Introduction

I. Why Study This Text?

The Chinese character *xiao* (pronounced “sheeow” in a falling, affirmative tone) was originally a highly stylized picture of a gray-haired old person 老 and a young child 子, reflecting as it does generational deference and the reverence it engenders. Ideally, each generation instructs and inculcates in the succeeding generation a reverence for the family by modeling the appropriate conduct toward the generation that preceded them, thus suffusing the family with unconditional love and a sense of belonging. *Xiao* has conventionally been translated as “filial piety,” and to the extent that the pious are deferential, the term is not altogether misleading, for deference is certainly called for in the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經). But it is to people living and dead in *this* world that Confucians defer, not to religious figures, usually associated with the Abrahamic traditions, who inhabit another, transcendent world. Moreover, “piety” often carries a sense of the “sanctimonious” that is absent from the Chinese *xiao*. Hence, we believe *xiao* is better rendered as “family responsibility,” “family deference,” “family feeling,” or “family reverence,” the term we have chosen for our translation of this work.

*Xiao* is the foundation of all Confucian teachings, for without feeling reverence for and within one’s family, the moral and spiritual cultivation necessary for becoming “a consummate human being” (*ren* 仁) and a socially and politically engaged “exemplary person” (*junzi* 君子) would not be possible. Significantly, this Confucian “role ethics”—how to live optimally within the roles and relations that constitute one—originates in and radiates from the concrete family feelings that constitute the relations between children and their elders and the interdependent roles they live. Such family feeling is ordinary and everyday yet at the same time is arguably the most extraordinary aspect of the human experience.

In attempting to cultivate the proper attitude of and toward family reverence, and to express it appropriately, it is necessary to have a family. This family may be large or small, and may, at least from today’s perspective, include surrogate others who are not related by blood or marriage. But a family there must be in order for *xiao* to be practiced; to attempt to
do so with total strangers, or alone, would be like trying to learn how to swim without water.

Families have been around for some time and are found in virtually every culture past and present. Patterns of familial interactions can and have varied widely across time and cultures, as have the definitions of what constitutes a family. While the family as an institution is by no means going to disappear in the immediate future, there are a number of social, economic, and technological factors undermining the family as we have known it, and it is becoming uncertain whether, or in what ways, families will continue to occupy the central role in our lives that they have done in the past. And if not, why study family reverence?

Worse, not a few people have thought that the family, at least in anything like its present form, ought to disappear, being only a continuation of chattel slavery in modern form. Some feminists and social reformers have been severely critical of the family on a variety of grounds. Summarizing this critique, one scholar notes:

The nuclear family was one of the institutions which came under heavy attack from what was then called “the counter culture.” Some of the criticisms to which it was subjected were specifically feminist; some were not. The nuclear family was said to fulfill certain economic functions which made it a cornerstone of the capitalist economic system. In addition, the nuclear family was said to transmit capitalist ideology, instilling the values of competition, discipline, and possessiveness. Feminists argued that it was oppressive to women; gay liberationists argued that it discriminated against homosexuals; many people complained that it was emotionally and sexually repressive to the marriage partners and some saw it as oppressive to children.¹

In addition to this kind of general critique, some people have insisted that the worst kind of family was that put forward by the Confucians. Walter S. Slote argues that “Confucianism was based on authoritarianism, and filial piety was the principal instrument through which it was established and maintained.”² An equally strong statement comes, this time from a Chinese scholar, Jiwei Ci, whose perceptions are informed by the fact that he was raised within this cultural tradition:

These two aspects of Confucian relationships, kinship on the one hand and hierarchy-reciprocity on the other, are seamlessly joined
and mutually defining. As a result, those who have absorbed the
Confucian concept of human relations would be socially and
ethically at sea if they were to enter into relations with strangers,
where the conjunction of hierarchical-reciprocal relations and
kinship ties simply does not exist. [Italics added]3

Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century the traditional Chinese family
and the conservative values that it represents was one of the main targets
of passionate reformers who sought to drag a humiliated and convulsing
China into the modern world. The hierarchical Confucian family and its
structural inequalities came to be seen as emblematic of everything that was
holding China back from scientific development and democratization.4

