

PART I

Historical Perspectives

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FRIENDSHIP IN THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION

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Historical Perspectives: Friendship in the Confucian Tradition

This chapter examines how friendship has been represented and assessed in the Confucian tradition, and particularly in classical Confucian texts such as the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. Several features of Confucian thinking about friendship are discussed. First, friendship in the Confucian and later imperial tradition is sometimes viewed with suspicion, as having the potential to be subversive. In addition, it has been largely subservient to the family, with the latter also influencing understandings of friendship. Next, an influential account of friendship in the classical texts will be explored: friendship as a relationship that contributes to the Confucian ideal of personal cultivation. Finally, I explore how the Confucian tradition might yield novel or neglected conceptions of friendship, and outline one such form: friendship based on shared social events rather than regard for personal character.

Confucian Doubts about Friendship and Its Subservience to Family

In the Western philosophical tradition, friendship, however its details are spelled out, is often admired and idealized. Aristotle lauded close friendship based on character, while modern manifestations are valued for their cherishing of individuality, as a liberation from tradition and non-voluntary social bonds, or as a relationship of equality or sharing.¹ In the Chinese literary and philosophical tradition, however, the reception of friendship historically does not neatly align with such positive portrayals. A contemporary cultural theorist in Taiwan observes that, while for many metropolitan audiences around the world “friend” is a ubiquitous and informative designation, “this is rarely the case in the Sinophone world” (Wei-cheng Chu 2017: 169). In Sinophone cultural contexts, calling someone a friend (*pengyou*) does not necessarily constitute a satisfactory summary of that relationship; it invites the further question: “*What kind of friend?*” (Chu 170). Answers often allude to other forms of relatedness, such as former classmate (*tongxue*), colleague (*tongshi*), or “brother-in-arms” (*xiongdi*, a term that describes close male relations by analogy with brothers).

Two points follow from this dissatisfaction with the term “friendship” and the demand for clarification, and both are helpful in understanding friendship in the Confucian tradition. The first is the emphasis on understanding the individual and their relationships in terms of the social roles and other relationships in which they are embedded. In particular, family (understood broadly, to include extended webs of kinship) and family-like relationships (including fictive kin) are especially

important in Confucian thought and have influenced how friendship is understood and assessed. Second, friendship, insofar as it is a nonhierarchical relationship that exists outside of the institutions and customs that structure social life, “clearly remains suspicious in the eyes of Sinophone beholders” (Chu 170).

The rise of globalization and cross-cultural exchange means that friendship is increasingly a universally recognized and widely valued relationship. Contemporary China is no exception to this trend. Yet the tradition within China that treats friendship with suspicion has deep roots.² For example, a popular form of literature, dating back to before the Qin dynasty was founded (c. 221 BCE), was “household instruction” (*jiaxun*). A famous example is “Family instructions of Master Yan” (*Yanshi jiaxun*) by Yan Zhitui (531–591) (See Zhu 2008). These texts featured prescriptions about how family members should behave. Friends, considered family outsiders, were usually presented as a threat to domestic harmony (Huang 2007: 2).

Friendship aroused concern – at least in influential written texts circulated among literate elites – for several reasons. Poorly chosen friendship could cause harm to oneself. The *Analects* (*Lunyu*), a collection of sayings attributed to Confucius (c. 551–497 BCE) and the most canonical of Confucian texts, identifies three types of harmful friendship: “with the obsequious, the double-faced, and those who use cunning words” (16.4). However, the potential harm of friendship was not merely personal; it was also social and political, affecting family and the state.

Ambivalence about friendship’s value can be traced back to the notion of five cardinal relationships (*wulun*) in traditional thought. Descriptions of a core set of foundational human relationships date back to early Chinese texts, and had far-reaching social and political implications. Such accounts are found in the *Mencius* (3A3, 7A15, and 7B24), the *Zhongyong* or *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and the *Xunzi*.³ Although a settled set of five relationships appears only in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) (Hsu 1970), family and kin relationships have been prominent in Confucian discourse across the ages.

The first four are the relationships between father and son, ruler and minister, husband and wife, and older and younger brother; friendship is the fifth relationship. The first four relationships were typically hierarchical and integral to orthodox Confucian prioritizing of family and state. Each of these relationships yielded clearly distinguished social roles, with accompanying duties, and which sustained family and state. The place of personal friendship within this social structure was less clear. Although friendship can encompass generic duties or customary norms (e.g., Telfer 1970; Shields 2015: 36), it is often valued because it allows individuals to find meaningful and nurturing relationships beyond the non-voluntary commitments of the kinship. But this lack of customary expectation and normative guidance is a reason why, in the Chinese literary tradition, “friendship was traditionally deemed the least essential” of the five relationships (Huang 2007: 2).

