

Confucius and the Recluses

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Abstract

The relationship between Confucius and the recluses is very complex. Confucius respects the recluses while criticizes them. The fundamental reason is that they have different understandings of the world and human mission. The recluses pursue personal freedom, and Confucius believes that as a part of society, humans cannot give up their responsibilities. Confucius believes that seclusion can only be partially achieved, complete seclusion from the world is impossible. The recluses also have an influence on Confucius, which makes his personality more flexible. Confucius does not completely negate the recluses. He draws on the reasonable factors of the recluses' thought, making later Confucians to have a transcendent mind even under a heavy coat. Confucius does not go to extremes. His concept of seclusion reflects his superb wisdom in seizing opportunities and the idea of following the Middle Way, which is also a reflection of his philosophy of benevolence.

Key Words: Confucius; Recluses; The View of Seclusion; Opportunity; Destiny

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Preface

It is generally believed that Confucius is a secular sage. He served in politics in the state of Lu for four years, and then traveled to other countries for fourteen years, all of which were to achieve his political ideal of restoring the rites of Zhou dynasty. However, after reading *the Analects*, we will find that there is also a transcendent aspect in Confucius' thought. *The Analects* recorded the men who withdrew from society and some recluses, and Confucius' attitude towards them was worth pondering. The men who withdrew from society were historical figures, while the recluses were contemporaries of Confucius. Their evaluation of Confucius and Confucius' response reflect different choices on value, and the logic behind it is worth thinking. This article takes Confucius and the recluses as a topic, examining Confucius' concept of seclusion and his exploration of the meaning of life.

Part I . The Recluses in *the Analects*

There were at least six recluses clearly recorded in *the Analects*, namely the Stone Gate keeper, the man carrying a basket, Jie Yu, the Madman of Chu, Zhang Ju and Jie Ni, an old man carrying a basket on a staff over his shoulder. Furthermore, according to Zhu Xi's point of view, the border official of Yi may also must be a recluse. They either chose to live in seclusion due to their indifference or their desire to escape the dark politics.

1. Stone Gate keeper

Zi-lu put up for the night at the Stone Gate. The gatekeeper said, "Where have you come from?"

Zi-lu said, "From the Kong's."

“Is that the Kong who keeps working towards a goal the realization of which he knows to be hopeless?” (14.38)

The Stone Gate keeper had an accurate evaluation. Literally, the gatekeeper seemed to have mocked Confucius, but the mockery also reflected a hint of empathy. After all, the consensus between Confucius and the gatekeeper was that “knowing it is impossible”, which highlighted the distance between ideals and reality, which anyone with a slight intellectual sensitivity could appreciate. Judging from this, the gatekeeper was by no means a simple low-level official. He was clear about Confucius’ political views and had a clear understanding of the current situation. He believed that the world was declining and could not be changed solely by personal effort, so he chose to be a minor official who did not care about the world and was willing to live a secluded and mundane life. If Confucius knew it was impossible and did it, then the gatekeeper would know it was impossible but did not do it.

2. The man carrying a basket

While the Master was playing the stone chimes in Wei, a man who passed in front of the door, carrying a basket, said, “The way he plays the stone chimes is fraught with frustrated purpose.” Presently he added, “How squalid this stubborn sound is. If no one understand him, then he should give up, that is all.

When the water is deep, go across by wading;

When it is shallow, lift your hem and cross.”

The Master said, “That would be resolute indeed. Against such resoluteness there can be no argument.” (14.39)

According to *the Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian, Confucius deeply understood the way of governing the country and promoted his governing philosophy to the feudal lords. He recommended himself to seventy

rulers, but none of them were willing to use him. Confucius did not have a stage to show his talents, seeing time gradually pass by, he felt frustrated from the bottom of heart. Being able to understand one's thoughts from the sound of the stone chimes, the man undoubtedly had a high level of cultural taste and artistic cultivation, and was by no means an ordinary person. However, while sympathizing with Confucius, the man inevitably criticized him.

