

Michael Smith

Knowledge and Responsibility: The Chinese Tradition

What would a professor say if he knew it were his last chance to speak, his "Last Lecture"? The concept is nothing new: pose the question to a variety of the campus' most popular teachers and invite the community to hear their responses.

The OU Student Senate inaugurated such a series in the fall of 1959 with the inimitable J. Clayton Feaver—who once illustrated "infinity" to his philosophy class by starting a chalk line on the blackboard, continuing it completely around the room, out the door, down the hall and out the building, he himself disappearing for the rest of the day. On the occasion of his "Last Lecture," reprinted in the January 1960 Sooner Magazine, Feaver had

considerably more to say. A subsequent "last lecturer," Percy Buchanan, redefined oratorical brevity, as recounted in "Sooner Memories" on Page 24.

Other universities have tried variations on the theme over the intervening years, and last spring the Association of University Ministries revived the series at OU. One of the first speakers was a popular young assistant professor of history, Vivien W. Ng, who startled her audience with an introductory announcement of her imminent departure from the University of Oklahoma, where she has taught since 1982. Fortunately the scenario was a fictitious one, constructed to make her "last lecture" more convincing. —CJB

[The lecture follows.]

Last Lecture

Yesterday, at 5 o'clock, I turned in my grades for the last time. Tomorrow, I will begin my summer vacation on one of the islands on Puget Sound. Come September, I will embark, at age 45, on a new career. I will be leaving the comfortable world of academe to assume the directorship of the Public Policy Department of the American Association of University Women in Washington, D.C.

My decision to give up the scholarly life to become a full-time activist was not made rashly. In fact, I have considered it and debated with myself about it for years. In a way, I think I have learned the lessons I have been teaching my students too well.

You see, years of having to teach my students at OU about Chinese philosophy have compelled me to reflect on not just the history of Chinese thought but the substance of the various philosophical teachings as well. Since Confucianism was, and still is, the most influential school of thought in China, I have spent the most time talking about it, thinking about it and, in the process, internalizing much of its values.

It is important to point out that my mind—or should I say, my soul—was receptive to this process. So, I must also give credit to my undergraduate experience for my decision to become a full-time activist.

For two-and-a-half quarters of my freshman year, I behaved like many college freshmen—enjoying the freedom of being away from home and blithely cutting classes that did not entertain me. But in the spring of 1970, the United States expanded the war into Cambodia, and even my dormmates (mostly freshmen and sophomores) felt the outrage. Then came the Kent State tragedy on May 4, 1970. That was the turning point. I enrolled in the General Studies Program so that I could devise my own college curriculum. I took advantage of this opportunity to combine my love for chemistry with my newly-recognized interest in history. The discipline of history, I concluded at the time,



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was ideal for anyone who had a profound interest in the past, but who also cared a lot—a whole lot—about the future. I have not changed my evaluation of the discipline of history.

What have I learned from my lessons on Confucianism? The time in which Confucius (-551 to -479) lived was a watershed of history, a turbulent time when divisive but vital changes occurred. The old aristocracy was losing its prerogatives, especially those of automatic office-holding in the “national” and local governments. There were new and great opportunities for upward mobility. The intense competition among the states (China was not yet a unified empire) to succeed in economic development, warfare and diplomacy offered a broad market for talent; and many men of talent exploited the situation. They traveled from state to state, offering their knowledge and expertise to the rulers. Loyalty meant nothing at all to them. It was not at all unusual to find a minister negotiating for a better position elsewhere while still serving his own lord. It seemed that the values of

the old order had become irrelevant, and this development dismayed Confucius.

Like most of his contemporaries, Confucius was ambitious to make a career by his own efforts in the public world of government. But he was not really suited to the courtier life, which in that age demanded a willingness to engage in flattery, to attach oneself to a powerful figure and assist him in the unprincipled exercise of power. Confucius was too frank—and too principled—for such a life. Not surprisingly, none of the heads of state offered him a responsible position in government.

In -484, a disappointed old man, he returned, after a decade of wanderings, to his native state of Lu; five years later, he died there. He had achieved nothing by which he himself or his contemporaries could count him a success. One of his students once asked him how he should be described, and his answer is his best epitaph: “He is this sort of man: so intent upon enlightening those eager for knowledge that he forgets to eat, and so happy in doing so that he forgets his sorrow, and

does not realize that old age is creeping up on him.”