But why did the other four bonds traditionally take precedence over friendship in orthodox Confucian thought? One reason is that family and state were traditionally intertwined. In the early Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE), for example, a centrally located suzerain emperor usually maintained control by enfeoffing relatives in vassal states, or by marriage, thereby creating a network of loyal rulers sustained by kinship (Pulleyblank 2000: 7–10; Khayutina 2014). In the later imperial dynastic system, which lasted from the unification of China under the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) until the collapse of the Qing dynasty in the twentieth century, the family was a model for the state. The tenets of this system appear in the early Confucian texts. *Analects* 1.2 stresses filial conduct, while 2.21 reads: “Just being filial to your parents and befriending your brothers is carrying out the work of government”; the *Mencius* notes, “The empire has its basis in the state, the state in the family, and the family in one’s own self” (4A5, trans. Lau 2004: 120). This family–state dynamic is also present in modern history (Yue Du 2021).

The Chinese term for a state – *guojia* – is comprised of “nation,” *guo* 國, and “family,” *jia* 家.⁴ This indicated, ideologically at least, that kinship and the state were closely connected. Within this family–state, the foundational social bond was the bond between father and son, which “occupies a paradigmatic place among the *wulun* [five relationships]” (CI Jiwei 1999: 329). Crucial to this

bond was the Confucian virtue of filial piety (*xiao* 孝). *Xiao* was important in the Analects (1.6, 2.5–2.7, 2.21, 4.18–21, and 19.17.) as well as the later imperial period (Rosemont and Ames 2008; Knapp 2005).

While *xiao* is multifaceted, one prominent demand was respect for seniority, particularly fathers (see, e.g., *Mencius* 1A7; Yang 1991: 43–9). The bond between younger and older brothers or between senior and junior exhibited similar dynamics: younger brothers deferred (*ti* 悌) to older brothers while older brothers nurtured junior siblings.⁵ The importance of *xiao* and *ti* is confirmed in the *Analects*, which makes them central to the Confucian goal of personal cultivation: “Filial piety and fraternal deference are the root of exemplary conduct (*ren* 仁)” (*Analects*, 1:2; All translations based on Rosemont and Ames 2010).

The relationship of ruler and minister, although a political relation, resembled the father–son relationship. It also readily translated into a ruler–subject relation, in which felt obligation in the family became obedience to the ruler (Ci 1999: 333), who was a father figure to his subjects. Unsurprisingly, some connect such patrilinear family structures with later totalitarianism (Schwartz, 1985: 67–75; Roetz 1993; Hu Shi (1934), though others deny a link between Confucian familial ethics and the state-as-family view (Chan 2004).

Setting aside this issue, however, the emperor’s good treatment of his own family both demonstrated his fitness to rule and served as a model that stimulated emulation among the populace. The good ruler also ensured the material conditions that enabled children to care for parents and elders (*Mencius* 1A7). In contrast, friendship, as a nonfamilial relationship, had little role in sustaining the familial state. It could even obstruct duties to family and states. For example, pursuing the pleasures of friendship could lead to the neglect of filial duties toward parents.

The ubiquity of the family – as both social structure and dominant metaphor of the social imagination – affected, directly or indirectly, thinking about friendship. As one sociologist observes, “Many non-family social relationships were patterned after the family system in terms of structures and values” (King 1985: 58). Arguably, this dominance was an obstacle to theorizing friendship as a voluntary relationship between equal and unencumbered individuals. It led, for example, to a view of friendship as fleeting, momentary and intense in nature, or as a bond between outsiders resisting corruption or bad rulership (Kutcher 2000: 1616).

Friendship was pulled into the orbit of experiences within the family and often understood as an extension of the affections found in family life (though see Lu 2010 for an independent characterization of friendship). A legacy of this familial sensibility is the use of fictive kinship terms in Chinese social relations. This involved familiarizing acquaintances and generating intimacy by drawing on the expectations and emotions of a familial bond. Fictive kinship was prominent historically, such that “those who lacked family ties invented them” (Mann 1997, : 139), and remains widespread today (Jankowiak 2008: 83). This sensibility is well summarized by the twentieth-century Chinese thinker Liang Shuming:

Chinese culture puts importance on human relationships. It expands the familial relationships into broader society beyond the family. For example, a teacher is called “teacher-father” [*shifū*] a schoolmate is called a “school brother” [*xuexiong/xuedi*]. In ways like this, a person always has the close, family-like, intimate feelings. Applying such relationships to society, it seems to bring distant people closer together, to bring outsiders inside. This is the distinguishing feature of China and Chinese culture.