The Master said, "It is not the failure of others to appreciate your abilities that should trouble you, but rather your failure to appreciate theirs." (1.16) Since Confucius did not suffer from the ignorance of others, why he felt frustrated? It is obvious that Confucius' depression indicated that his heart was full of contradictions. "When the water is deep, go across by wading; When it is shallow, lift your hem and cross." This is a quotation from *the Book of Songs*. The man used water as a metaphor for society. The metaphor of deep water indicated that society was very dark and one could do nothing; and shallow water metaphorically meant that the degree of darkness was not deep, and one could prevent oneself from being contaminated. Nowadays, society is very dark, and it is not easy to preserve oneself. Where else is there time to care about the world?

3. Jie Yu, the Madman of Chu

Jie Yu, the Madman of Chu, went past Confucius, sing,

Phoenix, oh phoenix!

How thy virtue has declined!

What is past is beyond help,

What is to come is not yet lost.

Give up, give up!

Perilous is the lot of those in office today.

Confucius got down from his carriage with the intention of speaking with

him but the Madman avoid him by hurrying off, and in the end Confucius was unable to speak with him. (18.5)

Jie Yu was from Chu, pretending to be mad to avoid the world. He compared Confucius to a phoenix, which showed his admiration for Confucius' virtues. According to the ancient belief, the phoenix only appears in a world with Way. Nowadays, with the decline of the world, the appearance of the phoenix is a very unfortunate thing. The implication was that Confucius was born out of time. Jie Yu, the Madman of Chu believed that entering politics in today's era was a dangerous thing, and he suggested that Confucius should retreat bravely and not do useless work. "Phoenix, oh phoenix! How thy virtue has declined!" This song reminds us of when Confucius was 71 years old, the nobles of the state of Lu captured a kylin while hunting. After learning this news, Confucius was very sad and stopped compiling the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Kylin and phoenix are both auspicious beasts, and they should not appear in chaotic times. Confucius saw the kylin injured and felt his dream shattered. What a great sadness it was! The song seems to suggest to some extent the fate of Confucius in the future.

4. Zhang Ju and Jie Ni

Zhang Ju and Jie Ni were ploughing together yoked as a team. Confucius went past them and sent Zi-lu to ask them where the ford was.

Zhang Ju said, "Who is that taking charge of the carriage?"

Zi-lu said, "It is Kong Qiu."

"Then, he must be the Kong Qiu of Lu."

"He is."

"Then, he doesn't have to ask where the ford is."

Zi-lu asked Jie Ni.

Jie Ni said, "Who are you?"

"I am Zhong You."

“Then you must be the disciple of Kong Qiu of Lu?”

Zi-lu answered, “I am.”

“Throughout the Empire men are all the same. Who is there for you to change place with? Moreover, for your own sake, would it not be better if, instead of following a Gentleman who keeps running away from men, you followed one who runs away from the world together?”

All the while he carried on harrowing without interruption.

Zi-lu went and reported what was said to Confucius.

The Master was lost in thought for a while and said, “One cannot associate with birds and beasts. Am I not a member of this human race? Who, then, is there for me to associate with? While the Way is to be found in the Empire, I will not change place with him.” (18.6)

Faced with Zi-lu’s question, the two of them not only did not answer directly, but also used the question to satirize Confucius. The implication was that Confucius had such great knowledge and lofty aspirations, and of course he knew where the ford was. The ford is a metaphor, symbolizing the way out of the world. They believed that Confucius’ avoidance was not thorough, and advised Zi-lu to avoid the bad world rather than the bad people, which can be understood as their “guidance”. There are two ways of seclusion, namely to “avoid the world” and to “avoid the people”. They likened the world to a place of flooding, suggesting that individuals were insignificant in the face of the times, and Confucius’ efforts were ultimately in vain. The gatekeeper of the Stone Gate knew he was powerless, so he didn’t do it. Zhang Ju and Jie Ni knew they were powerless, too, so they fled. Confucius, who was hidden in his body but not in his heart, could not gain the understanding of the secular world or the recluses, and would only bring troubles to himself. The recluses insist an idea that true concealment is both physical and mental concealment, avoiding both bad people

and the bad world.

5. An old man

Zi-lu, when travelling with, fell behind. He met an old man, carrying a basket on a staff over his shoulder.

Zi-lu asked, "Have you seen my Master?"

