, now as Zhuangzi (but which is more readily pronounced by new readers if spelled “Jwangdz”). What miracle of time travel puts Confucius in this later age?

Watson, who has previously translated all but one of the contact texts mentioned above, was in a uniquely favourable position to elucidate these encounters. He has let that opportunity get away from him: in none of these passages does he mention the external parallel. In this intertextual territory we may say of Watson, as Bohr said of Einstein when Einstein rejected the quantum mechanics he had earlier done so much to create, “We miss our leader.”

The bottom line is that, besides a smattering of the real Confucius (and even the greenest reader might care to know where in the text that Confucius is to be found), the *Analects* spends much of its time fighting ideas which arose only long after Confucius was dead. To explicate the text on Watson's “unified whole” assumption cannot produce a unified result. Given the text's own mixed character, it can only produce confusion.

One point of possible confusion which Watson treats in his

Introduction is whether Confucius had anything to do with the Chinese Classics. He calls this purported connection a legend (p. 2), which is right, but he does not replace the legend with anything else, and his translation (like the *Analects* itself) often portrays Confucius as a bookish man. The textualization of Confucianism is one of many panoramas which a differentiated *Analects* opens to the viewer (*The Original Analects*, 255f). But if read in Watson's way, simply as a pile of sayings, the *Analects* gives opposite signals, some implying an empirical ethic (7:22, "three men walking"), and others a bookish one (16:13, on memorizing the Classics). If anything, Watson himself goes for bookish. At LY 7:16, he adopts the variant *Yi* 易 (the *Classic of Changes*), where most scholars prefer adverb *yì* 亦 "indeed," and thus makes Confucius a deep student of the *Yi*. And it is as a bookish man that the cover of the review copy pictures Confucius: eight times life size, with a fully staffed Italianate library behind him. Watson's Introduction thus points one way, while the visuals, and parts of the text as Watson presents it, point another way. What is the reader to think?

III

Watson has established himself as the translator of choice for early Chinese texts whose message is the plain or the oppositional, the exciting or the grotesque. Those texts too had their connections with the life around them, but without that context there is still something left to enjoy for its own sake. With the gnomic and particular *Analects*, where the connection to contemporary reality is both intimate and essential, Watson is out of his depth. These things need to be explained to a modern audience, and explanation is not Watson's way. As was said of old, and we cannot do better than quote Watson's own rendition: "Don't you know about the praying mantis that waved its arms angrily in front of an approaching carriage, unaware that they were incapable of stopping it?" With the *Analects*, one feels, Watson too has come up against something that is beyond the range of his characteristic strengths.

The field owes Watson much. It is to be hoped that those who will ultimately assess his contribution will pass lightly, and with an understanding eye, over the present effort.

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A Rejoinder to Professor Brooks's Book Review on the *Analects*

I am happy to have this opportunity to write a rejoinder to the review of my *Analects* in this issue by Professor Brooks (E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks, to be exact). I think I can point out two ways in which my approach to the *Analects* and that of Professor Brooks differ. These, I believe, will help clarify why he finds my translation of the *Analects* so unsatisfactory, and why his criticisms do not trouble me as much as perhaps they ought to.

When I was a freshman in Columbia College in 1946, I was required, like all freshmen, to take a one-year course called Humanities, in which we read, in translation of course, the so-called great books of the Western tradition: Homer, the major Greek philosophers, historians, and dramatists; Augustine, Dante, Rabelais, etc. There was only a two-hour discussion session for any given work, which clearly could not get us very deep into the text. But we came away with a general idea of how the works were put together, what their main ideas were, and what these may have contributed to the development of the intellectual tradition.

Experts in the various texts naturally voiced misgivings about such an approach. "How can students understand Dante when they know nothing about the Guelphs and the Ghibellines?" they objected, and Professor Brooks would no doubt have been among their ranks, since he speaks disapprovingly of "the device of throwing an enigmatic and unexplained text at the reader."

Despite these objections, it was felt that the course at least insured that freshmen would become acquainted, if only in a superficial way, with the key works of Western literature, and would to some extent learn how to extract from such works their principal ideas and some sense of their literary appeal and importance.

Later, a similar course dealing with the great books of the Asian tradition was set up at Columbia, covering the major works of the Middle East and India in the fall and those of China and Japan in the spring. After I had completed my doctorate in Chinese, I was asked by the Committee on Oriental Studies, which supervised the course, to prepare new translations of several works of Chinese thought not easily obtainable in English. This resulted in my translations of selections from the writings of Mozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi, and Han Feizi. Waley's translation of the *Analects* was available in paperback, so there was no need for a new translation of that text.

When Columbia University Press a few years ago asked me to make a new translation of the *Analects*, that was the sort of readership I had in mind, though I should perhaps have stated that fact more clearly. I am not a specialist in early Chinese thought, and I had no intention of trying to produce the kind of detailed treatment of the text that Professor Brooks has. In my introduction I of course mentioned that some chapters of the *Analects* are now thought to date from a period considerably later than Confucius's time, and referred readers to the Brookses for further information. But in my *Analects* I deliberately avoided going into such textual matters, or discussing later commentaries on or interpretations of the work. I did so because I felt that readers, particularly those encountering the work for the first time, should concentrate on forming an impression of just what sort of book the *Analects* is, what are its most important ideas, and if such ideas were put into application, as they were to some extent in China, what sort of society would be likely to result.