Liang and Alitto 2013: 16

The conceptual space for friendship in public discourse was not entirely eliminated, however. Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci’s (1552–1610) Chinese treatise on friendship fascinated Chinese literati (Ricci 2009). Later, during the decline of the imperial era, friendship became a topic of interest. Some Chinese reformers (e.g., Tan Sitong 1958) looked to the fifth Confucian relationship as the basis for

a new social order, and contemporary political theorists have continued to explore friendship's place in a modern Chinese polity (Dallmayr 2003).

The above discussion highlights some of the obstacles in classical Confucian thought to valuing friendship as a distinct and socially vital relationship. Family and kinship were more heavily theorized and socially more important. However, this does not mean that everyday life did not feature many close friendships that arose as the result of propinquity, shared experiences, and familiarity. Rather, such relationships were not central to the ethics and social structures of Confucian society. Friendship does appear in early Confucian texts, albeit as fragmentary comments and insight rather than as the object of sustained or systematic discussion. The next section surveys some of the ways in which friendship has been conceptualized and related to the core commitments of classical Confucian thought.

Friendship in Classical Confucian Thought

Several Chinese terms or characters associated with the idea of friendship appear in the early texts, and in the even earlier inscriptions found on bronze ritual vessels. These include *you* 友, *peng* 朋, *jiu* 舊, and *gu* 故. The character *you* 友 is the term most often associated with friendship. It appears early in the written records, featuring on oracle bone inscriptions from the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1050 BCE), and on bronze inscriptions from the Western Zhou period (1045–771 BCE) (Vervoorn 2004: 6). The modern character 友 is composed of two hands combined, a left and a right hand, indicating cooperation or amity; early forms of this character featured separate hands, suggesting two people acting in unison (Vervoorn 2004: 6).

Sociocultural context is important to understanding early uses of terms such as *you* 友. In early China, especially the Shang and Zhou dynasties, clan-based forms of social organization were dominant. Networks of patriarchal clan lineages were characterized by ordered webs that combined consanguineal and affinal ties. The later Confucian emphasis on family has its roots in these social structures. During the Western Zhou period, written records on ritual bronze vessels were typically concerned with kin relatives (Khayutina 2003: 121). Consequently, there is broad scholarly consensus that in the earliest texts, from the Western Zhou or Spring and Autumn periods, *you* referred to both non-kin friends and male relatives, particularly those of the same generation such as brothers and cousins (Shields 2015: 32; Tong Shuye 1980: 122; Zhu Fenghan 1990: 292–7; Zhou 2010: 110–11). Some have argued that *you* originally referred to the relationship between younger and older brother, with its meaning then extended to cover kinship relationships of mutual support (Zha Changguo 1998; Zhu Fenghan 1990). Others have argued that *you* was not used exclusively for non-kin friends until the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE) (Wang Lihua 2004: 49). Such observations support the claim that friendship was initially understood as an extension of kinship and family relations.

However, some have disputed whether early accounts of friendship were so closely tied to kinship affinities, arguing that the textual evidence is inconclusive (Vervoorn 2004). According to this view, it is implausible that everyday life in early China did not feature relationships of mutual support and sympathy that functioned somewhat independently of the more formal bonds of kinship or clan. Without resolving this larger question of how family relationships shaped perceptions of friendship in the tradition as a whole, we can summarize some features of friendship alluded to in the early literature.

The *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*), which became one of the five Confucian classics (*wujing*), is a collection of sung odes that describe everyday pastoral life, and offer eulogies to esteemed rulers. In one ode, a bird calls out for a mate (*you*), evoking the idea of faithful mates who spend time together (ode 165, Waley trans., 1996: 137). Another intuitive dimension of friendship is conveyed by the character *peng* 朋. In early Chinese texts and lexicons, this character is typically glossed as two cowrie shells (Sturgeon 2019a), which were used in ritual and economic exchange in early China, or as a flock of birds flying together, suggesting a binding together or the formation of a group (Sturgeon 2019b).

In some poems in the *Book of Songs*, *peng* indicates identity or equality, based on the similarity of the shells (odes 17, 154, 300; Waley 1996). The same text also portrays friendship as a relationship between brothers, and as the experiences and commitments of brotherhood (odes 92, 241).

