Praise for

THE PATH

"I read *The Path* in one sitting and have been talking about it to *everyone*. It's brilliant, mesmerizing, profound—and deeply contrarian. It stands conventional wisdom on its head and points the way to a life of genuine fulfillment and meaning."

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—*The Chronicle of Higher Education*

"This is a book that turns the notion of help—and the self, for that matter—on its head. Puett and Gross-Loh bring seemingly esoteric concepts down to Earth, where we can see them more clearly. The result is a philosophy book grounded in the here and now and brimming with nuggets of insight. No fortune cookie this, *The Path* serves up a buffet of meaty life lessons. I found myself reading and rereading sections, letting the wisdom steep like a good cup of tea."

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—*Kirkus Reviews*

THE PATH

What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us About the Good Life

Michael Puett and
Christine Gross-Loh

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Contents

Foreword xiii

Preface 1

1 The Age of Complacency 5

2 The Age of Philosophy 15

3 On Relationships: Confucius and As-If Rituals 23

4 On Decisions: Mencius and the Capricious World 55

5 On Influence: Laozi and Generating Worlds 87

6 On Vitality: The *Inward Training* and Being like a Spirit 119

7 On Spontaneity: Zhuangzi and a World of Transformation 141

8 On Humanity: Xunzi and Putting Pattern on the World 163

9 The Age of Possibility 183

Acknowledgments 199

Resources and Further Reading 201

Foreword

Christine Gross-Loh

On a crisp, sunny morning in the fall of 2013, I sat in on a course at Harvard University on Chinese philosophy. I was there to write an article for the *Atlantic* on why an undergraduate class on such an arcane subject had become the third most popular on campus, after the predictable choices of introductory economics and computer science.

Professor Michael Puett, a tall, energetic man in his late forties, stood on the stage at Sanders Theatre speaking animatedly to over seven hundred students. His famously engaging lectures are done without any notes or slides—fifty minutes of pure talk every time. Students aren't assigned any readings except the translated words of the philosophers themselves: Confucius's *Analects*, the *Dao de jing,* the writings of Mencius. They are not assumed to have any prior knowledge of or interest in Chinese history or philosophy; they merely need to be open and willing to engage with these ancient texts. The course is well known for the bold promise the professor makes every year on the first day of class: "If you take the ideas in these texts seriously, they will change your life."

I'd completed a PhD in East Asian history at Harvard and, when I was a graduate student, taught undergraduates about Chinese philosophy. This material was not new to me. But as I listened to Michael that day and during the weeks that followed, I saw him bring these ideas to life in a way that I had never experienced before. He asked his students to not only grapple with the ideas of the thinkers but also to allow the ideas to challenge some of their fundamental assumptions about themselves and the world they are living in.

Michael speaks on Chinese philosophy at other universities and organizations throughout the world. After each talk, people invariably come up to him, eager to know how these ideas can apply to their own lives and real issues: their relationships, their careers, their family struggles. They realize that these principles present a fresh perspective on what it means to live a good and meaningful life; a perspective that stands at odds with so much of what they have assumed to be true.

It is a perspective that has affected many for the better. Michael's students have shared with me stories of how their lives were transformed by these ideas. Some have told me that they have changed the way they look at their relationships, now recognizing that the smallest actions have a ripple effect on themselves and everyone around them. As one student explained, "Professor Puett opened the door to a different way of interacting with the world around me, of processing my feelings, of establishing with myself, and with others, a sense of calm that I hadn't felt before."

These successful young people, positioned to become future leaders in whatever career they might pursue, told me how these ideas changed their approach to major life decisions and their own trajectory. Whether they decided to go into finance or anthropology, law or medicine, these ideas equipped them with different tools and a different worldview than those with which they had been raised, opening a new window onto the purpose of life and its infinite possibilities. One student told me, "It's very easy to have the mind-set that you're building toward some ultimate goal and climbing a ladder to some dream end—whether that's a certain position or a certain place in life. But this message really is powerful: that by living your life differently, you can open yourself up to possibilities you never imagined were even possible."