More specifically, in recent scholarship on the Xiaojing itself, Hu
Pingsheng disputes the putatively romantic claims made by more tra-
ditionally minded scholars that family reverence is the perennial flower of
Chinese culture, and that the Xiaojing is the classic that has developed and
perpetuated this cultural theme. He would allow that, while historically
the Xiaojing has certainly been one of the more important of the classics
and that, in a traditionally socialistic society, its advocacy of modes of
respect for seniors still persists, a thorough study of it is warranted most
importantly by the need to understand the ancient Chinese feudal society,
its clan structure, and a way of thinking that took loyalty and family
reverence as its key ideas. In fact, while he allows that the Xiaojing does
expound on family reverence to some significant degree, Hu insists that its
purpose, far from advocating a doctrine of family reverence as an end in
itself, has been to recommend xiao as an expedient device to be used by the
political elite to promote loyalty to themselves and to the state.5

We do not, of course, agree with these philosophical and political
reservations about family and family reverence in general, nor with the
outright condemnation of the Confucian family and its understandings of
family reverence in particular. We do, however, feel it necessary to point
out to the reader that a number of distinguished scholars in a variety of
disciplines, as well as important voices from within Chinese culture itself,
do not believe there is much of contemporary value in the family institution
that defines classical Confucianism—apart, perhaps, from its historical
interest—and to emphasize as well that our efforts herein are designed to
counter these negative perspectives.

To begin answering the question of why the Classic of Family Re-
verence should hold our attention, consider first the all-too-frequent cold
and impersonal nature of much of public life.6 Schools and some work-
places may attend to us as the persons we are, and at times being in the marketplace can be pleasant and stimulating. But nurturing takes place largely in the home, within a family whose members know each other’s hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, who celebrate their accomplishments together and console one another when misfortune strikes. We use the term “nurturing” broadly and concretely to include not only what parents do for their children but also little things like the hugs a young child gives his parents when they return home from work, or the help an older sister gives her siblings with their homework; these, too, are nurturing. The family is where much of our personality develops and continues to develop even after we mature and become parents ourselves. Grandparents can be a major boon to their children and grandchildren, and the converse is equally true. Reading the Classic of Family Reverence can thus serve as a mirror of our own family past, helping us to reflect on how and why we have become who we are, on whom we are becoming, and on how we might become better.

Another reason for reflecting on family life more generally was mentioned briefly in our Translators’ Preface: Very probably all nation-states, no matter how well-meaning and competent, will be incapable of providing the full measure of social services their citizens need in a world whose population is growing at the same time that its resources are shrinking. Other institutions will have to provide many of those services, and properly modified to accord with our best contemporary sensibilities, the family should be high on the list of candidate institutions. The Classic of Family Reverence can aid our inquiry into the needed modifications: What needs to be eliminated from the present patterns of family living? What needs to be changed? What should be treasured and enhanced?

A third reason for taking the text seriously today lies in sharply distinguishing idealities from realities; that is, distinguishing Confucianism as a philosophical and religious belief system that serves the culture as a source of inspiration from invoked Confucianism as it was practiced in many Chinese homes and by the government. For example, Chinese history has had its share of abusive parents (especially toward daughters and daughters-in-law), dull pedants, corrupt officials, cruel and totalitarian emperors, and more. But none of these kinds of attitudes and behaviors are ever championed in the Confucian texts; on the contrary, they were all uniformly condemned in unequivocal terms, as we shall attempt to show.

While the appropriate “reality check” is certainly necessary to rein in romantic excesses in our interpretive endeavors, it is also important to
recognize the crucial and still vital role played by ideals in engendering and sustaining cultural change. The development of cultures is complex and reiterative. Quite often this process involves and requires envisioning ways of life distinctively other than those that are near and familiar, revealing with greater or lesser clarity what present cultural realities are not and do not promise. Cultural change does occur in response to differing circumstantial realities, to other cultures, and to political, economic, or environmental exigencies. But it also takes place as a function of pursuing new or not-yet-actualized ideals. Stated differently, ideals as “ends-in-view” are also realities that live in history and that have the force of, at least in degree, initiating and directing the dynamics of culture. Although our academic disciplines tend to favor one side or the other of the divide between the real and the ideal—for example, history the side of the real, and philosophy, the ideal—there is a vital connection between the two in the historical emergence of cultural identity, and of the Chinese cultural identity in particular.