How is friendship portrayed in the *Analects*? The historical Confucius, as recorded in the *Analects*, is sometimes thought to mark a shift in worldview, away from a world of clan organization and rigid social structures, and their morality and social norms. As this form of social organization broke down with the disintegration of the Zhou dynasty and the onset of the Warring States period, the individual became more prominent. The *Analects*, for example, is often read as a study in character cultivation. Arguably, this explains why friendship in the *Analects* is often associated with the virtue of trust (*xin*信); trust is particularly relevant to personal relationships governed more by personal responsibility and discretion rather than adherence to public and shared communal standards. This has led some scholars to claim, “Confucius conceived of a socio-political system ordered by affinity, if not instead of consanguinity then certainly in addition to it” (Vervoorn 2004: 13). This view is at least consistent with the interpretative tradition, which holds that the historical Confucius offered a new vision for society. A popular and concise way to express this change is as a shift in emphasis from being a *nobleman*, hereditary nobles holding official title, to being a *noble man*, that is, someone of good character worthy of official position and public emulation. This idea of Confucius as an innovator, who identified a new ethical basis for society and was concerned with personal cultivation and not merely correct ritual form or social duty, also confirms Confucius as a philosophical figure worthy of study (Hall and Ames 1987; Tu Wei-Ming 1985).

If, despite his modest claims to the contrary (Confucius declared, “I transmit but do not initiate,” *Analects* 7.1), Confucius was an innovator concerned with cultivating individual character and not simply defending tradition, then reading into the *Analects* familiar voluntary friendships of affection and mutual liking becomes more plausible. As the individual became a key unit of social analysis so friendship between individuals, independent of kinship or clan ties, could also emerge as an important social bond. Indeed, some have argued that such friendship is important in early Confucian thought, and that friendship in early Confucian thought is roughly comparable with how “early Greek and Roman philosophers” understood friendship (Vervoorn 2004: 18). Indeed, Vervoorn claims that Confucius “was working at least semi-consciously towards what may be called a friendship theory of society” (Vervoorn 2004: 13).

However, the claim that Confucius represents a significant departure from earlier values and social ethics (and so offered a more individualistic, affinity-based view of friendship), is disputed. Some argue that the *Analects* remains rooted in a preexisting culture and value system (Li Zehou 2019); this a world constituted by clan social structures. Furthermore, this residual culture need not be reactionary and oppressive, but instead might yield an alternative and philosophically distinctive worldview. This is characterized by, for example, an ethical vision built out of a concern with ritualized behavior, a heightened concern with human relatedness, and an interest in music as a means to cultivate character and regulate society. I return to this point in the final section, when considering a novel conception of Confucian friendship.

Here, let us simply note the following. The idea that the early Confucians offered a universal or generic ideal of voluntary friendships of affinity, or treated friendship with the same importance as family relations, is difficult to sustain given the scattered and disparate comments on friendship found in texts such as the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi* (the three most influential classical Confucian texts). In the *Mencius*, for example, 5B3 offers perhaps the clearest account of friendships based on virtue, independent of status. But it must be balanced against other attitudes toward friendship in the same text. These include friendship being conditional on family life (4A12), conflicting demands of friendship and family (4B30), and official position limiting the possibilities for friendship (5B7).

Thus, claims of a “friendship view of society” are too strong. Personal friendship – beyond family commitments – was undoubtedly common and important to people in early China, as it probably has been in most times and places. However, while this might be true on the everyday folk level, such

a view was not clearly theorized in the early Confucian tradition. As seen in the above discussion of ambivalence toward friendship in the later tradition, themes of family life and familial roles continued to dominate Confucian social life.

Even though the early Confucian texts do not offer an explicit theoretical account or definition of friendship, several features of the early Confucian approach to friendship are noteworthy. For example, in contrast to the modern hope that parent–child relationships mature into a friendship relation (English 1992), the Confucians seemingly discouraged parents from trying to befriend their children. For example, Mencius’s account of the father–son relationship is more structured around social roles, with little emphasis on ideals of intimacy and caring (Lambert 2016). Fathers do not teach their sons, for example, because this leads to anger and resentment (*Mencius* 4A18). In the *Analects*, there are warnings against “fake” friendships – appearing to befriend someone while harboring resentment (5.25). There is also awareness of both good and bad forms of friendship (16.4), and encouragement to reflect daily on conduct in relationships, including friendship (1.4).

Another feature of Confucian friendship is the value of personal recognition or understanding, and often in ways that strangers and even family cannot manage. In the *Analects* and beyond, this feature is often associated with the term *zhi* (知 knowledge, acquaintance, understanding, realization) (Henry 1987; Harbsmeier 1993; Lu 2010: 236–8), although this term has a range of meanings beyond personal recognition. The demand to know people or recognize others (*zhiren* 知人) is widespread in Confucian texts; it applies in both personal life and political rulership, and covers both empathy and also the more pragmatic notion of knowing how to get along with others. The value of finding a friend who appreciates one’s true character is a recurring theme in the tradition. Several terms for friends incorporate the term for knowing or recognition, *zhi* 知: *zhixin* 知心 lit. knowing one’s heart, *zhiji* 知己, knows oneself, and *zhiyin* 知音, a musical allusion, “appreciating the same tune.” Indeed, the Confucian corpus features several paradigmatic stories of friends who appreciate each other or remain loyal in the face of hardship. Famous examples include Guan Zhong and Bao Shuya in the *Records of the Grand Historian* or *Shiji* (62:7 2131; see Wang 2017: 47); the *Liezi* (trans. Graham 1990) records the legend of blind zither player Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi. Boya refused to play his zither again after the death of his friend Zhong, because he believed Zhong was the only person who could fully appreciate his music. These examples show that close friendship was appreciated in the Confucian literary tradition.