And it isn't just the philosophical texts that shape these students. Michael himself is an inspiration. He is known for his kindness, humility, and dedication to helping his students flourish: traits that come directly out of his decades of immersion in Chinese thought. "He completely embodies these teachings," one student said.

What is it about these philosophies that has such an impact on those who study them? None of these ideas is about "embracing yourself," "finding yourself," or following a set of instructions to reach a clear goal. In fact, they are the very antithesis of that sort of thinking. They are not specific, prescriptive, or grand. Rather, they are about changing from the ground up in unpredictable, unimaginable ways. One student explained how liberating it was to recognize that what we think is ingrained and inherent really isn't so: "You can adopt new habits and literally change the way you take in the world, react to it, and interact with other people. I learned that you can wield that power of habit, or 'ritual,' to achieve things that you never thought were possible, given who you thought you are."

We have long looked at Chinese thought through the wrong lens, tending to see it as inextricable from a "traditional" world and therefore considering it irrelevant to our contemporary lives. But as these students can attest, the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosophers force us to question many of the beliefs we take for granted. Their ideas on how people approach the world—how they relate to others, make decisions, deal with life's ups and downs, attempt to influence others, choose to conduct their lives—are just as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago. In fact, they are more relevant than ever.

Michael and I realized that these ideas can speak to all of us, and that's how this book came into being. On the pages that follow, we will show how the teachings of these Chinese philosophers can offer possibilities for thinking afresh about ourselves and about our future.

THE PATH

Preface

Confucius. Mencius. Laozi. Zhuangzi. Xunzi. Some of these thinkers might be familiar to you; others you have probably never heard of. One was a bureaucrat-turned-teacher who spent his life instructing a small coterie of disciples. Another roamed from region to region providing guidance to local rulers. Yet another was later thought to have been a god. Their lives and their writings seem obscure to us now, far removed from our modern lives.

After all, what could Chinese philosophers who lived over two thousand years ago possibly have to teach us about the art of living? You probably think of them, if you think of them at all, as placid wise men who spouted benign platitudes about harmony and nature. Today, meanwhile, we lead dynamic, liberated, modern lives. Our values, mores, technology, and cultural assumptions are completely different from theirs.

What if we told you that each of these thinkers offers a profoundly counterintuitive perspective on how to become a better human being and how to create a better world? What if we told you that if you take them seriously, the ideas found in these extraordinary texts from classical China have the potential to transform how you live? That is the central theme of this book: that the teachings of these ancient Chinese philosophers, who were responding to problems very much like our own, offer radical new perspectives on how to live a good life.

Most of us think we're doing the right thing when we look within, find ourselves, and determine what our lives should become. We figure out what kind of career would fit best with our personality and proclivities. We think about what sort of person would make a good match for us. And we think that if we find these things—our true self, the career we were meant to have, and our soul mate—life will be fulfilling. We will be nurturing our true self and living out a plan for happiness, prosperity, and personal satisfaction.

Whether we realize it or not, this vision of how to build a good life is rooted in history, specifically sixteenth-century Calvinist ideas about predestination, a chosen "elect," and a God who has laid out a plan for each individual to fulfill. The Calvinists rejected the following of ritual, which they saw as empty and formulaic, and instead emphasized sincere belief in this higher deity. Today we no longer think in terms of predestination, a chosen elect, or even, for some of us, God. But much of our current thinking is a legacy of these early Protestant views.

Many of us now believe that each of us should be a unique individual who knows himself. We believe we should be authentic, loyal to a truth we now tend to locate not in a higher deity but within ourselves. We aim to live up to the self we were meant to be.

But what if these ideas that we believe enhance our lives are actually limiting us?

We often associate philosophy with abstract, even unusable, ideas. But the strength of the thinkers in this book lies in the fact that they often illustrated their teachings through concrete, ordinary aspects of daily life. They believed that it's at that everyday level that larger change happens, and a fulfilling life begins.

As we explore these thinkers, our hope is that you will allow them to challenge some of your most cherished notions. Some of their ideas may make intuitive sense; others won't. We don't necessarily expect that you will agree with everything you read. But the very encounter with ideas so different from our own allows us to recognize that our assumptions about a good way to live are just one set among many. And once you recognize that, you can't return to your old life unchanged.