The old man said, "You seem neither to have toiled with your limbs nor to be able to tell one kind of grain from another. Who may your Master be?" He planted his staff in the ground and started weeding.

Zi-lu stood, cupping one hand respectfully in the other.

The old man invited Zi-lu to stay for the night. He killed a chicken and prepared some millet for his guest to eat, and presented his two sons to him.

The next day, Zi-lu resumed his journey and reported this conversation. The Master said, "He must be a recluse." He sent Zi-lu back to see him again. When he arrived, the old man has departed. (18.7)

Confucius and his disciples did not engage in production activities, but ran around in vain, therefore they were ridiculed by the old man. Due to Zi-lu's respectful attitude, the old man invited him to his home as a guest, while when Confucius asked Zi-lu to go back and see him again, he walked away.

The old man's behavior exhibited duality. On the one hand, he did not agree with the conduct of Confucius and his disciples traveling around the world, on the other hand, he also treated and respected the disciples of the Confucian with kindness. When Zi-lu stayed at the old man's house, he should have had a conversation with him and his two sons to let them further understand the teachings and thoughts of Confucius.

In summary, these recluses had a clear tendency towards seclusion, refusing to cooperate with politics to maintain their personal independence. This kind

of spiritual temperament was closer to Taoism. However, they were different from pure Taoism, which had no expectations for politics at all. Chen Guying said, “The recluses have an extremely keen eye for observing society, and their feelings of the world’s injustice are more painful than ordinary people. They belong to a group of people with extremely cold eyes and extremely hot hearts.” Chen Guying, Baixi (2001:77). Although the recluses avoided politics, they were extremely concerned about the world and had a strong sense of concern. They expressed their concern for society and politics via critical means. The achievements of Confucius in his political career in the state of Lu had a certain international influence, and his departure from his homeland and wandering around sparked discussions throughout the empire. The recluses should have a certain understanding of Confucius. They also had some sympathy for Confucius, but did not recognize his actions.

Part II . Confucius’ Attitude towards the Recluses

The recluses were self-sufficient and had a high level of cultural cultivation. Confucius respected them, even envied their natural way of life. Confucius heard the song of Jie Yu, the Madman of Chu, and wanted to get off the carriage to talk to him. Upon hearing Zi-lu’s report on his conversation with the old man, it was concluded that he was a recluse and hoped to meet him. Although the recluses criticized Confucius, Confucius hoped to communicate with them. Entering the world or escaping from the world is a personal choice. Confucius believed that any choice had its own rationality and was worthy of understanding and respecting. Confucius’ ideas had strong inclusiveness.

There are various types of seclusion, and their depth also varies.

The Master said, “Men who shun the world come first; those who shun a

particular place come next; those who shun a hostile look come next; those who shun hostile words come last.” (14.37)

Shunning the world is to avoid chaotic times. Shunning a particular place is to avoid chaotic states. Shunning a hostile look and hostile words is to avoid people who speak harshly or cleverly, which is essentially avoiding people. The recluses belonged to the category of shunning the world, while Confucius belonged to the category of shunning a particular place. Confucius gave high praise to the recluses who shunned the world, calling them “wise men”, believing that they maintained their noble characters.

However, Confucius ultimately did not choose to avoid the world.

Aristotle believes that humans are political animals. “Birds and beasts” represent a natural state that helps maintain human nature, but this is only an ideal and does not exist in real life. To survive and develop, one cannot avoid dealing with others. In the process of dealing with others, economic life, political life, and community life develop. The criticism of the recluses is reasonable, and their actions are also worthy of respect, but their actions are not worth emulating. As everyone retreats to the mountains and forests, the community will lose its foundation of existence. To take a step back, even if the recluse retreats to the mountains and forests, politics still exist. Where there are crowds, there must be politics. Politics is what human life can't be lack of, where can humans escape?

Confucius said, “One cannot associate with birds and beasts. Am I not a member of this human race? Who, then, is there for me to associate with?” There has always been controversy over the interpretation of this question. The author has no intention of joining the debate, but hopes to gain some understanding by analyzing Zi-lu's comments through the method of “interpreting the classics through the classics”.