Confucian Friendship and Personal Cultivation

Although not systematically laid out, one particular conception of friendship does permeate the *Analects*. This is friendship as a relationship that furthers the Confucian goal of personal cultivation, often with a view to taking an official post (12.23–24, 13.28, 15.10, 16.5). Consider the opening passage of the *Analects*, which famously enthuses about friendship:

The Master said: “Having studied, to then repeatedly apply what you have learned—is this not a source of pleasure? To have friends come from distant quarters—is this not a source of enjoyment? To go unacknowledged by others without harboring frustration—is this not the mark of an exemplary person?”

Analects 1.1

Some have suggested that friendship’s appearance in the first passage signifies the importance of the topic to the *Analects*’ worldview. Whether true or not, this passage is traditionally viewed as a comment about personal cultivation. The three statements indicate three distinct kinds of enjoyment or personal satisfaction that accompany three levels of cultivation (Lu 2010: 236). Practicing what one has learned is pleasurable, discussing what one has learned with friends and sharing in the process of

cultivation is enjoyable; and the individual can then remain content and unperturbed by the attitudes of others. The passage thus connects friendship to the goal of personal and moral cultivation that characterizes classical Confucian philosophy.

The *Analects* makes clear that cultivation is challenging – “the burden is heavy and the way is long” (8.7) – and requires sustained application (9.11, 9.19; 9.22). It requires immersion in the classic literature of the tradition (e.g., studying the Odes, 17.9), immersion in music (3.23, 8.8), and training in ritualized behavior that cultivates appropriate social behavior (3.4, 6.27, 8.2) and bodily comportment (10.2–4), while also upholding familial roles and due concern for parents. The outcome is an exemplary or cultivated person (*junzi*), who is *ren* (humane, virtuous, and exemplary), and who thereby acquires a kind of power or charisma (*de*) that transforms the world around (2.1), an effect like ripples on water, involving an ever-wider circle of effect. The classic statement of this radial model of personal cultivation occurs in the *Great Learning* or *Daxue* (Chan 1963: 84–7; also *Analects* 2.4).

Friends help in propelling a person along this Confucian path of personal cultivation. Indeed, the *Analects* is an illustration of the mentoring friendships between Confucius and his students, to whom he often responds with personally tailored advice. That advice also includes how to treat friends. Confucius says, “Do your utmost to exhort them, and lead them adeptly along the way (*dao*)” (12.23); also, be “critical and demanding with their friends” (13.28). Possibly speaking of Confucius, his follower Zeng Xi declares, “The exemplary person (*junzi*) attracts friends through refinement (*wen*), and thereby promotes authoritative conduct (*ren*)” (12.24) – suggesting that friends serve the goal of becoming authoritative or exemplary (*ren*).

This friendship is rooted in the desire to learn from those further advanced on the Confucian way. The *Analects* exhorts the reader to dwell among the exemplary (*ren*) (4.1) and “befriend those scholar apprentices (*shi*) who are most authoritative in their conduct” (15.10). The drive to seek out those from whom one can learn leads Confucius to declare: “in strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly” (7.22).

Similarly, 16.4 mentions three kinds of beneficial and three harmful friendships and conveys the importance of carefully choosing friends; and 16.5 describes the joy of being surrounded by “friends of superior character (*xian*).” This drive to learn and improve leads to a striking demand: “Do not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as you are” (1.8), advice repeated in 9.25.

However, this emphasis on friendship as a relationship of self-improvement gives rise to a tension within the text, an apparent paradox (Wing-tsit Chan 1963: 20). The imperative of 1.8 seems to contradict another passage, 8.5, in which Confucius’s follower Zeng Xi exhorts followers to learn from a range of people, including the less accomplished or knowledgeable. On the one hand, friendship should be exclusive and not extended to anyone inferior; yet, 8.5 commends someone who was “superior” and yet humbly engaged with others. How might this tension be resolved?