1

The Age of Complacency

A certain vision of history has become conventional wisdom. Until the nineteenth century, human beings lived in what we call "traditional societies." In these societies, they were always told what to do. They were born into a preexisting social structure that determined their lives: born peasants, they remained peasants; born aristocrats, they remained aristocrats. The family into which they were born determined how much money and power they had, and so the trajectories of their lives were set from the day of their birth.

The story continues: in nineteenth-century Europe, people finally broke free of these constraints. For the first time, we realized that we are all individuals who can think rationally. We can make decisions for ourselves and take control of our lives. As rational creatures, we can create a world of unprecedented opportunity. With these realizations, the story says, the modern world was born.

But if some of us broke away, other cultures were left behind—or so we believe. To many of us, classical China represents the ultimate traditional society in which people were required to follow rigidly defined social roles in order to live within a stratified, ordered world.

Thus, it must be a world that has nothing to teach us.

Of course, at times this reading of traditional societies in general and China in particular has been given a romanticized spin: *We now are alienated from each other, but people in the traditional world saw themselves as living in harmony with the cosmos. We have broken from the natural world and seek to control and dominate it, but people in the traditional world tried to live in accordance with the patterns of nature.*

This sentimental view of a traditional world, too, has nothing to teach us. It simply turns these so-called traditional societies into something akin to nostalgia pieces. We can go to a museum and see an Egyptian mummy and think, *How interesting*. An ancient Chinese artifact? *How quaint*. Intriguing to look at, but we wouldn't want to go back to that time—to the world they represent. We wouldn't want to live there or take any lessons from these traditional worlds, because they weren't modern. *We* are the ones who finally figured out things, not them.

But as you are about to learn, many of our stereotypes about these "traditional" societies are wrong. And there is much we can learn from the past.

The danger of our vision of history isn't just that it has led us to dismiss much of human existence as irrelevant, but also that we think today's predominant ideas are the only ones that encourage people to determine their own lives; therefore, today's ideas are the only correct ones.

The fact is that there has been a wide range of visions of how humans can lead lives of their own making. Once we recognize that, we can see the "modern" for what it actually is: one narrative out of many, built from a specific time and place. An entire world of thought thus becomes available to us—one that challenges some of our most cherished myths.

Myth: We Live in an Age of Freedom Unlike Any Other

Most of us think of ourselves as essentially free, in ways that our ancestors were not. After we in the West broke from the traditional world in the nineteenth century, we finally had the ability to decide for ourselves how to organize the world. We spent two centuries grappling with various competing ideologies: socialism, fascism, communism, and democratic capitalism. And once all but one of those ideas was largely discredited, we finally arrived at the "end of history." With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neoliberalism seemed to have won out as the one correct way of organizing the world—the one that best enables humans to flourish and prosper.

But what do we make, then, of the unhappiness, narcissism, and anxiety surging in the developed world? We are told that hard work will lead to success, yet the gap between rich and poor has widened dramatically, and social mobility is on the decline. Our lives are mediated by all kinds of fascinating and impressive devices, we have achieved unprecedented medical advances, yet we face environmental and humanitarian crises on a frightening scale. Several decades later, our great optimism has disappeared. We no longer feel as confident as we did in the way we have structured our world.

So how much *have* we figured out? Will historians look back on this era as one of prosperity, equality, freedom, and happiness? Or will they instead define the early twenty-first century as an age of complacency: a time when people were unhappy and unfulfilled; when they witnessed growing crises but failed to respond, feeling there to be no viable alternatives?

The Chinese philosophical texts described in this book offer alternatives to this Age of Complacency. But they are not coherent ideologies that would, for example, replace democracy. Rather, they are counterintuitive notions about the self and its place in the world. And many of them were actually developed in opposition to the idea of living according to any overarching system of thought.

From roughly 600 to 200 BC, an explosion of philosophical and religious movements throughout Eurasia gave rise to a wide variety of visions for human flourishing. During this period, which has come to be called the Axial Age, many of the ideas that developed in Greece also emerged in China and vice versa. In fact, in China, as we will see, certain beliefs arose that were very similar to those common in the West today. But in China, such views lost the day, while other ideas emerged in opposition, arguing for a very different path to a good life.

