

Confucius' Hero's Journey

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Through depth psychology, Confucius' existential journey can be seen as not only a hero's journey, but also as the hero's realization reenacted, upon return, for the benefit of humankind. Whereas there are few fantastical tales we can associate with his adventures, his journey is marked with stages, as reported in his brief bio (Analects 2:04), that correspond with the essence of the various stops made by mythological heroes worldwide. The great difference between Confucius and the others is his recognition that life in the world as is *is* the story of the journey of psyche and that the realignment of the ways of psyche can assure that not only can the hero attune to the prize of the journey, but that the collective as a whole can attune itself, with marked benefits for society as a whole.

I. THE MONOMYTH: THE HERO IN A THOUSAND GUISES

Until depth psychology, myths were seen as stories, but so enchanting, meaningful and enduring as to inspire abundantly rich culture, such as music, art and literature, and to root peoples in shared ways of speculating on the mysteries of the universe and bond them in communities. From among these tales, none is more powerful than the theme of the hero's journey. For one of the central questions C.G. Jung pursued, “[W]as there something akin to the individuation process to be found in all cultures?” (*Red Book*, p. 87), the renowned Joseph Campbell, a quarter century later, responds with the title of his book, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces.” In it Joseph Campbell surveys at least a thousand variations on the hero the world over and coins the word “monomyth.” For Campbell, the hero's quest is indeed the perennial underlying existential quest, through which a ready youth transcends the mundane self, overcomes unimaginable obstacles, and returns homeward a hero in service to society.

From the East, Campbell recruits the Buddha, Huang Ti, Laozi, Arjuna, Krishna and others for the monomyth, but excludes Confucius. Campbell describes Confucius as “mirage-like” (1962, p. 414) and questions his authorship of time-honored classics. While fascinated by China, neither Jung nor Campbell preferred Confucius' teachings over Laozi's Taoism, being men of their times who associated Confucius with pragmatics divorced from fundamental existential quests.

The sinologists, D.L. Hall and R.T. Ames, however, in *Thinking Through Confucius* (1987), tackled the issue of Confucius being lost to the world, i.e., being uncategorized even as philosopher (p. 327), by suggesting two ring-tones to make a connection: (1) that Confucius' view of the human condition best parallels the basic tenets of existentialism in the West (p.); and (2) that Confucius is probably better understood through a worldview based on immanence (p.), rather than the dominant approach of transcendence in the West. Tracing the fragmented lineage of the monomyth in China does, in fact, reveal that it has played at least a similar role in the rise and development of Chinese civilization as its counterparts have worldwide, with the difference that myths elsewhere generally illustrate existential truths, while in the Chinese tradition, the truths themselves are recorded in terse outlines. Finding these manifestos in canonized Classics does unveil similar universal attempts to grasp existential mysteries, and help to reconnect China and the West as cousins of the quest.

II. THE EXISTENTIAL QUEST

The hero's journey being the universal existential quest, we have at our disposal a direct statement on existential purpose in the *Zhongyong*, written by Confucius' grandson Zisi (481-402 BCE). The opening lines that human nature is equipped with a drive towards a higher possibility and that the Tao/Dao/path of life is to "accord with it" (Legge, p. 383) —i.e., to will it and carry it out-- reflect real-life inclinations to want/do/be better in all of us as in the hero. The instruction on purpose, stages, end goal, method, as well as post-journey application is given in *The Great Learning* by Confucius' disciple Zengzi (505-436 BCE). Converting to the language of myth, the prize is the pearl or treasure (*de*-“virtue”) and the goal is fetch it out of darkness (i.e., unconscious psyche) to manifest.

The hero's journey of the monomyth inevitably begins with the “call to adventure,” which entails knowing about and getting ready to undertake the challenge. The hero then “crosses the threshold” to tackle the problem, winds up in the “belly of the whale”—i.e., goes inward to be born again, and upon emergence, returns home renewed—in the sense of complete transformation or at least having reclaimed more of the innate self. (Campbell 1949, p.36)

The great Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, for instance, begins with the delusion of invincibility of manhood and winds up humbled by the recognition of human frailty and mortality. These occurred upon the death of his friend Enkidu, upon his own need to sleep off fatigue for a period of six days and nights, and

upon a snake stealing the flower of rejuvenation from him. Among the Greeks, folk epic heroes such as Hercules of the great labors, Theseus of the Minotaur and Jason of the Golden Fleece are called to superhuman tasks and trials through which they successfully rose to the occasion and prevailed. In the literary epics, we see Homer's Odysseus in his ten-year struggle to return home, Aeneas of Virgil's *Aeneid* and the pilgrim Dante of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Aeneas and Dante both traveled through the Underworld to seek knowledge of the truth—Aeneas for the establishment of Roman destiny and Dante for everyone's salvation.