It is a legitimate intellectual endeavor to ask how these texts and their ideals could be cited to justify such horrific authoritarian attitudes and behaviors, in the same way that one might read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to explain why no small number of devout Christian fathers thought it incumbent upon them to quite literally beat the devil out of their children for minor transgressions. But in our opinion, to accept such negatively and narrowly focused readings of sacred texts—East or West—as a fair account, to quote William James on the matter, will eventuate in “something like offering a printed bill of fare as the equivalent of a solid meal”\(^\text{10}\)—that is, the former is not nearly as nourishing as the latter. Hence we wish to make clear at the outset that our focus herein is on the philosophical and religious contributions of early Confucianism, especially in the sociopolitical, ethical, and religious realms, from which we believe there is much that can be learned that is of contemporary value. The balance of this introduction should thus be read as providing additional responses to the question of why we should study the *Classic of Family Reverence*, despite the fact that it is half a world and over two millennia distant from us and that historically it has not always lived up to its own premises and its own promise.

Finally, we are concerned that there is a pervasive and seemingly invincible misreading of the Confucian ideal of family that equates hierarchical structure with coercion and the absence of simple equality with oppression. In what follows we shall argue for a greater degree of complexity in our understanding of this persistent Confucian ideal
of human organization. This complexity allows that some models of hierarchy—healthy relations among grandparents and grandchildren, for example—might not only be benign, but might indeed serve the human community as an incomparable source of love and solidarity.

Certainly, while there are a large number of occasions on which we must treat others equally, we would want to challenge an uncritical assumption that equality is always an unalloyed good. Our relations with our mothers and our classmates are properly different, and children who today defer to their grandparents will, in the fullness of time, be grandparents to their own grandchildren. Indeed, unwarranted assumptions about equality can rob relationships of their complexity and can lead us to overlook an emerging parity between senior and junior that is established over time when we factor into the equation the phasal nature of the human narrative. Although elitism always implies hierarchy, the converse does not hold true; that is, hierarchical relations need not be coercive or oppressive. A healthy child, far from resenting the social expectation that she should be concerned about her mother, can find in such concern an unrivaled source of personal pleasure. And the interdependence that can come with always shifting inequalities—I am benefactor of my friend when she needs my help, beneficiary when I need hers—can be a source of growth, security, and sustenance for all parties involved.

II. HISTORICAL AND TEXTUAL BACKGROUND

1. Synopsis of the Book

The *Classic of Family Reverence* is the most succinct of the thirteen imperial Confucian classics. It is merely 1,800 plus characters in length, employing only 388 different lexical items. Unlike other early Chinese works, it contains (with one exception) no references to specific historical personages, places, or events, and its syntax and semantics are both relatively simple and straightforward. The *Classic of Family Reverence* is thus fairly easy to read; it served as an early McGuffey Reader in Chinese education, and was studied—and often memorized—by almost every literate Chinese for more than two millennia.

The text, divided into eighteen chapters, is a record of brief conversations (that may or may not have actually occurred) between Master Kong (that is, Confucius) and one of his disciples, Zeng Shen, who in the fullness of time was himself remembered as Master Zeng. The opening section that sets the theme for the document concisely extols the virtue of family reverence in both its personal and sociopolitical dimensions; *xiao* is
both whereby one lives a moral and productive life and equally the basis of
governmental legitimacy and hence authority.

The five chapters that follow take up in somewhat fuller detail the
proper filial activities of, respectively, the Emperor, the hereditary nobility,
the ministers and high officials, the younger scholar-officials, and the com-
mon people. Chapters 9, 10, 14, 15, and 18 then elaborate upon the more
personal dimensions of family reverence, while Chapters 8, 11, 12, 13, 16,
and 17 describe how the practice of xiao by governing officials—from the
Emperor on down—obviates the need for real or threatened coercion in
securing and maintaining a harmonious and well-ordered society; per-
sonal example, not physical force, is the hallmark of effective Confucian
governing. The remaining Chapter 7 is more cosmological in nature, de-
scribing in brief compass how family reverence links together the tripar-
tite dimensions of the Confucian way (dao 道)—that is, the intersection
of the way of tian (conventionally rendered as “Heaven,” or sometimes
“nature”; see the Chinese Lexicon), the way of the earth, and the way of
humankind.