None of what we are looking at should be considered "Chinese" views as opposed to "Western" ones, any more than we are dealing with traditional ideas as opposed to modern ones. As we explore these concepts, we will see that not only have people been debating how best to organize the world since long before the modern era but also that there are true alternatives in thinking about how to live well.

Myth: We Know How to Determine the Direction Our Lives Will Take

When it comes to planning for happiness and prosperity in the West, we are taught to rely on our rational minds, confident that we can arrive at a solution by careful calculation. In the face of life's uncertainty, we take comfort in the belief that by overcoming emotion and bias and reducing our experience to measurable data, we can master chance and defy fate. Consider our most popular approach to moral and ethical dilemmas: inventing a representative hypothetical situation and working through it rationally. In the famous trolley experiment, we're told to imagine ourselves in a trolley yard, watching a runaway trolley coming down the tracks. We see it's going to hit five people up on the tracks ahead. But if we pull a switch we can divert the trolley onto a different track, where one person is lying. Do we allow the trolley to plow into those five people, or do we pull the switch to save them—actively choosing to kill the single person lying there?

What's the right thing to do?

This kind of question has occupied philosophers and ethicists for lifetimes. Countless essays—even a book or two—have been written on its implications. The scenario allows us to reduce decision making to a simple set of data and a single choice. Most of us think that's how decisions get made.

They tried these thought experiments in classical China, too. But our Chinese thinkers weren't as intrigued. This is a fine intellectual game, they determined, but you can play these games all day long, and they will have no impact on how you live your ordinary everyday life. None whatsoever.

The way we think we're living our lives isn't the way we live them. The way we think we make decisions isn't how we make them. Even if you did find yourself in that trolley yard someday, about to see someone killed by an oncoming trolley, your response would have nothing to do with rational calculation. Our emotions and instincts take over in these situations, and they guide our less spontaneous decisions as well, even when we think we're being very deliberate and rational: What should I have for dinner? Where should I live? Whom should I marry?

Seeing the limitations of this approach, these Chinese philosophers went in search of alternatives. The answer, for them, lay in honing our instincts, training our emotions, and engaging in a constant process of self-cultivation so that eventually—at moments both crucial and mundane—we would react in the right, ethical way to each particular situation. Through those responses, we elicit positive responses in those around us. These thinkers taught that in this way, every encounter and experience offers a chance to actively create a new and better world.

Myth: The Truth of Who We Are Lies Within Us

The breakdown of old aristocratic religious institutions left the people of the Axial Age in search of new sources of truth and meaning. Similarly, in our own age, we feel we have broken free of older, confining ways of thinking and are looking for new sources of meaning. Increasingly, we have been told to seek that higher truth within. The goal of a self-actualized person is now to find himself and to live his life "authentically," according to an inner truth.

The danger of this lies in believing that we will all know our "truth" when we see it, and then limiting our lives according to that truth. With all this investment in our self-definition, we risk building our future on a very narrow sense of who we are—what we see as our strengths and weaknesses, our likes and dislikes. Many Chinese thinkers might say that in doing this, we are looking at such a small part of who we are potentially. We're taking a limited number of our emotional dispositions during a certain time and place and allowing those to define us forever. By thinking of human nature as monolithic, we instantly limit our potential.

But many of the Chinese thinkers would argue that you are not and should not think of yourself as a single, unified being. Let's say that you think of yourself as someone with a temper; someone who gets angry easily. The thinkers we are about to encounter would argue that you should not say, "Well, that's just the way I am," and embrace yourself for who you are. As we will see, perhaps you aren't inherently an angry person. Perhaps you simply slipped into ruts—patterns of behavior—that you allowed to define who you thought you were. The truth is that you have just as much potential to be, say, gentle or forgiving as you do to be angry.

These philosophers would urge us to recognize that we are all complex and changing constantly. Every person has many different and often contradictory emotional dispositions, desires, and ways of responding to the world. Our emotional dispositions develop by looking *outward,* not inward. They are not cultivated when you retreat from the world to meditate or go on a vacation. They are formed, in practice, through the things you do in your everyday life: the ways you interact with others and the activities you pursue. In other words, we aren't just who we are: we can actively make ourselves into better people all the time.