Inasmuch as we do not have myths from Confucian lore to recast his journey as a hero's tale, we can do the reverse by comparing the outline of the archetypal circuit in the monomyth with Confucius' personal milestones as recorded in his brief autobiography (*Analects* 2:04). Except for a glimpse of his mother praying to a mountain for a son, the story of Confucius, according to Sima Qian's *Records of the Historian* (p. 1905), contains no mythological embellishments. However, Confucius' self-observation across the decades does offer a significantly similar trajectory: (1) heeding the call by seeking knowledge--age 15, (2) stabilizing himself on the right path--age 30, (3) pacifying "demons," so to speak--age 40, (4) attaining knowledge/truth--age 50, (5) returning to community--age 60, (6) attaining immanence--age 70.

The succinctness of his personal story and the exclusivity of theme demonstrate that the crucial life pursuit for Confucius himself was the manifestation of psyche: i.e., his individuation in his existential quest. How he is capable of streamlining his quest in this manner, while the vast majority of humankind is not even cognizant of it, is due probably not only to his natural abilities, but also to the wisdom of his forebears.

III. IMMANENCE IN THE CHINESE WORLDVIEW

Where did Confucius get his inspiration? The answer is not suggested in his biography, but it is quite clear he was a child of his times and, through the nurture of a widowed mother (at three, he lost his father), was raised and educated according to the times. His bio records his call to adventure at age 15 to "set his will on learning." To help his poverty-stricken mother, we know he became a jack-of-all-trades, including carriage-driving, from an early age. In his studies, he was exposed to history, the literary arts including poetry, music and archery. From scattered records, we know he was interested in temple rituals and "played temple" as a child. The worldview that would permeate his psyche and determine his behavior came from the I Ching. We have his own words on his fascination with this book and on his

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admiration for the Duke of Zhou (1100 BCE), the third sage in the lineage to interpret the I-Ching. While questioning Confucius' knowledge of the I Ching and challenging the authenticity of Confucius' saying on wanting 50 more years of life to study it (Analects ...), Campbell, at the same time, does underscore that the universe captured by this ancient book is the "mythic view of universe that is central to all Chinese thought" (1962, p. 411).

Because of the age-old tendencies to hold Confucianism and Taoism in opposition, as though the tenets for one cannot be valid or worthy from the rival's vantage point, the I Ching's introduction to the West was through Taoism. History, however, shows the two camps growing from the same soil and root and sharing the template of immanence for their mindset, as well as their psychic and mental tools to apprehend life. If we allow the whole Confucius to emerge from behind his reified image as worldly sage and moral teacher, we can tap into their common metaphysics—the Tao of the universe—for a glimpse of perhaps a Confucius of the mysteries, with the same world view, but cultivating a different path.

Baffling and tantalizing, mystical and engaging, the I Ching seems to be the fountainhead of Chinese culture. Without getting lost in its labyrinth of 4,096 basic life situations, a quick return to the two elemental symbols can demonstrate the founder Fuxi's attempt (3322 BCE) to diagram the cosmos from the perspective of immanence. According to legend, Fuxi—his name translates as “conceal” and “breath, vapor”—was looking at a tortoise's back at the time and deduced that movement in the cosmos occurs in two basic types. He depicted their polarity by drawing one line broken into two segments to symbolize *yin*-yielding and another line that is unbroken to symbolize *yang*-force. For the basic ideogram to capture the trinity of “heaven, human and earth,” he used different combinations of the two elemental lines, yielding eight dissimilar trigrams. One set of eight trigrams manifesting *yin* and combining with its opposite, *yang* (8 X 8), generates the standard 64 hexagrams that represent basic situations. Then, as though fetching a magnifying glass, accommodating the possible change of each line in the set of 64 to its opposite (64 X 64), we get 4,096 scenarios to tell us where we are at and where we can take ourselves on the original cosmic palette.