Confucius chose to designate himself a “mere transmitter” of antique learning, but in fact he must be credited with three innovations that remained permanent features of Chinese (and East Asian) civilization. His first innovation is the creation of the role of the private teacher. There were no professional teachers and no schools as such in China during the time of Confucius. Teaching was done merely as a matter of course, and without any sense of professionalism. Older men simply took it upon themselves to instruct younger kinsmen, and ethics was not necessarily always a part of the instruction.

Confucius taught as an expectant official for 40 years, marking time until he would take up the real work of his life. But after returning from his decade of wanderings, he undoubtedly realized that the “real work” would never come and that teaching had become his true vocation. Yet, because he never really quite abandoned his fervent hope of doing something more, he could not teach without total detachment. His instruction retained its practical orientation. He encouraged his students to engage in impassioned discussions of current problems, and he invited them to offer solutions. He treated his students with respect and, accordingly, set very high standards for them. His students, in turn, venerated him.

His second innovation is closely related to the first. He created and established the content of education and its method and ideals. Although education was quite specifically for one kind of career—that of public service—Confucius believed in the broad liberal arts learning. He urged his students to be bold in their quest for learning, to reach out beyond their narrow interests to explore the other disciplines.

The third innovation is that Confucius accepted students of all social backgrounds and clearly established the principle of doing so. When he opened his school, he declared that, as

far as he was concerned, education recognized no class boundaries. This was a very revolutionary position to take, because education was, until then, the preserve of the aristocracy. By democratizing education, Confucius opened up opportunities for men from the lower classes, men who otherwise might not have had the chance to obtain an education and to become employed by the heads of state.

Yet mere employment alone should not be the reason for anyone to acquire an education, to obtain knowledge. Confucius denounced certain bright and unscrupulous students who used their educations to get ahead, but in

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so doing forgot the moral responsibilities he considered essential to the “superior man.” And this points to another explanation for his achievements. The tyrants and the politicians put up with Confucius because, despite his troublesome insistence on norms and standards, he was trustworthy. The chaotic times made a man of integrity especially valuable, and Confucius’ followers were indoctrinated in loyalty and integrity above all. Moreover, he taught reform by moral suasion, not by revolution. His students did not become immediate dangers to the established order in any of the obvious ways. So, the rulers of the time, even those who did not merit the sage’s approval and who knew it, nonetheless actively cultivated his students.

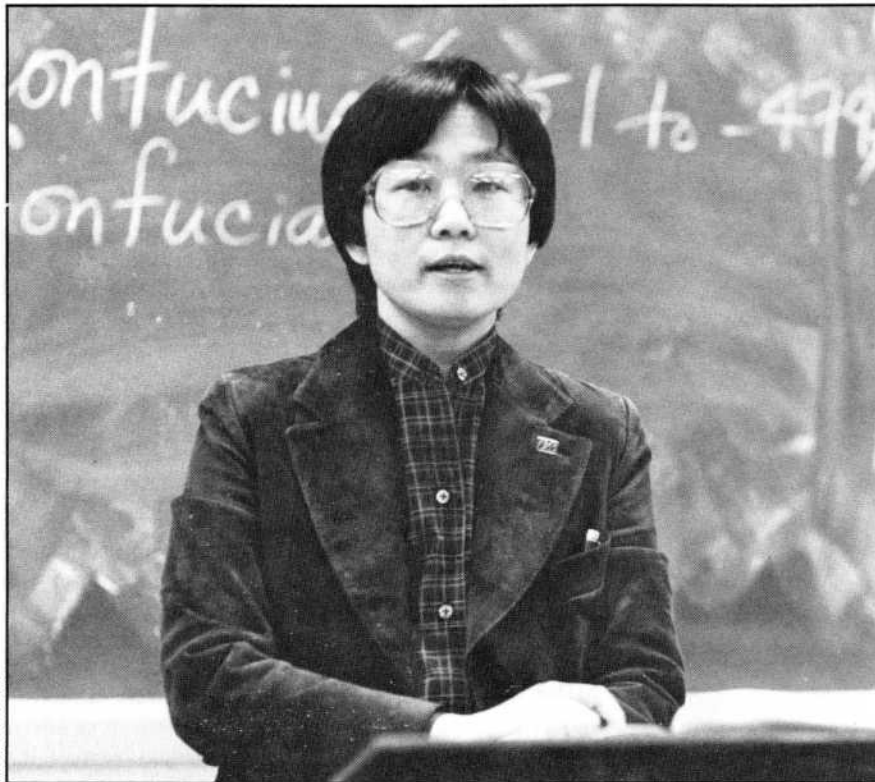
The foundations of Confucius’ ethical system are secular; his moral principles derive no supernatural revelation. The general good of the family and of society is the primary reason

for adhering to the principles of ethical conduct. Confucius fully accepted the ethics of a family-centered society. The individual’s primary duty was to the family, and the grades of responsibility lessened as one went beyond the family to the extended clan, to the village or community, to the state and finally to the whole society. Politics to Confucius was merely the extension of ethics to the larger society. Filial piety was the primary virtue; loyalty to the state and its leader never could become more than the second most important ethical principle. Most of the sayings in *The Analects* have ethical relevance, and the absolute primacy of humanistic ethics in a human-centered world may be taken as the ultimate touchstone of Confucianism.