Of course, this is no simple task. It requires us to change our mind-set about our own agency and about how real change happens. Nor is it a quick process:

change comes incrementally, through perseverence. It comes from training ourselves to broaden our perspective so that we can grasp the complicated tangle of factors (the relationships we're in, the company we keep, the jobs we hold, and other life circumstances) that shape any given situation and slowly transform our interactions with everything around us. This broad perspective enables us to behave in ways that gradually bring about true change.

While we have been told that true freedom comes from discovering who we are at our core, that "discovery" is precisely what has trapped so many of us in the Age of Complacency. We are the ones standing in our own way.

* * *

Does this mean that we need, then, a radical new plan for how to live and how to organize the world? On the contrary, the philosophers we will explore often illustrated their ideas through mundane aspects of daily life, arguing that this is where great change occurs. Following their lead, we have included many quotidian examples in this book to bring their ideas to life. But these thinkers did not mean for these illustrations to be taken as prescriptive advice, and nor do we. Rather, they are meant to show that we already do many of these things; we just don't do them well. As we rethink these aspects of our lives, we will understand how practical and doable the ideas really are.

The title of this book comes from a concept the Chinese philosophers referred to often as the *Dao*, or the Way. The Way is not a harmonious "ideal" we must struggle to follow. Rather, the Way is the path that we forge continually through our choices, actions, and relationships. We create the Way anew every moment of our lives.

There was no one unified vision of the Way with which all these philosophers would have agreed. Not only did they argue against the conventions of their own society, but also each offered a strikingly different vision of how exactly one creates this path. But they agreed that the very process of building it has endless potential to transform us and the world in which we live.

2

The Age of Philosophy

Enter any major museum of art, and you face a wealth of galleries: Mesopotamia. Ancient Egypt. Ancient Greece. Roman Empire. Medieval Europe. Modern Europe. Each gallery is filled with beautiful artifacts, and as you walk through them in succession, you can trace the rise of civilization. You can then wander to another wing if you like, and go into rooms focused on lands such as India, and China, and Japan.

This is how we tend to learn about world history: as discrete civilizations that developed on their own over time.

Now imagine a different kind of museum, one organized solely by era. You could stroll through a gallery, for example, and see a Roman silver denarius coin, a bronze coin from China's Han dynasty, and a punch-marked coin from India's Mauryan Empire. You would see right away that three major civilizations were going through remarkably similar changes at roughly the same time, despite the vast distance between them: each had become an empire, and each was running an economy based upon coin currency. Or you could enter a gallery about the early medieval period, several centuries later, and see Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist sacred objects and architectural remnants. They would vividly bring to life the fact that at the same time in history, all the major world religions spread, establishing themselves along the trade networks that linked China, India, and the Mediterranean region This would present a more accurate portrayal of how this history unfolded, for Europe and Asia have always been interconnected.

* * *

Many of us think that globalization is exclusively a modern phenomenon—that technology and air travel have ushered in a new era in which societies that were closed off from one another now finally can be connected. But if that's the case, then why were Confucius, Socrates, and the Buddha addressing similar philosophical questions at roughly the same time 2,500 years ago, despite living in completely different places, separated by such great distances, and speaking completely different languages? The fact is that innovations, technologies, and ideas have been moving across the globe for a very long time. Dynamic tension and movement within Eurasia have defined much of its history. Confucius, Socrates, and the Buddha were responding to very similar societal catalysts.

To understand why philosophical debate emerged at all and why these thinkers focused on such similar problems, we have to understand the teeming, vibrant culture in which they lived and their ideas developed.

Nineteenth-century Europeans were not the first to think they were breaking away from the past and creating a completely new age. Similar eruptions have happened repeatedly throughout human history. One of the most significant occurred across Eurasia midway through the first millennium BC.