Putting aside these numbers, what should come across as a world view that is cradle to both Confucius and Laozi admits that

- (1) human presence is imbedded, integral and participatory with heaven and earth; that is, the pattern of the universe is immanence of all;

- (2) life and nature are integrated/interpenetrating, cyclical and unceasing in change and pattern;
- (3) at the threshold between phenomena and mystery, the I Ching presents a graspable picture of a whole;
- (4) Humans can fit into the picture by rising to the occasion of being a participant. The quest in both camps is 配 *pei* 天 *tian* –to match heaven by manifesting such potential and participating in the mystery. (Zisi, *Zhongyong*, 22)

In the 20th century, Carl Jung (1875-1961) was unexpectedly taken on a hero's journey himself, the outcome of which was his discovery of the dramatic differences between the patterning of psyches Chinese and West.

The call to adventure was his break with his mentor Sigmund Freud. In the interval of his deep retreat, he built with stone, read and drew and wrote to stave off depression and kept a journal of the occurrences in his psyche. One day in 1928 he emerged from his self-imposed isolation, without finishing his last mandala, and, re-engaging with the collective, went back to work. The catalyst was the secret ancient Taoist text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, freshly translated by Richard Wilhelm, who presented it to him. Wilhelm had also translated the I Ching and introduced it to Jung, requesting that Jung write commentaries on both.

No one had had access to the journal Jung had kept during the retreat until the family permitted its release in 2009. Upon its publication as *Liber Novus (Red Book)*, together with a separate volume for the translation, a vivid picture of Jung's dealings with different components in his psyche was revealed, such the unsummoned visitations by *spirit of the depths*, *spirit of the times*, *my soul*, *I*, *self*, *life*. Jung did not necessarily invite dialogue, but did identify the presences. The *spirit of the times*, for instance, "would like to hear of use and value" (p119); and *my soul* announced, "I am your mother." From among these, Jung adopted a livelong invisible friend and mentor in the person of Philemon from the Greek myth, "Baucis and Philemon," as told in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These make up some of the drama in the encounter with the unconscious in what can be construed as the whale-belly immersion in Jung's individuation process. His discovery of the I Ching and, more dramatically, *The Golden Flower*, gave him answers and corroboration that psychic unconscious contents were real. The mandalas he painted from dreams or imagination, like the mandalas in the *Golden Flower*, emerged spontaneously and moved naturally to a center in the picture, signifying the movement in the unconscious to uncover the higher

Self. As he observed, “The font of life is the core of the individual and within himself he will find if he can tear the coverings away” (*Red Book*, p. 191).

More study on the *Red Book* and Jung’s excursion into the Chinese psyche will no doubt infuse more insights into our East-West probe. Jung, however, warned that simple-minded imitation of the East by those ingrained in the Western world view, might not only be useless but also harmful (*Golden Flower*, p.). For Jung himself, however, who had been making the descent to the common wellspring of psyche, the linkage made it possible to further develop his theories. On the significance of the *Red Book*, the translator, Sonu Shamdasani, suggests that “the *Collected Works* can in part be considered an indirect commentary on the *Liber Novus*” (p. 87). This is also to say that the confirmation on the confrontation with the unconscious from the perspective of the I Ching tradition was a significant factor in Jung’s career.

Probably unknown to Jung, and apparently not highlighted enough, is this same universal quest for center codified as “matching or participating with heaven” in the Confucian canon. Confucius’ milestone at age 50, “knowing the mandate of heaven,” could be this realization. We probably would never know how dramatic a moment or event, such as the conversion of St. Paul, brought this about, but we can surmise that Confucius experienced alignment in his heart/mind with “heaven and earth,” himself wholly surrendering to the human destination of according with the higher destiny and higher nature unique to the human species. In the instruction manual, *The Great Learning*, the corresponding stage of its six stages, the fourth and final in the existential quest before returning to the community, is named 安-an. (Pinto 2012, p. 37) The character 安-an has several meanings, such as *peace, comfort, fitting, anchorage*, all of which describe the optimal state possible in this psychic zone. The previous three stages are (1) knowing (the goal or end), (2) being sure and (3) being tranquil. Each of these already implies that they are comfort zones when we attain knowledge, certainty or tranquillity. Most commentaries do not elaborate on this fourth stage. However, Professor Nan Huai-jing (1918-2012) of Taiwan, a prominent lecturer on Chinese classics and spiritual teacher, postulates that 安-an represents the most profound “comfort zone” through identification with the mysteries. In that most profound peace, you are that mystery or you simply are: you immediately recognize rootedness. Like homecoming, you are completely one with your anchorage of self where all manifestation retreats into the point of mystery or nothingness. (Nan, *The Great Learning*, vol. 1, p. 96).