According to the Confucian scheme of things, we are not to be ethical for the sake of going to heaven or saving our souls. We are ethical because it is our nature to be so. This is what separates us from animals. This is a tremendous burden to bear. We cannot take credit for being good, because we are supposed to be good. And when we make mistakes, we cannot blame the devil for it. We take ultimate responsibility for all our actions.

The primary virtue Confucius urged on his followers for their personal cultivation is *jen*. This has been translated as “benevolence,” as “love,” as “goodness,” as “human-heartedness,” all with some justification. Like all the Confucian virtues, to Confucians it seems to lack meaning unless practiced; and the practice of *jen* requires us to express our concern for the well-being of others. The ideal government is a government of *jen*, one which so cares for the basic needs of people that it will not have to use coercion in order to maintain social order. Confucius was a theoretician of government, never a governor. Later, Confucians bearing responsibilities for governing often felt the rightness of this vague ideal so strongly that they struggled to realize it in practice and characteristically blamed themselves when they could not. *Continued*

Last Lecture



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The secular, human-centered ethics of Confucianism invited the inevitable question: "If I have only this one life to live, how best shall I live it?" The answer was equally inevitable: "To extend the ethics of self-cultivation to society, to apply knowledge obtained through education to public service, in order to bring about a humane and harmonious world order."

Confucian intellectuals, typically, were aware of their responsibility to "take care of the world." And they accepted the burden willingly. The great 11th century reformer, Fan Chung-yen, expressed it very well with his maxim: "A scholar should be the first to become concerned with the world's troubles and the last to rejoice in its happiness." This maxim became an article of faith deeply imprinted in the mind of the scholar class. Until the 1940s, it was often assigned as an essay topic in Chinese schools.

It was this sense of mission, of involvement, that propelled the late-19th century reformer, K'ang Yu-wei, to write this statement about himself:

"Every day the salvation of society was uppermost in my thoughts, and every moment the salvation of society was my aim in life, and for this aim I determined to sacrifice myself. Since there were an infinite number of worlds, great and small, I could only console and try to save those on the world where I had been born, those I met along the way, those I had a chance to grow close to. Each day I would call to them and hope that they would listen to me. I made this my guiding principle and goal."

It was because they all shared the sense of responsibility to the world that K'ang's contemporaries did not find him a megalomaniac.

Even after his reform program was aborted by the Empress Dowager, and he was forced to flee the country, K'ang continued to see himself as a vehicle for social change. He continued to feel the pain of other people's suffering. In 1902, he wrote what perhaps was his most eloquent statement of purpose. He wrote this while he was in exile in north India. It is called *The Great Community*. In it, K'ang envisions a

future society where artificial boundaries that divide nations and peoples will be completely abolished. In particular, the gender distinctions that divide men and women—and have caused women immeasurable pain—will be eliminated.

Regarding the tragedy of universal oppression of women, he wrote: "The guiltless have been universally oppressed, the innocent universally punished. Such actions have been worse than the worst inhumanity. And yet throughout the world, past and present, for thousands of years, those whom we call good men, righteous men, have been accustomed to the sight of such things, have sat and looked and considered them to be matters of course, have not demanded justice for the victims or offered to help them. This is the most appalling, unjust and unequal thing, the most inexplicable theory under heaven.

"I now have a task: to cry out the natural grievances of the incalculable numbers of women of the past. I now have one great desire: to save the eight hundred million women of my own time from drowning in the sea of suffering. I now have a great longing: to bring the incalculable, inconceivable numbers of women of the future the happiness of equality, of the Great Community and of independence." This was written, as I said, in 1902.

Even after the fall of the Manchu dynasty in 1912; even after the system of government that had been bolstered by Confucian ideology was smashed and replaced by new and alien forms; even after a new generation of intellectuals had arrived on the scene, most of whom were absolutely and utterly critical of Confucianism, the Confucian ideal of political engagement remained alive. Ironically, it was kept alive especially by Confucianism's most ardent critics.