In a revolutionary historical shift, the Bronze Age aristocratic societies that had dominated Eurasia for two thousand years, passing power and wealth down exclusively through hereditary bloodlines, began to crumble. As these states collapsed, new forms of political experimentation arose —from radical democracy in Greece to centralized bureaucracies and legal systems in China. These new forms of statecraft helped to foster the beginnings of social mobility. And in the midst of the immense social changes that these states engendered, the religious institutions that had been embedded in the earlier aristocratic cultures fell as well.

As a result, religious and philosophical movements flourished across Eurasia. In classical Greece, this was the era of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the Pythagoreans and the Orphics. In India, it brought the emergence of Jainism and, most important, the arrival of the Buddha. And in China, this was the age of Confucius, Mencius, and the other philosophical and religious movements we will be encountering in this book. All were roughly contemporary. And all were pondering the questions that emerge when a societal order breaks down: *What is the best way to run a state? How do I build a proper world where everyone has a chance to flourish? How do I live my life?* All were wrestling with problems very much like our own.

The Axial Age lasted until the formation of massive empires across Eurasia in the last centuries BC. In response to these empires, a series of salvationist religions spread through Eurasia in the first centuries of the Common Era: Christianity, Manichaeism, Mahayana Buddhism, Daoism, and, later, Islam. And within a few centuries, in many parts of Eurasia and especially in Europe, this period of philosophical and religious experimentation would come to an end after the fall of the empires and a return to aristocratic rule.

The societal changes of the Axial Age led to remarkably similar developments across a wide geographical area. There's no evidence that Confucius and the Buddha and the Greek philosophers were even aware of one another, much less one another's ideas. And yet by around the year 500 BC, these major philosophical movements in disparate parts of Eurasia were unified by the belief that the world had to change.

Throughout much of the Bronze Age, most humans saw no possibility of being able to change the trajectory of their lives, but increased social mobility now planted the seeds of the idea that what is available to some people could and should be available to all, not just a few.

At the same time, people saw themselves as living in a period of massive cultural crisis. The times were marked by ceaseless warfare, especially in Greece, north India, and the North China Plain—the very areas where many of the major philosophical and religious movements emerged later. In these regions, there was a pervasive sense that humans had lost their way and had forsaken the rules of conduct that enabled them to live in simple civility. The Greek poet Hesiod captured the ethos of the time, lamenting that he was living in an era when relationships had crumbled: fathers and offspring disagreed with one another, children failed to care for their aging parents, siblings fought with one another, and people freely gave their "praise to violence."

It was in the midst of this cultural crisis that religious and philosophical movements began emerging. Many involved withdrawing from society and creating alternative communities based upon a full rejection of violence. Others emphasized transcending the fallen world here on earth altogether by imagining a higher world beyond.

The movements that developed in the North China Plain focused, too, on creating alternate worlds. But for them, the solution was not to withdraw from society or seek higher, transcendent realms, but to make changes in the very patterns of everyday life.

Specific developments led to this focus on the mundane. In the North China Plain, one response to the breakdown of the Bronze Age hereditary societies was the formation of new states run by literati from the class just below the aristocracy, who would hold their positions through merit rather than through birth. More and more people sought to become educated in the hope of gaining positions in these new bureaucracies and raising their status in life. As they became educated, they became deeply dissatisfied with the world as it was and began to ponder how to live differently. Most of the new religious and philosophical movements in China during this period were populated by figures from this growing literati class.

Take Confucius, for example. This great philosopher lived during the decline of the last great Bronze Age dynasty, the Zhou dynasty. The Zhou was a powerful aristocratic clan that claimed its status over other great clans because it possessed the mandate of Heaven. In early China, Heaven was seen as a deity that granted the most virtuous lineage of the time the mandate to rule for as long as it continued to be moral. It was an age very much like pre-nineteenth-century Europe, in which the great aristocratic lineages ruled through a claim of divine right.

During Confucius's lifetime, these leading aristocratic families were losing their power. The Zhou itself was in decline, but so were the other clans. None could step forward to claim the new mandate.

It was during the ensuing political vacuum that figures such as Confucius came to prominence. He held a few minor official posts and, later in his life, became a teacher who focused on a new generation of people seeking these positions as well.