Professor Nan also postulates that the meditative aspect of Confucian training, akin to Taoist meditation, was the technique that merged into the making of Zen. According to tradition, meditation was first taught by Huang Ti (2697?-2598? BCE), the Yellow Emperor, and later revived by Laozi as a Taoist practice. As Huang Ti was cultural ancestor to Confucius as well, we cannot unfairly deny Confucius' knowledge of esoterica.

From the monomyth, Joseph Campbell corroborates that "centered in this hub-point, the question of selfishness in altruism disappears. The individual has lost himself in the law and been reborn in identity with the whole meaning of the universe." (1949, p380) At this stage, immanence is recognized and experienced. But total immanence is probably what Confucius describes as his attainment at age 70, when he feels no gap between desire and mandate, suggesting that his egoic center has merged with a larger center. Joseph Campbell similarly describes that the aim of the hero's journey is

not to see but to realize that one *is* that essence; then one is free to wander as that essence in the world... The essence of oneself and the essence of the world: these two are one..."...just as the way of social participation may lead in the end to a realization of the All in the individual, so that of exile brings the hero to the Self in all. (p.386)

Though the I Ching is also Confucius' great myth, the chasm of latter-day Chinese tradition would divide him from Jung until Jung discovers that "accordance with nature" is analogous to the Taoist quest via the Golden Flower.

IV. PRIZE OF THE JOURNEY: VIRTUE EXISTENTIALLY

In folk myths, the prize carries symbolic meanings from the deep and is open to interpretation. Perseus's Medusa, Hercules' Labors and Theseus' Minotaur each bode great danger, including loss of life. But vanquishing monstrosities, the heroes achieve new stature as super-human beings befitting their nativity as children of divinity or acknowledging the possible divinity realized in the human—echoing Zisi's "matching and participating with heaven." In a direct lineage, the heroes of the three literary epics, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid* and *The Divine Comedy*, all descend to Hades for immersion in the dreaded realm for knowledge of their duty, for foresight and insight: Aeneas for his current role in the founding of the Great Roman Empire 1,000 years hence; Dante for a Christian vision of the soul's possible afterlife. Gilgamesh also learns of the nether realm from his friend, the dying Enkidu.

Confucius' corresponding encounter at age 50, is the experience of 知-*realize* 天-*heaven* 命-*mandate* as he descends into a zone beyond consciousness.

The same phrase "heaven-mandate" opens the *Zhongyong*: "Heaven-mandate-is-your nature," prompting the reminder that Confucius is in the metaphysical realm that endows us with the nature we must accord with. The "prize" is made clear. For the literary heroes, there can be no revelation prior to attaining virtue, as virtue necessitates opening appropriately the channels for psychic energy to be properly directed, enabling the proper understanding and use of knowledge.

How to "channel" virtue is based on the realization that in everyday life the outcome depends on how energy is wielded in a given situation. Should one apply force or should one yield? The choice does not hang on expediency, but rather on existential self-actualization (i.e., to be on par with heaven in the trinity). If for no other reason that Confucius wanted 50 more years to study the I Ching, psychologists can all understand that we cannot know enough to totally grasp the complexity of personality and situations the client is nested in, from the chair in front of us to the existential beyond our control, in order to dispense the perfect intervention.

Professor Nan proposes that the I Ching is the study of the principle of attraction, desire and affect being the human version. In themselves the lines of the I Ching are self-contained and don't move. Once stimulated by desire, they reach for the ends of the earth and stir up all kinds of situations. (Xici v1, p.313) The object is to detect "right conduct," as right conduct "underlies cosmos, inhabits every created thing..." (Campbell 1949, p. 152).

Confucius' prize, therefore, is to impart the management of psychic energy to guide behavior based on the participation of the entire collective in mutual actualization. The Chinese call it *de*-德-*virtue* and the portals through which virtue-in-action is channeled is called *li*-禮-*protocol, ritual, etiquette*.

禮-*li* is the protocol of connectivity among heaven-human-earth. "Heaven weaves things together with it (*li*)...Earth measures things against it, and men model their conduct on it... *Li* works out the relationship of high and low, like sorting silk threads! It is the warp and woof of Heaven and Earth; *li* is what renews the people's life." (*Zhozhuan* 左傳 10:25, McNaughton, p.3)

In human relationships, the responsibilities to access and play out these relationships led to the codification of ethics and rules.

Upon the shift of the hero's ego center to be subsumed by the Self center at the heart of all humanity and all phenomena, the quest to transform everyone in the world to do the same is now, without question, the hero's personal/universal desire. In fact, it is everyone's heaven-mandated personal life's work, whatever their capacity.

