

The Fisherman Fallacy

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(10 Mar 2009)

Abstract. Modern readers tend to like, in antiquity, what is nearest their own time: what is *least antique*. In a composite text, posterity will thus often prefer the later parts, the ones where the text has reconfigured itself so as to appeal to later readers.¹ This danger, this snare of affection for the modern reader, I call the Fisherman Fallacy.

Jwāngdǔ 31 漁父

This chapter, “The Fisherman,” consists of a single and beautiful story, in which “Confucius” treats with reverence a sage hermit who seems to reject everything that Confucius has always stood for. In contrast to the terse style of the earlier Jwāngdǔ, this piece builds slowly, gathering atmosphere as it goes by echoing the Analects, especially those Analects passages which are closest to Dàuist thought:

Confucius had been wandering in the Black Curtain forest, and sat down to rest atop Apricot Altar.² His disciples were reading their books; Confucius was singing to the string and thrumming his cithern. The song was not yet half done when a fisherman got out of his boat and approached. His beard and eyebrows were white; his hair hung loose and his sleeves waved. He climbed up the shore and stopped when he had reached level ground. His left hand rested on his knee, his right hand cradled his chin; thus he listened. When the song was finished, he beckoned to Dǔ-gùng and Dǔ-lù.³ The two came over. The stranger indicated Confucius, and said, Who is that?⁴ Dǔ-lù replied, He is a gentleman of Lù. The stranger asked his ancestry. Dǔ-lù replied, He is of the Kǔng clan. The stranger said, What do the Kǔngs do?⁵ Dǔ-lù made no answer, but Dǔ-gùng replied, As for the Kǔngs: within, they embody loyalty and fidelity;⁶ without, they practice benevolence and righteousness;⁷ they adorn with rites and music, and select from human relationships; above, they relate loyally to the rulers of the age; below, they bring transformation to the lower populace. They offer benefit to the whole world. *This* is what the Kǔngs do.

¹For this common and important phenomenon, see Brooks **Reader**.

²The site of the long and beautiful (and, for the Analects, atypical) LY 11:24.

³The same two disciples who failed to answer the questions of two hermits in LY 18:5.

⁴彼何爲者 inquires not about identity so much as about social role; hence the reply.

⁵何治也 “What do they have charge of?” Notice the extremely slow tempo of this piece. Notice also that the piece is not against Confucius, but against the whole “Kǔng” enterprise.

⁶The essence of the early Confucian aristocratic warrior code; see LY 9:25, 1:8.

⁷The signature phrase of the later ethicized Confucianism of Mencius; see MC 1A1.

Surely, there could be no more highminded answer, no more complete defense. The visitor then proceeds to disassemble that defense in two quick strokes:

He asked, Are they rulers with territory? Dž-gùng answered, No. He asked, Are they assistants to some Lord or King? Dž-gùng answered, No. The stranger smiled and turned to go, saying, Benevolent, then benevolent; but I fear he will not escape with a whole skin. He toils his frame and endangers his true self. Alas! So far removed is he from the Way.

Dž-gùng returned and reported to Confucius. Confucius put aside his cithern and rose, saying, Is this not a sage? And seeking after him, he came to the water's edge, where the fisherman was just about to take up his pole and steer his boat . . .

And the story goes on, drawing on several Jwāngdž stories in which Confucius admits the superior wisdom of his Dàuist opposite.⁸ The fisherman shows that, without an official position, mere ritual and relational excellence has no meaning. Confucius confesses his bafflement at his failures,⁹ and is shown that activity is not the way to cure the failures of activity. The fisherman's secret is sincerity (誠), the key term of the 03c Jūng Yūng; the element which infuses all right actions, including those which conventional Confucians toil to produce from outside. This is no Dàuist refutation of Confucius; it is instead the refutation of activist 04c Confucianism by mystical 03c Confucianism – a view popular in the early Empire, and among the Sùng philosophers, and with millions at the present time.

The story announces its own moral, in JZ 31:7 – 同類相從，同聲相應 “Like kinds flock together, like sounds resonate.”

Conclusion

We like, in antiquity, what in antiquity is near to us. When an ancient text makes sounds to which we resonate, the text is probably making modern sounds. The rule for those who would read a text historically is: ignore your feelings. This is hard advice; sagehood is not easily won. But having won it, we are no longer seduced by the charm of the “love” treatise, 1 Corinthians 13,¹⁰ or the affecting tale of the Woman Taken in Adultery, John 7:53-8:11.¹¹ We are not perplexed that when Shǐ Jì 63 lists the parts of the Jwāngdž which it regards as by Jwāng Jōu, it ignores the craggy Inner Chapters and names instead several higher-numbered chapters, *beginning with the Fisherman*. It was that Hān piece that spoke most directly to the Hān authors of the Shǐ Jì.

Works Cited

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 Bruce M Metzger. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. 2ed UBS 1994
 William O Walker Jr. *Interpolations in the Pauline Letters*. Sheffield 2001

⁸Such as JZ 14:5-7, where the Dàuist opposite is no less than Lǎu Dān.

⁹Compare JZ 20:6, from which the Fisherman author has borrowed several phrases.

¹⁰See Walker **Interpolations** 147-165.

¹¹See Metzger **Commentary** ad loc.