When we think about Confucianism today, we often associate it with rigid social hierarchy, strict gender roles, and a conservative emphasis on correct behavior—an impression based in part on later reinterpretations of these teachings. But the portrayal of Confucius in the *Analects* is not one of someone who was trying to control people, nor is it one of someone who was trying to create a coherent ideology at all. On the contrary, we see a figure trying to create worlds in which humans could flourish. These worlds were to be built in the here and now, through how we interact with those around us.

Confucius thought that a great era of human flourishing had existed in the early days of the Zhou, about five hundred years before his lifetime. He saw this period as having been ruled by several individuals who cultivated themselves, became virtuous, and, briefly, succeeded in creating a better world around themselves. He sought to do the same: create a world where his students could thrive, with the hopes that some of them might be able to create a larger social order where the broader population could flourish too.

Every philosopher we encounter in this book is similar to Confucius. Each emerged from this crucible of transition. Each opposed the society in which he lived and was actively contemplating new and exciting ways to live. Each believed strongly that every person has equal potential for growth.

beginning with Confucius, led to a radically new vision of exactly what ritual can do.

Confucius, who lived from 551 to 479 BC, was the first great philosopher in the Chinese tradition. His vast and enduring influence comes not from grand ideas but from deceptively simple ones—ideas that flip on its head everything we understand about getting to know ourselves and getting along with other people.

Consider this passage from Book 10 of the *Analects,* a collection of conversations and stories compiled by Confucius's disciples after his death:

"He would not sit until he had straightened his mat."

Here's another one:

"He would not teach while eating."

Not quite what you were expecting? Seems a little too prosaic for one of humanity's most important texts?

These passages are not exceptional. The *Analects* is full of concrete, minute details about what Confucius did and what he said. We find out how high Confucius holds his elbows. We see how he talks to different people when he walks into a room. We learn, in specific detail, how Confucius behaves at dinnertime.

You might wonder how any of this could be of philosophical significance. You might be tempted to flip through the book for yourself and search for passages where Confucius says something really profound. But to understand what makes the *Analects* a great philosophical work, we need to learn how Confucius comported himself at his meals. We need to know what he did on a daily basis. The reason these daily moments are important is because, as we will see, they are the means through which we can become different and better human beings.

Such a stance is rare in the field of philosophy. If you take most any philosophy class or read a philosophical work, chances are the philosopher will jump right in with big questions such as: *Do we have free will? What is the meaning of life? Is experience objective? What is morality?*

But Confucius took the opposite approach in his teachings. Rather than start with the great big philosophical questions, he asked this fundamental and deceptively profound question:

How are you living your life on a daily basis?

For Confucius, everything began with this question—a question about the tiniest things. And unlike the big, unwieldy questions, this is one we all can answer.

The Fragmented World

We often think of people from traditional cultures as having believed in some sort of harmonious cosmos that dictated how they ought to live and the social roles they would be confined to playing. This is certainly how many in the West have thought about China. But the truth is that many Chinese philosophers actually saw the world very differently: as consisting of an endless series of fragmented, messy encounters.

This worldview emerged from the notion that all aspects of human life are governed by emotions, including the endless human interactions that take place. The *Nature That Emerges from the Decree*, a recently discovered fourth-century BCE text, taught that

> *The energies of joy, anger, sorrow, and sadness are given by nature. When it comes to their being manifested on the outside, it is because they have been elicited by others.*

All living things have dispositions, or tendencies to respond to things in certain ways. Just as a flower has an inherent disposition to lean toward the sun, and birds and butterflies are disposed to seek out flowers, human beings have dispositions too. Our disposition is to respond emotionally to other people.

We often don't even notice how constantly our emotions are being drawn out from us. But our feelings sway back and forth, depending on what we encounter. We experience something pleasurable and then feel pleasure; we encounter something frightening and subsequently feel fear. A toxic relationship makes us feel despair, an argument with a coworker makes us livid, a rivalry with a friend arouses jealousy. We find ourselves experiencing certain emotions more often than we do others, and our responses then become patterned habits.

This is what life is about: moment after moment in which people encounter one another, react in an infinite number of ways, and are pulled to and fro emotionally. Not one of us can escape this, be it a child on a playground or the leader of a great nation. Every single human event is shaped by the world of our emotional experiences. If human life consists of people constantly bumping up against one another and reacting passively, we live in a fragmented world, one in which we are buffeted about endlessly by disparate events.