These are all weighty subjects, yet are discussed by Confucius and
Master Zeng quite straightforwardly and in summary form. Indeed, when
compared to Western philosophical writings on these themes, the Clas-
sic of Family Reverence will very probably appear, at first reading, to be
not merely simple and laconic but simplistic (or even simpleminded), and
some of its pronouncements will seem mystical—often a synonym for “un-
intelligible”—hopelessly utopian, or worse, authoritarian, bearing little or
no relation to the real world of either personal life or politics anywhere on
the globe today.

In the end, such a judgment may be a proper one. But before arriv-
ing at it, we encourage readers to examine the text a few times over, as the
great majority of Chinese readers have done since it was composed several
centuries before the beginning of the Common Era. The text became and
has remained canonical, generating a long commentarial tradition with
a multiplicity of contested interpretations as to how it is to be read and
understood in providing guidance for leading a meaningful life. Both the
quality and the quantity of scholarship expended upon the Classic of Fam-
ily Reverence, conducted by scholar-philosophers centrally concerned with
the question of how best to live our all-too-human lives, should give pause
to any initial impulse to dismiss the text as philosophically unsophisticat-
ed, or to toss it into history’s already heaping bibliographic dustbin. After
all, the question of how to make this life significant is no less, and perhaps
even more, urgent today than it ever was in the past.
2. Confucius (551–479 BCE)
Confucius is arguably the most influential philosopher in human history. We say “is” because, taking Chinese philosophy on its own terms, he is still very much alive in the modern world. Celebrated as China’s first teacher both chronologically and in importance, his ideas have been the rich soil in which the Chinese cultural tradition has grown and flourished. In fact, whatever we might mean by “Chineseness” today, some two and a half millennia after his death, is inseparable from the example of personal excellence that Confucius provided for posterity.

Although Confucius enjoyed great popularity as a teacher and many of his students found their way into political office, his enduring frustration was that he personally achieved only marginal influence in the practical politics of the day. In this respect, he was a philosophe rather than a systematic or theoretical philosopher; he wanted desperately to hold sway over intellectual and social trends, and to improve the quality of life that was dependent upon them. Although there were many occasions on which important political figures sought his advice and services, during his mature years in the state of Lu he held only minor offices at court.

Early on, however, and certainly by the time of his death, Confucius had risen in reputation to become a model of erudition, attracting attention from all segments of society. As centuries passed and the stock in Confucius rose, the historical records began to “recall” details about his official career that supposedly had been lost. Over time, his later admirers altered the wording of his biographical record in his favor, effectively promoting him from minor official to several of the highest positions in the land. Surely, they reasoned, the people of his time would have recognized that someone special had walked among them and would have sought out and deferred to his leadership.

Nor does the story end there. By the time of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), Confucius was celebrated as the “uncrowned king” of the state of Lu, and by the fourth century CE, any prefecture wanting to define itself as a political entity was required by imperial decree to erect a temple to celebrate Confucius. Gods in China are local cultural heroes who are remembered by history as having contributed meaning and value to the tradition, and of these revered ancestors, the “god” called Master Kong has been remembered best.

Confucius was certainly a flesh-and-blood historical figure, as real as Jesus or George Washington. But the received Confucius was and still is a “living corporate person” in the sense that generation after generation
of descendants have written commentaries on the legacy of Confucius in an effort to make his teachings meaningful for their own times and places. “Confucianism” is a lineage of scholars and cultural exemplars who have continued to elaborate upon the canonical texts passed on after the life of Confucius came to an end, extending the way of thinking and living that he had begun.

By developing his insights around the most basic and enduring aspects of the human experience—family reverence, friendship, education, community—Confucius guaranteed their continuing relevance. One characteristic of Confucianism that began with Confucius himself, and that made it so resilient in the Chinese tradition, is its porousness and adaptability. Indeed, Confucius with great modesty said of himself that he only transmitted traditional culture, he did not create it; his contribution was simply to take ownership of the tradition and to adapt the wisdom of the past to his own present historical moment.12

There are many sources for the teachings of Confucius that have been passed down to us today. The most authoritative among them is the Lunyu, usually translated as the Analects. (Lunyu literally means “Discourses,” but a better translation is “Analects,” taken from the Greek analekta, which has the root meaning of “leftovers after a feast.”) Tradition has it that the first fifteen books of these literary “leftovers” were assembled and edited by a congress of Confucius’ disciples shortly after his death.13 It would seem the students concluded that Confucius was a model human being of the highest order, and that his way—what he said and did—should be preserved for future generations. Much of this portion of the text is devoted to remembering Confucius; it is a personal narrative of what he had to say, to whom he said it, and how it was said.