Zi-lu commented, “Not to enter public life is to ignore one’s duty. Even the proper regulation of old and young cannot be set aside. How, then, can the duty between ruler and subject be set aside? This is to cause confusion in the most important of human relationships simply because one desired to keep unsullied one’s character. The gentleman takes office in order to do his duty. As for putting the Way into practice, he knows all along that it is hopeless.” (18.7)

“Entering public life” means entering politics, and the purpose of entering politics is to enforce morality and righteousness throughout the world. The old man entertained Zi-lu and invited his two sons to meet him, indicating that he still had a sense of the “proper regulation of old and young” in his mind. The “proper regulation of old and young” represents human ethics and is a manifestation of politics within the family. Since the “proper regulation of old and young” cannot be set aside, how can the “duty between ruler and subject” be set aside? The “duty between ruler and subject” is an extension and expansion of the “proper regulation of old and young”. People share the same heart, and they hope for a “proper regulation of old and young” in their families. Why don’t others hope for it? By extension, how can politics not exist? The recluses’ avoidance of the world may seem the deepest and most thorough on the surface, but they have abandoned the responsibility and mission of scholars towards society, which is a manifestation of “lacking of justice”.

From this perspective, associating with people is for the sake of achieving the Way, while associating with birds and beasts, even if one is a sage, is just a small path. The difference between the two choices is like the Mahayana and Hinayana in Buddhism. There was no Way in the world, and Confucius’ ideals cannot be realized. He was clear about this undoubtedly. Why did Confucius have to live in such a restless way? Just because this is what he should do.

Confucianism emphasizes the unity of knowledge and action, striving to do what is necessary without any utilitarian considerations. The recluse believes that if something cannot be done, it should not be done, while the Confucian believes that although something cannot be done, it should still be done. To some degree, saving the country and the people is Confucius' mission, at least in his mind.

Confucius also wanted to pursue carefree life, which can be seen from a dialogue with his disciples. When he asked Zen Dian if someone did appreciate his ability, then how he would do about things. Zen Dian's reply was so much splendid and inspiring, while Confucius' response was profound.

In the late spring, after the spring clothes have been newly made, I should like, together with five or six adults and six or seven boys, to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry.

The Master sighed and said, "I am all in favour of Dian." (11.26)

But he knew that in real life, one must ultimately take responsibility, which is where human destiny lies. We can observe Confucius' self-awareness towards the mandate of heaven through the evaluation of Confucius by the border official of Yi.

The border official of Yi requested an audience, saying, "I have never been denied an audience by any gentleman who has come to this place." The followers presented him.

When he came out, he said, "What worry have you, gentlemen, about the loss of office? The Empire has long been without the Way. Heaven is about to use your Master as the wooden tongue for a bell." (3.24)

The wooden tongue for a bell is an instrument with a rich and warm sound. In ancient times, when the government had something important to announce, the officials would ring this bell and gather the crowd to listen. The border official of

Yi compared Confucius to the wooden tongue for a bell, aiming to illustrate that heaven wanted Confucius to be the mentor of the people, to alert and educate the world, and to return the world from chaos to order. Confucius also had a clear understanding of this. He said, “Heaven is author of the virtue that is in me. What can Huan Tui do to me?”¹ (7.23) Confucius’ self-awareness and full confidence in his own mission was very clear.

If there is a Way in the world, why didn’t Confucius not want to enjoy himself like a recluse? Although Confucius’ avoidance of particular place and avoidance of particular people may seem contradictory, he retained his pursuit of morality in seclusion and did not lose faith in the Way he walked. He pursued morality in a more tortuous way. Compared to avoiding the world, the practice of avoiding particular places and particular people is more difficult, because it needs to withstand pressure from both sides, which is why the persistence of Confucius and his disciples is particularly precious. It requires extremely high practical wisdom, and any stubbornness towards certain principles often leads to the opposite result.

Based on the above analysis, Confucius’ attitude towards the recluses was complex. On the one hand, he agreed with the recluses’ avoidance, and he himself was also avoiding, which is the similarity between them. On the other hand, he also criticized the recluses’ way of avoiding, believing that although avoiding the world may seem noble, it cannot be achieved and will cause fundamental damage to human relationships. Relatively speaking, avoiding particular place and particular people is more feasible, which not only demonstrates one’s principles but also does not give up on upholding morality.