But all is not hopeless: we can refine the way we react during these endless encounters and create pockets of order. The *Nature That Emerges from the Decree* argues that we should strive to move from a state where we just randomly respond to things emotionally (*qing*) to a state where we are able to respond with propriety, or "better ways of responding" (*yi*):

> *Only through training do we become able to respond well . . . At the beginning [of our lives] one responds through emotions; at the end, one responds through propriety.*

Developing propriety does not mean overcoming or controlling the emotions. Feeling emotion is what makes us human. It simply means cultivating our emotions so that we internalize better ways of responding to others. These better ways become a part of us. When we have learned to refine our responses, we can start to respond to people in ways that we have cultivated, instead of through immediate emotional reaction. We do this refining through ritual.

Customs and Rituals

Most of us have certain "rituals." Whether it's a morning cup of coffee, family dinners, a couple's regular Friday date night, or a piggyback ride for the kids at bedtime, we consider these moments important because they give our lives continuity and meaning and bond us to our loved ones.

Confucius would agree that all of these moments are potential rituals. But in his teachings, he elaborated upon what we should consider rituals and why they are significant.

Consider a simple act that we all engage in multiple times a day:

You run into a friend.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Great! How about you?"

This brief act connects you for a moment before you continue on.

Or your colleague introduces you to someone new: "Great to meet you." You shake his hand, and then you both make breezy chitchat about the weather, the surroundings, or some recent news event.

Or you run into a close friend at the grocery store. You stop your carts and give each other a warm hug. "How have you been? How are the kids?" You talk a little bit about your lives, have a short, animated conversation, and promise to make a date for coffee before you go your separate ways.

son's most dangerous energies—all of his anger and resentment at passing away while his loved ones go on living—would be released and haunt the living. Thus, people believed that the world was filled with the spirits of the deceased, who looked jealously upon their survivors. Death would bring out the worst in the living as well: horrible sadness, confusion, inexplicable anger.

To combat all of these negative, uncontrolled energies, people developed ritual acts, the most important of which was ancestral worship. The purpose was to transform dangerous ghosts into benevolent ancestors. The meat of a beast, most often a pig, would be placed in bronze ritual vessels and cooked over an open fire in front of the family at a temple. The family would call down the ghosts to feed on the rich smoke that rose up from the meat. By feeding the ghosts these offerings, the living hoped to humanize them, bring them back into the family, and persuade them to inhabit the role of a benevolent ancestor hovering above.

After the ritual had ended, the ancestor eventually reverted to an angry, haunting ghost, and the rite would have to be repeated.

In the *Analects,* Confucius is asked about ancestor worship. He says that the ritual is absolutely necessary but that it makes no difference whether the spirits are participating or not: "We sacrifice to them," he said, "*as if* they are there." What matters is participating in the ritual fully: "If I do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice."

But if the ghosts aren't even necessarily there, why do the ritual as if they are?

In life, the relationship between the deceased and the living had been imperfect and fraught, as real-life human relationships are. A father might have been stern, unloving, and temperamental; his offspring might have been hostile and rebellious. These unresolved tensions haunt the living all the more painfully when the father dies, and any possibility of a reconciliation has ended. If performed well, the ritual moves us from this troubled world of human relationships and creates a space—a ritual space—in which ideal relationships can be forged. Within this space, it is as if the haunting ghosts are proper, beneficent ancestors to the living. The living now behave as if they were proper descendants of the ancestors. The angers, jealousies, and resentments that had existed between the living and the dead are being transformed into a vastly better relationship.

For Confucius, the ritual was essential because of what it did for the people performing it. To ask whether these ritual acts actually affected the deceased or not missed the point entirely. Family members needed to make the sacrifices because acting *as if* the ancestors were there brought about change within themselves.

The ritual also changed the feelings of the living toward one another. A death always engenders changes in relationships among those left behind. A long-dormant childhood rivalry between two siblings flares up again; a wayward son suddenly becomes the nominal head of the