This same tradition holds that the last five books of the Analects appear to have been compiled some time later, after the more prominent disciples of Confucius had launched their own teaching careers and had taken it upon themselves to elaborate on the philosophy of their late Master. This, then, would be the beginning of a process of appropriation and extension of Confucius’ ideas that has continued down to the present day. Confucius is less prominent in these later chapters, yet he is referred to in more honorific terms, while the now mature disciples are themselves often quoted.

The Analects is relevant to family reverence in several ways. Of course, Confucius has much to say on the topic of xiao himself, and we reference these passages throughout our introduction as a way of both clarifying and amplifying what is said in the Classic of Family Reverence.
But in the *Analects* we also catch a glimpse of Confucius himself as a “family man.” First, there are several allusions to his own family experience. His concern to educate his own son, Boyu, is mentioned (16.13, 17.10), as is his willingness to give his own daughter in marriage to an ex-convict, in spite of the social stigma of doing so, because Confucius deems the young man to be an innocent who was wrongly convicted (5.1). Perhaps most revealing of Confucius personally was his relationship with his favorite protégé and indeed surrogate son, Yan Hui:

> When Yan Hui died and his fellow students wanted to have a lavish burial for him, the Master said it would not be proper, and yet they did so anyway. The Master responded, “Yan Hui! You looked on me as a father, and yet I have not been able to treat you as a son. This was none of my doing—it was your fellow students.” (11.11)

Confucius himself had grown quite literally “together” with Yan Hui. The magnitude of the bond that Confucius had forged in this relationship was such that he felt enormous loss when the bond was severed by the student’s untimely death. Indeed, this death was nothing short of surgical in the diminishing of Confucius’ own person, and he expressed unconstrained anguish openly, to the alarm of his students:

> When Yan Hui died, the Master grieved for him with sheer abandon. His followers cautioned, “Sir, you grieve with such abandon.” The Master replied, “I grieve with abandon? If I don’t grieve with abandon for him, then for whom?” (11.10)

Yan Hui was certainly special, but then Confucius’ relationship with most of his students was fatherly, as when he was similarly grief-stricken at the imminent death of another disciple (6.10). He was, in the best sense, their “teacher-father” (*shifu* 師父), treating each one of them responsively in a way appropriate to their particular needs.

There is an intimacy to this entire text as it portrays Confucius in relation to the people who were most important to him. The middle three books in particular are like snapshots of Confucius’s life habits at home: Confucius never sat down without first placing his mat in a position appropriate to the company; he never slept in the posture of a corpse; he never sang on a day he attended a funeral; he ate circumspectly and with manners and decorum; he drank freely, but never to the point of becoming confused.
One thing is clear about the *Analects* and the supplementary texts such as the *Classic of Family Reverence*: They do not purport to lay out a generic formula according to which everyone should live their lives. Rather, they provide an account of one person—how he in his relations with others cultivated his humanity, and how he lived a satisfying life, much to the admiration of those around him. The way (*dao*) of Confucius is nothing more or less than the way in which he as a particular person chose to live his life. The power and lasting value of his ideas lie in the fact that, as we will endeavor to show, they are intuitively persuasive and readily adaptable.