1 This was said on the occasion when Huan Tui, the Minister of War in Song, attempted to kill him.

Part III. Confucius' View on Seclusion

In addition to the six recluses in his era, Confucius also introduced some ancient recluses. By combining the two, we can have a more comprehensive understanding of Confucius' concept of seclusion.

Men who withdrew from society: Bo Yi, Shu Qi, Yu Zhong, Yi Yi, Zhu Zhang, Liu Xia Hui, Shao Lian. The Master commented, "Not to lower their purpose or to allow themselves to be humiliated describes, perhaps, Bo Yi and Shu Qi." Of Liu Xia Hui and Shao Lian he said, "They, indeed, lowered their purpose and allowed themselves to be humiliated, but their words were in accord with their station, and their deeds with circumspection. That was all." Of Yu Zhong and Yi Yi he said, "They lived as recluses and gave free rein to their words. Thus they accorded, in their persons, with purity, and, in their words, with the right measure for the occasion. I, however, am different. I have no preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible." (18.8)

Confucius divided the recluses into three categories, he praised and admired them, but believed that he was different from them, which was reflected in his choice of values.

Confucius said, "I, however, am different. I have no preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible." It is worth noticing, as it shares similarities and differences with Confucius' philosophy of "refusing to insist on certainty or to be inflexible". (9.4) "Permissible" and "impermissible" implies a certain preset, which is a choice made based on certain standards. Anything that meets the standards is "permissible", and anything that does not meet the standards is "impermissible". This is a transcendental attitude. Grasping things through definition often leads to paranoia in practice, especially when it comes to moral

judgment. Practical affairs are extremely complicated, and a simple definition cannot exhaust all possibilities. Having knowledge alone is not enough.

Therefore, the idea of righteousness was introduced. Confucius said, “In his dealing with the world the gentleman is not invariably for or against anything. He is on the side of what is moral.” (4.10) “What is moral” is the meaning that should be, closely related to timing. Mencius said,

When it was proper to go into office, then to go into it; when it was proper to keep retired from office, then to keep retired from it; when it was proper to continue in it long, then to continue in it long; when it was proper to withdraw from it quickly, then to withdraw quickly: that was the way of Confucius. (Chap II, Part I, 22)

Bo Yi among the sages was the pure one; Yi Yin was the one most inclined to take office; Liu Xiaohui was the accommodating one; and Confucius was the timeous one. In Confucius we have what is called a complete concert. (Chap VI, Part II, 5)

The pure one, the one most inclined to take office, the accommodating one are only one certain aspect of the “sage”, and are something that has been determined. Only Confucius, as the “sage of time”, has no specific nature. In his point of view, everything changes with the changing circumstances. This may seem lacking in regulation, but in practice it is a high level of wisdom. If wisdom is predetermined, it will lead to stubborn persistence and therefore cannot be considered wisdom. The “sage of time” means constantly changing. There are no specific standards, everything changes more in accordance with the practical situation. Such superb practical wisdom is certainly a culmination, and the “complete concert” is just a metaphor.

Closely related to “righteousness” is “benevolence”. Confucius said, “For Gentleman of purpose and men of benevolence while it is inconceivable that

they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished.” (15.9) “To have benevolence accomplished” refers to improving one’s own moral character and achieving morality. Individual achievement of benevolence cannot be separated from society. In Confucius’ view, personal value must be combined with social value, only by this way, can one have the opportunity to realize the pursuit. The recluses pursue personal integrity while neglect their responsibility to society, which is a manifestation of inhumanity. In short, Confucius’ contemplation of taking office and seclusion is closely related to his contemplation of benevolence and righteousness.

As mentioned above, the recluse is both physically and mentally hidden, Confucius is physically hidden but not mentally hidden, and he has not completely lost hope for the world. “It is Man who is capable of broadening the Way. It is not the Way that is capable of broadening Man”. (15.29) Through human efforts, one can do some things. In Confucius’ view, seclusion was only a temporary means, on the contrary it is silently accumulating strength and waiting for opportunities. Once the time was ripe, one ought to enter the world and engage in politics to achieve their ideals. This is not for personal gain, but for the public good of the world.