There is another fundamental way in which Professor Brooks and I differ in our approach to the *Analects*. I have read with great interest what he has to say about the manner in which he believes the text of the *Analects* was put together, which sections are of early date and which are later additions. But I believe that, given the present state of our knowledge of early Chinese literature, such assertions are still in the realm of speculation. I gather, however, that Professor Brooks regards them as established facts, and that he expects anyone writing about the *Analects* now to accept them as such. Likewise, with regard to those passages in the *Analects* that have long puzzled Chinese commentators and for which they have put forth conflicting interpretations, he believes there is now a "right" interpretation — presumably that followed in his own translation — and that other interpretations are to be labelled as "wrong." I do not think we have reached that point yet, which is why I have at times in my translation given varying translations of such disputed passages. It seems to me important that readers of the *Analects*, in addition to learning about its particular contents, should also learn something about the difficulties and uncertainties involved in interpreting the exact meaning of a text of such antiquity.

To sum up, Professor Brooks and I clearly differ rather radically in our approach to the *Analects*. Commenting on my approach, he declares that "Watson is out of his depth." I in turn would question whether Professor Brooks in his approach is not a little bit too confident.

As for the illustration on the jacket of my *Analects*, I must apologize

to readers. Due to a mix-up in communication between Columbia University Press and myself, it was printed before I had seen the proposed design. Confucius as envisioned by the Jesuits in China, gigantic, kingly, and backed by an Italianate library, represents the exact opposite of the image of Confucius I was trying to convey in my translation. Columbia University Press has promised to replace it at some future date, but when that will be I do not know.

Burton Watson

A Reply to Professor Watson

Professor Watson suggests that “the present state of our knowledge of early Chinese literature” does not permit the sort of confidence in our own results for which he implicitly faults us. But how current is he with “the present state of our knowledge?” In addition to our book, *The Original Analects* (Columbia, 1998), which he was kind enough to mention, and to the 1994 overview which was mentioned in that book, there have since appeared:

- (a) archaeological confirmation of our accretional model for the *Dau/Dv Jing* (*Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 50, No. 1 [2000], pp. 141–46),
- (b) further studies of the *Analects* (Bryan Van Norden ed., *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays* [Oxford, 2002], pp. 163–215),
- (c) an accretional model for the *Mencius* (Alan K. L. Chan ed., *Mencius: Contexts and Interpretations* [Hawaii, 2002], pp. 242–81),
- (d) and for the *Zuozhuan* (*Oriens Extremus*, Vol. 44 [2003/2004], pp. 51–100), all of the above being
- (e) congruent with each other and with the previous work of Rickett on the *Guanzi* (Princeton, 1985, rev. 2001; 1998).

The result is a consistent chronology for the major 04th and 03rd century texts. It creates no new problems, and by providing for the passage of time between early and late layers of the texts, it solves many old problems of internal incoherence which must otherwise bedevil the reader of the *Analects*, or of any classical text. To these problems (such as the encounter of Confucius with rude recluses from another century),

Professor Watson seems to offer no solution. But when a theory can cover the material without internal contradiction, and when it explains problems which are otherwise inexplicable, it seems reasonable to repose a certain working confidence in the result. We invite Professor Watson to consider that result, not indeed in time to affect his book, but at least in time to help him with his section of the survey course. There he can bring out the context of LY 18:6–7, surely the most eloquent statement ever made about the duty of public service in bad times.

The survey course itself Professor Watson describes with great charm. And no, we wouldn't change a word of it. Let the students read their Dante, savoring the rhymes, responding to the pathos, acquiring the rudiments of a sentimental education. So far from troubling them with Guido da Polenta, when they come to Canto V, we would instead put Tchaikovsky's *Francesca* on the phonograph.

But there are texts and texts. Machiavelli's Italian is beautiful too, but is it reasonable to read *Il Principe* just for that pleasure? Or for its occasional crumb (perché la fortuna è donna) of crackerbarrel wisdom? The *Analects* is terribly in earnest about right and wrong ways to govern the state — in earnest *in more than one way*, but we have already covered that. Are those details, and the tremendous panorama of the total war bureaucracy taking shape outside the window of the text, irrelevant to the understanding of the text?

And are they irrelevant to the needs of the future citizen? The world needs people who know how the world works, and it suffers instead from people who have no idea, or wrong ideas, about how it works. The League of Nations collapsed in part because it was built on romantic misconceptions of precisely the period in which Confucius lived. Shouldn't the *Analects* be allowed to bear full witness to that world, and to the dizzyingly different worlds which rapidly succeeded it, and not be played instead for its easily assimilable nuggets — the wisdom Confucius of the fortune cookie? We think so. We urge so. There should indeed be gentle beginnings, in the green student's acquaintance with the rest of humanity. But there should also come a time when that student is capable of taking the grownup stuff straight. For this transition, so devoutly to be wished, we continue to find that Professor Watson's *Analects* points no path.

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