V. THE RETURN:

Rollo May (1991) writes, "Every culture has to have myths, [as] cultural myths guide life and behavior." Worldwide, mythical heroes all strive towards the path of virtue. Furthermore, they all mind the communal journey not only by the role they fulfill with their talents, but also by serving the community through work and being a model and guide.

Gilgamesh returns home a better king. Odysseus, post heroics, is an example of the appreciation of home, where virtue is the defense of family, home and kingdom, so that the heart can be at peace and at rest. As for Aeneas, who has to establish virtue before being allowed on the path leading to knowledge of destiny, the sign of divine approval came with the Golden Bough yielding easily to him. But in addition, he had to fulfill his communal obligation: to bury his comrade Misenus. Arjuna also has to do his duty, for which Krishna reveals a large picture of the cosmos, in which the hero is embedded.

Dante's reclaiming his virtuous self is the most telling. When his guide Virgil scolded him for gawking at sinners in Circle 8, (Inferno, Canto 22), he flushed with shame—at that instant he presented visceral proof that he was redeemed back to his original self. The psychic mission accomplished, he was ready for visions of purgatory and heaven. Jung's return to the collective upon reading *Golden Flower* to work on deep psychic structures undergirding behavior is the turning point when he becomes identified with his enormous contributions to the understanding of the human psyche.

Because Confucius is more readily identified with the virtue that has guided China than with its myths, it appears difficult to make a case for the importance of myths in China. But China had a plethora of myths, scintillating myths of creation, enchanting tales that are still alive and well in folk arts, drama and the oral tradition and in scholarly compilations, such as the two-volume post-Han Dynasty *Creation of the Gods*. Relieved of the task to bear the ponderous themes of Western myths by the grand myth of the I Ching, these retain the stature of folk and fairy tales. One could say that early myth-making in

China had been intercepted by Fuxi who, by synthesizing mythological meanings into the 64 hexagrams to offer patterns of the universe as based on dispensation of the energy of natural forces, blocked the spawning of Chinese variations on especially the hero theme. The process is not unlike Campbell's distilling to the monomyth or Jung's discovery of the archetypes of the unconscious.

As the I Ching is an abstraction of the vicissitudes of our existential journey, it fills the place in the Chinese mind that "cry for a collective myth which gives a specific spot in an otherwise chaotic universe" (May, p.53), eclipsing the rest of the myths. The four sages, Fuxi, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius, seeing usefulness in it, successfully lifted its wisdom into mainstream culture. The process took over 500 years for Confucius' teachings to be adopted as state philosophy.

Confucius' public recognition, though, unwittingly changed the cultural situation. Teaching the essence of the myths, sans the original narratives, bore out Campbell's observation that when we demythologize, the mundane loses the vitality of myth and fantasy (p.). That is, when we fleece the myth to focus on only the essential teaching—the myth become lifeless. We lose the symbolic suggestions told by the story and are left with brittle precepts and roles of behavior. This was indeed the case when the fruits of Confucius' hero journey were adopted by the Empire as not just the protocol of conduct and government, but the core of qualifying exams to select government officials—a practice that lasted almost 2,000 years. Did the scholars undergo the hero's journey? Did any candidate in the 19 centuries of the Imperial Examination experience the life-giving wonders of the hero's journey? The challenge of scholarship rather than the boon at the heart of the hero's journey had become an aspirant's "prize." Add to this picture the designation School of Scholars, the official name by which the Confucians have been known for two millennia.

With Confucius' philosophy pared down to a system of ethics and his aphorisms to random insights that sporadically guide action, no wonder Confucius is not discoverable for what he truly is. Known worldwide, but what is he really known for? That probably is why Confucius has not found solid foothold in the Western world. He is neither this, nor that, in the Western configuration of things. "In the twentieth century this central role of the holy in Confucius's teaching has been largely ignored because we have failed to grasp the existential point of that teaching." (Fingarette, p.1) With the same insight, Hall and Ames suggest re-connecting with Confucius through the existential perspective.

There are positive comments to conclude with. With Confucianism implemented as the official way, Europeans of the Enlightenment did see the Celestial Empire run well, its populace relatively happy. It also instilled the possibility for the cultural regulation of archetypes, which we can study in the psychology of the Chinese. With the tumultuous history of the past 160 years effectively stripping clean the outcropping of the legacy, there is no better time than today to come to terms with the authentic Confucius, who does have something to offer in light of the universal hero's journey. We of any culture can relate with him, human to human, interpret his direct and simple instructions and find out "What prize?" for us.

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