A gentleman prioritizes righteousness and is the bearer of value, unlike the ordinary people. It is precisely because of this that Confucius said,

“I live in retirement in order to attain my purpose and practice what is right in order to realize my way.” I have heard such a claim, but I have yet to meet such a man. (16.11)

The ordinary people may choose to completely retire, but gentlemen cannot. Once gentlemen also retire, then the Way cannot be realized. From this perspective, we can have a deeper understanding of Zi-lu’s comment. Only

when there is no Way in the world can one escape, as long as there is still a glimmer of hope, one should strive hard. Confucius' seclusion was not thorough enough in eyes of the recluses, but Confucius chose it to preserve the possibility of practicing the Way.

Confucius once said, "Let yourself be seen when the Way prevails in the Empire, but keep out of sight when it does not." (8.13) Confucius believes that the world will not remain without the Way, so seclusion is only temporary. Hiding is due to helplessness, it is a temporary expedient, and ultimately, one must enter the world and enter politics to achieve the ideal of serving the people. Confucius took morality as his responsibility. Although his seclusion may seem negative and contradictory, it actually embodies the spirit of a gentleman who strives for self-improvement and upholds virtue. There is no Way in the world, whether it has truly become an irreparable flood as Jie Ni said, we need to do it to know. This is not the object of theoretical speculation. Even if one really wants to retire, they can only retire after doing their best, which means that destiny cannot be violated. As long as there is possibility, even a little, one must strive to do their job well, so as to feel at ease.

If we look at it literally, there is indeed some records in *the Analects* that Confucius wanted to escape.

The Master said, "Should the Way fail to prevail and I were to put to sea on a raft." (5.7)

The Master wanted to settle amongst the Nine Barbarian Tribes of the east. (9.14)

In the past, most interpretations believed that Confucius was complaining and harboring hidden thoughts of seclusion. Based on the previous analysis, we may have a new understanding, that is to say, Confucius went to the sea and the Nine Barbarian Tribes of the east to pursue his own ideals and realize the

Way. Maybe, drawing a blueprint for cultural construction on a blank sheet of paper makes it easier and more successful to implement. The sea and the Nine Barbarian Tribes are both cultural fringe areas, and the difficulty of realizing the Way is relatively high, but it is not impossible. Wang Yangming, a prominent Confucian in Ming dynasty, was demoted to Longchangyi in Guizhou province, where he could still give lectures and promote local cultural development.

The lowest recluses are hidden in the forest, middle ones are hidden in the city, and the highest ones are hidden in the court. By analyzing Confucius' concept of seclusion, we can see his understanding of issues such as the gentleman, the Way of Heaven, benevolence and righteousness, timing, destiny, and mission. Confucius insists, "A man has no way of becoming a gentleman unless he understands Destiny". (20.3) The mission of a gentleman is to uphold morality, but one should not make meaningless sacrifices. When conditions are not ripe, one needs to work hard to cultivate oneself and wait for the right moment. His concept of seclusion is ultimately based on the pursuit of the Way, which is more positive and in line with the Middle Way compared to the recluses, and is also more feasible.

Conclusion

When we look back at the charm of Chinese recluses, Confucius naturally becomes the logical starting point of thinking. Although the recluses before Confucius and those who lived with him had seclusion behavior, they did not consciously engage in systematic thinking about seclusion behavior. Confucius' entering the world and leaving the world, as well as his official career and seclusion, were based on the Way. Confucius did not persist in seclusion, and he saw through it that there was no seclusion. Therefore, he could not be

stubborn in certain concepts and lose the opportunity to promote benevolence and righteousness. Confucians take morality as their responsibility and often give the impression of living a burdened life. However, the addition of reclusive thinking allows Confucians to have a wider range of choices in moral cultivation. Gentlemen should cherish their own body, learn to be cautious of solitude, and strive to cultivate themselves when the time is not right. When the time is right, one can work for the country and the people, realizing the ideal of being both a saint and a king. Confucius' concept of seclusion can be summarized as follows: go forward when employed and to stay out of sight when set aside. (7.11)

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