At the textual level, several interpretations might be considered. One reading, based on *Mencius* passage 7B37, is that if those of higher character are not available, then associating with those of lesser character might sometimes be necessary. One might still learn from the interaction. However, 7B37 seems to be directed to teachers selecting students rather than the friendship relation. Alternatively, the exclusionary tone of 1.8 might, in fact, be limited in scope. In the commentarial tradition, 1.8 has been interpreted as referring only to particular virtues not personal character in toto – specifically, loyalty and trustworthiness as prerequisites for friendship. If so, friendships could tolerate other differences in character or putative inequalities. Yet others have read 1.8 as simply advising caution when choosing friends. Another solution is to read 8.5 as not referring to friendship but to an attitude toward learning. One should be willing to learn from anyone, but this does not require befriending them. Yet others have taken the identity of Confucius’s interlocutor – the differing temperaments of his students – to be significant, and indicative of which passage offers the more literal understanding of Confucian friendship (Ames and Hall 1997: 262).

At this point, it is helpful to recognize that this sparse and aphoristic text underdetermines possible meanings, and declines to offer precise definitions. This explains why the commentarial tradition is so important in Confucian thought, since it adds a rich web of interpretation that extends and deepens the original insight across different eras. Taken by itself, the *Analects* invites the personalizing of suggestive passages through imaginative appropriation, and this struggling to “make the text one’s own” exemplifies the effort-filled Confucian approach to personal cultivation. When shown “one corner” of the square, students must then return with the other three (7.8).

What is clear is that friendship functions within this paradigm of self-cultivation as a means to further personal enrichment and refinement. A traditional gloss on *peng* 朋, found in the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), is “those of the same gate are friends” (同門為朋): *peng*-friends are those who share the same school (“gate”), that is, teacher. Hence, this term for friendship was associated with the Confucian demand for learning via the appropriate mentor. Similarly, *you* 友 is glossed “those with the same aspirations are friends” (同志為友), suggesting a shared sense of vocation and relevant intention as conditions of friendship. The ideal of upward progression, leaving behind those who cannot contribute, is extended even to the point where one runs out of possible friends. *Mencius* 5B8 famously describes “making friends with history.” This calls for the befriending of the most virtuous person in one’s village, and when one can no longer learn from them, one befriends the most outstanding people in the state, and then the world. And if that is insufficient, one is to go back in time and befriend worthy people from antiquity. At the extreme we find Confucius: “Confucius is [...] peerless and hence, friendless. To assert that Confucius had friends would diminish him” (Hall and Ames 1997: 266). In summary, friends serve as stepping-stones toward ever more cultivated states.

Aside from the textual considerations, this view of friendship also raises some philosophical issues. One should not befriend those less cultivated than oneself. But this means those who are superior should not befriend those below. This leaves only peers, who are one’s equal. Broadly, this means people who have attained the same degree of personal cultivation. But if they already possess similar levels of refinements, then how can befriending them improve one’s degree of cultivation? This would leave one unable to make friends to advance the process of personal cultivation.

In response, a friend could be more advanced in some areas and less in others, making possible mutual learning alongside peers. Nevertheless, this kind of friendship appears to be predominantly a one-way relationship. The senior party might have some kind of positive attachment to the junior, but this is not typically friendship. This is consistent with the tone of the five cardinal relationships, in which each party in each of the hierarchical and dyadic relationships is guided by a different virtue or different norms: children are filial (*xiao*), while parents are benevolent (*ci*), and so on.

Befriending another, or at least seeking to be in their presence, for the sake of cultivating oneself, seems also to make such friendship utilitarian – a case of treating someone as a means rather than an end, and so a poor example of friendship as idealized in contemporary times. Indeed, awareness of the need for “useful” friendships is a theme in later Confucian literature (Kutcher 2000: 1618). But if true friendship entails the rejection of such instrumental reasoning, then can befriending for the sake of self-cultivation be a true form of friendship? Accepting that this mentoring conception of friendship is prominent in the *Analects*, a qualified defense of it can be offered.

First, it confirms the importance of self-cultivation in the tradition, particularly as the expansion of the self through engagement in an ever-wider range of roles and relationships. Some see the self to be cultivated in early Confucian thought as social and relational (Ames 2011; Kim 2010; Lai 2016; Li 2014). If so, the contrast between self and others, including a distinct notion of self-interest that others can instrumentally further, is muted. Accordingly, personal cultivation is not intended as a private or “selfish” benefit; rather, its fruits are a communal resource. Ideally, it produces those who take responsibility in the interests of all, and to greater effect than uncultivated leaders – against whom the Confucians railed.

Furthermore, the aspirational and upwardly directed nature of this friendship confirms the importance of hierarchy and its ubiquitous presence in Confucian social thought. In contemporary

liberal society, hierarchy can be an uncomfortable topic, and raises concerns of oppression or domination. But the Confucian tradition generally does not view hierarchy as pernicious. Confucian thought recognized natural differentials and inequalities as a basic fact of life, and the family was paradigmatic of the benign presence, and even need for, hierarchy in human life. Much human development arises through various forms of hierarchical relatedness: parents raise children, elder siblings nurture younger, teachers educate students, et cetera, and the five cardinal relationships sought to capture this. The integration of this natural plurality into a well-functioning organic whole, however difficult to realize, is expressed in the Confucian ideal of harmony (*he*).