In the early 20th century, knowledge acquired a new meaning and new content. Confucian classical learning was replaced by snatches of translations of certain Western works. But the

new intellectuals, who preached democracy and science, continued to see themselves as agents for social change. They would, and they must, bring about a new social and intellectual order in China. They must save the Chinese from themselves.

Ch'en Tu-hsiu, the co-founder of the Chinese Communist Party, was a professor at the University of Peking. He also was a founder of the radical publication, *New Youth*. In the first issue, he called on the younger generation to struggle against the old and rotten elements of society and to reform their thought and behavior in order to achieve a national awakening.

"The Chinese compliment others by saying, 'He acts like an old man although still young.' Englishmen and Americans encourage one another by saying, 'Keep young while growing old.' Such is one respect in which the different ways of thought of the East and West are manifested. Youth is like early spring, like the rising sun, like the trees and grass in bud, like a newly sharpened blade. It is the most valuable period in life. . . . I do not wish to waste my fleeting time in arguing with [the old generation] on this and that and hoping for them to be reborn and thoroughly remodeled. I place my plea before the fresh and vital youth, in the hope that they will achieve self-awareness and begin to struggle. What is this self-awareness? It is to be conscious of the value and responsibility of one's young life and vitality, to maintain one's self-respect, which should not be lowered. What is the struggle? It is to exert one's intellect, discard resolutely the old and the rotten, regard them as enemies and as a flood of savage beasts, keep away from their neighborhood and refuse to be contaminated by their poisonous germs."

Ch'en was not always optimistic that he, and others like him, would be able to carry out their cultural revolution. He once confided to a friend, "My pessimism is not caused by the lack of quick success in our undertaking, but has developed from an awareness of

the hopelessness of our catching up with European and American civilizations. They are progressing hundreds of miles each day, while we are left far behind. Most of our people are lethargic and do not know that not only our morality, politics and technology but even common commodities for daily use are all unfit for struggle and are going to be eliminated in the process of natural selection. Although there are a few awakened people in the country, who can save us from the fate of perishing?" It was a rhetorical question. Of course, the new generation of intellectuals must take up the responsibility.


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Sometimes, however, the new intellectuals wondered themselves how far they should go to warn their compatriots of the dangers of complacency. For example, Lu Hsun, perhaps the greatest writer of the modern period, once had a conversation with an editor of the publication, *New Youth*. He put forth this question: "Imagine an iron house without windows, absolutely indestructible, with many people fast asleep inside who will soon die of suffocation. Since they will die in their sleep, they will not feel any of the pain of death. Now if you cry aloud to wake a few of the lighter sleepers, making those unfortunate few suffer the agony of irrevocable death, do you think you are doing them a good turn?" The editor replied that one must, nevertheless, make the attempt, for one could not be sure that there was no chance of escape whatsoever for those trapped

in the iron house. To awaken the still sleeping was the only responsible thing to do.

And more recently, in 1986, Fang Lizhi, a noted astrophysicist and vice president of the University of Science and Technology until his ouster from that office in the aftermath of the student demonstrations later that year, gave a talk to a group of students in Beijing. He had just spent several months at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. He concluded his talk with this statement: "I believe we intellectuals must have a strong sense of social responsibility. In this regard, European intellectuals are far more committed than those of America. They are conscious of a historical duty to pay attention to and discuss world affairs. They believe that anyone who merely understands his own occupation can be called a technician or specialist, but never an intellectual. Intellectuals must assume certain responsibilities and duties. We too must have this consciousness as intellectuals, since we hope at least that the Chinese nation will not be cast aside by history." Although Fang appeared to be ignorant of his own culture's tradition of intellectual activism, his statement would have met with the approval of Confucius.

Knowledge and responsibility are inseparable. The privilege to become educated, to become knowledgeable bears a price: the obligation to apply that education, that knowledge, for the betterment of humanity. In the Chinese tradition, it is an obligation that cannot be shirked.

And so, I shall descend from the ivory tower to become a part of the world. 

Professor Ng's "Last Lecture" was originally part of a series sponsored by the Association of University Ministries at OU: University Outreach (Church of Christ), Wesley Foundation (United Methodist), The Muslim Association, Baptist Student Union, St. Thomas More (Roman Catholic), St. Anselm Canterbury Association (Episcopal), B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundation (Jewish), University Lutheran Chapel, Institute of Religion (Mormon) and the United Ministry Center (Presbyterian, Christian [Disciples], United Church of Christ).