This idea of closeness in the context of difference or unequalness informed the Confucian conception of friendship, since friendship involves people who are nominally equal relating to each other under conditions of moderate de facto inequalities – of life experience, skills, financial means, and so forth. Within this framework, the Confucian ideal of ongoing learning (*xue*) (from others) might be understood as guiding such friendship. While this ideal does not preclude the affection and respect found in most friendships, it does challenge the idea that friendship requires equality.

The portrayal of friendship as a learning or mentoring relationship reveals, by way of contrast, what is missing from a canonical text such as the *Analects*, namely, the familiar ideal of friendship as a close relationship between two autonomous and equal individuals who befriend from choice, not from a position of need or instrumental benefit, and on the basis of mutual liking or admiration. Such relationships are not of sustained interest to the compilers of the texts. Perhaps an account of close friendship based on personal character can be distilled from various passages in the classical Confucian texts (e.g., Vervoorn 2004). However, rather than look to Confucian texts to find confirmation of the familiar, we might instead think about informative differences – specifically about alternative conceptions of friendship and forms of human relatedness suggested by the texts. Accordingly, let us finish with a brief sketch of an alternative project: a novel conception of friendship that is both distinctly Confucian in spirit and challenges some familiar ways of thinking about friendship.

Exploring Confucian friendships: Event-Based Friendship

The idea of friends as mentors, helping us along the Confucian way, is a plausible account of Confucian thought because it coheres with many parts of the texts, including those not explicitly addressing friendship. Using this same approach, another conception of friendship can be inferred from the early texts. Although not systematically laid out therein, this also makes sense of prominent themes and concerns. It captures the view of the self as primarily social and relational, and the Confucian emphasis on personal cultivation – according to which the highest degree of flourishing involves the fullest engagement (*cheng* 誠) with the myriad things of the world, such that all things can be organized and integrated by the sage (Mencius 7A4). This includes the webs of human relations and emotional attachments in which the self is situated.

Unlike the readings of the *Analects* that emphasize a more individualistic turn, and a departure from pre-Confucian society, this account of friendship emerges from the preexisting social world of clan and kinship. In this account, friendship consists of multiple discrete shared social interactions and the goods realized therein, which mirror the large-scale communal ritual events prevalent in Confucian thought. The goods generated in both are affective and aesthetic in nature: shared delight-like states. This form of friendship generates, through everyday social interaction, emotional or affective goods that are also generated through more complex and structured communal rituals. This friendship is not based on character, utility, or even how another can be pleasing to oneself. This account is informed by John Dewey's naturalistic account of aesthetic experience (Dewey 1980), particularly how practically important aesthetic experiences emerge in everyday contexts (Saito 2007: 2017).

This kind of event-based friendship is rooted in another foundational Confucian ethical ideal, harmony: “probably the most cherished ideal in Chinese culture” (Li 2006: 583; see also see Li 2014 and Li et al. 2021). In the *Analects* (1.12, 13.23, 19.25, and *passim*), harmony “is celebrated as the

highest cultural achievement” (trans., Ames and Rosemont 1998: 57). Harmony as a practical ideal is explained in the texts by two metaphors: cooking and music (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 254–8). It is the blending of constitutive elements to produce an overall effect, like making a fine soup or participating in an exhilarating musical jamming session. Harmony has a profoundly relational quality. If done well, successful combinations or blendings have an effect on the human subject that is felt or emotional in nature.

The five cardinal relationships are one site of such harmony. Each party in the various relationships is typically (but not exclusively since personal judgment is relevant) guided by ritual and customary norms, so their contributions and actions achieve the kind of pleasing integration characteristic of harmony. The production of such harmony in social interactions can also serve as a guiding ideal for friendship (Lambert 2017).

An important feature of harmony in Confucian thought concerns how participants in an event or interaction are affected when harmony is achieved. This is described in emotional or affective terms, as the generation of delight-like states (*le* 樂) (*Analects* 6.11, 6.20, 7.19, 16.5; Holloway 2005; Nylan 2018; Lambert 2020). These can best be understood by analogy to the experience of participating in the making of music. Tellingly, the Chinese character for delight-like states is identical to the character for music (樂), and delight-like states (樂) are heralded as the fruit of successful human interaction (Mencius 4A27). This suggests that a visceral feeling of delight accompanies the attainment of relational goods created through the interaction; these include feelings of ease, a sense of anticipation, rapt attention, a sense of purposefulness, playfulness, novelty, or a sense of achievement (Lambert 2020). These goods are generated intersubjectively, through social encounter; and their co-creation constitutes the friendship.

An example, anachronistic but useful, is a large sporting event. For these to be successful, several groups must contribute. Athletes, officials, fans, ground staff, and media all make distinct contributions to an overall effect, and bask in the creation of a memorable social event. In fact, something like such events is a prominent theme of early Chinese culture. This was a “display culture” (Nylan 2001), characterized by drawing people together for ceremonies and ritual events, in which pleasure was generated and shared through the medium of public spectacle. Public rituals also generated a sense of solidarity and mutual identification among participants.

In the case of large ceremony, and in the roles of the Confucian family, the interactions are often scripted and structured. However, the same basic model applies to less structured social interactions, such as the everyday interactions that make up friendship. Friendship involves a rolling series of interactions, either virtually or in person, with the closest friendships constituted by more frequent interactions. In the friendship case, however, imagination and personal interpretation play a greater role in discovering and blending the particulars – words, actions, gestures – that generate the aesthetic goods. Practical judgment and cultivated habit are also needed to bring together the elements of an interaction in such a way that interactions are transformed into events. In fact, this was a goal of Confucian cultivation. The Confucian exemplary person regarded the managing of human and personal interaction as an ethical task, something that called forth reverence and concern, and a skill that required personal cultivation. When possible, these interactions are to be distinguished by the skillful eliciting and blending of particulars to generate the kinds of affective goods noted above. Participation in such events is one of the ideals of the Confucian exemplary person (*Analects* 11.26).

This approach to friendship – as a personal relationship composed of an episodic series of interactions distinguished by their affective and memorable qualities – is worthy of further exploration for several reasons. In contrast to some accounts of friendship, it does not depend upon detailed knowledge of, and deep affection for, another’s character. Although knowledge of personal particulars helps, situation and cultivated responses are arguably more important. What matters is not the number of personal particulars known, but rather the response to whatever is known. Also, since the value of this friendship resides in the quality achieved in the social interactions of everyday life, it avoids concerns about ethically problematic partiality that arises from the commitments of close personal

friendship. A deep personal commitment to, and prioritizing of, a particular other are not required. Instead, the focus is on the situation and attempts to generate certain kinds of experiences for all participants.

Furthermore, the number of people who can participate in an event is open. While the creation of such events might characterize close friendships (feeling energized and joyful when with a friend seems important), event-based friendships can be enjoyed with a wider set of people. Events, as intersubjective creations, can be enlarged to include newcomers or greater numbers. The nature of the event might change in the pursuit of a new equilibrium, but this inclusivity or accommodation distinguishes event-based friendship from closed and exclusive friendships based on familiarity and character. Finally, nor is this merely a friendship of pleasure, where the satisfaction of crude or existing desire drives the relationship. Creating events by discovering what resonates mutually is a skill, an effortful task, and its goods are mutual and interdependent, not private. What generates delight might be discovered only through the interaction.

This sketch of an alternative form of friendship suggests that much can be gained from paying greater attention to the Confucian philosophical tradition, and hints at the promise of cross-cultural and comparative philosophical projects. Friendship is a fitting topic for future work in this field.

Related Chapters

Can Parents and Their Children Be Friends?; Friendship and Family; Partiality to Friends; Friendship and Special Obligations

Notes

- 1 Philosophers in the Western tradition have, of course, identified problems with friendship. Close bonds can inspire jealousy and familiarity can breed contempt. Conflicts arise between friendship and moral commitments, including modern moral theories such as consequentialism. Nevertheless, friendship has frequently been valued as a voluntary relationship of intimacy constitutive of flourishing.
- 2 See Norman Kutcher (2000). Discussions of friendship in the Chinese tradition include McDermott (1992), Hall and Ames (1994), Mann (2000), Blakeley (2008), Gerritsen (2007), Sim (2007), Connolly (2012), Lambert (2017), Yao (2019), and C. Li (2019).
- 3 Reliable English translations of these texts include: *Mencius* (Bloom and Ivanhoe 2011), the *Doctrine of the Mean/Zhongyong* (Ames and Hall 2001), and *Xunzi* (Hutton 2014).
- 4 On the historical connections of kinship and politics, see Baker (1979), Anthony Yu (2005: 26–52), Liu (2003), and Yiqun Zhou (2010: 1–20).
- 5 Early Confucian thought was predominantly male-centric; however, whether it is essentially gendered or paternalistic, or whether its initial expression was filtered through a transient cultural milieu, is much debated. Regardless, this has not prevented feminist interpretations of traditional Confucian thought (Rosenlee 2006), nor the emergence of positive and complex portrayals of female identity within the tradition (Raphals 1998). On feminism and Confucian modernity, see Foust and Tan (2016).

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