Confucius begins from the insight that the life of almost every human being is played out within the context of his or her particular family, for better or for worse. For Confucius and for generations of Chinese to come, the basic unit of humanity is this person in this family, rather than the solitary individual or the equally abstract notion of family. In fact, for Confucius, there is no individual—no “self” or “soul”—that remains once the layers of social relations are peeled away. Each of us is the sum of the roles we live—not “play”—in our relationships and transactions with others. The goal of living, then, is to achieve harmony and enjoyment for oneself and for others through acting most appropriately in those roles and relationships that make us uniquely who we are.15

In the tradition that Confucius so thoroughly influenced, all Chinese people are the children of the Yellow Emperor. As such, China as a country is a “country-family” (*guojia* 國家), and all human beings are a “human family” (*renjia* 人家).16 Confucius was extraordinarily fond of good music, because making music is conducive to harmony, bringing different voices into productive relationships. Indeed, making music can be a most apposite analogy for effective family living. It is tolerant in allowing each voice and instrument to have its own place—its own integrity—while at the same time requiring that each element find a complementary role through which it can add the most to the ensemble. Music, like family, is “familiar,” yet always unique in that each performance has a life of its own.

### 3. Master Zeng

Zeng Shen 曾参, style name Ziyu 子輿, was born in 505 BCE and survived his teacher Confucius by more than four decades, dying in 436 BCE. In the “Biography of the Disciples of Confucius” in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), it states that “Confucius regarded Zeng Shen as a person able to truly penetrate the way of family reverence, and accordingly
passed on his teachings to him. Zeng Shen compiled the *Classic of Family Reverence*, and later died in the state of Lu.”

He is most commonly known to us honorifically as Zeng Zi, or Master Zeng, indicating that he was a much revered teacher in his own right. He is one of only two disciples regularly accorded the “Master” title in the *Analects*, wherein he appears in fifteen sections, occasionally quoting Confucius but more usually making a philosophical remark of his own. These remarks are, for the most part, highly incisive. Following are a few of his views as expressed in the *Analects*, beginning autobiographically:

Daily I examine my person on three counts. In my undertakings on behalf of other people, have I failed to do my utmost? In my interactions with colleagues and friends, have I failed to make good on my word? In what has been passed on to me, have I failed to carry it into practice? (1.4)

Master Zeng clearly associates familial and political virtuosity:

A person to whom you can entrust an orphaned youth or commission the command of a sovereign state, who in approaching great matters of life and death remains unperturbed—is this an exemplary person (*junzi*)? Such is an exemplary person indeed! (8.6)

And of those seeking to become exemplary persons he says:

[They] cannot but be strong and resolved, for they bear a heavy charge and their way (*dao*) is long. Where they take consummate conduct (*ren*) as their charge, is it not a heavy one? And where their way ends only in death, is it not indeed long? (8.7)

On the same topic he also says:

The exemplary person (*junzi*) attracts friends through refinement (*wen*), and thereby promotes consummate conduct. (12.24)

There are passages wherein Master Zeng is associated with the basic precepts found in the *Classic of Family Reverence*. For example, having inherited one’s physical body from one’s ancestors, one is obliged to return it intact. In this tradition, amputory punishments and facial branding were commonly used on criminals, not only to alert the community of a ne’er-
do-well in their midst, but also to shame such miscreants before their an-
cestors in the invisible world. Thus it is only on his deathbed that Master
Zeng can at last relax his vigilance:

Master Zeng was ill, and summoned his students to him, saying,
“Look at my feet! Look at my hands! The *Book of Songs* says:

\begin{quote}
Fearful, fearful! Trembling, trembling!
As if peering over a deep abyss,
As if walking across thin ice.
\end{quote}

It is only from this moment hence that I can be sure I have avoided
desecration of my body, my young friends.” (8.3)

Family reverence obviously requires one to be highly sensitive to,
and caring for, the needs and welfare of family members and, by extension,
is a highly valued quality for people assuming positions of authority.
Master Zeng counsels the new magistrate with a classic application of the
Confucian strategy of determining what is morally appropriate by putting
oneself in the other’s place (shu 恭):

\begin{quote}
“When the head of the Meng clan ap-
pointed Yang Fu as a magistrate, he sought advice from Master Zeng, who
said: ‘With their superiors having lost the way (dao), the common people
have long since scattered. In uncovering what really happened in criminal
cases, you should take pity on them and show them sympathy rather than
being pleased with yourself.’” (19.19)
\end{quote}

These and related statements attributed to Master Zeng in the
*Analects* suggest a sensitive and reflective thinker with wide-ranging con-
cerns. In several sections of the *Liji* 禮記—the *Record of Rituals*—he is
remembered as interrogating Confucius on how to resolve apparent con-
flicts in the demands of ritual propriety (li), or indeed as resolving these
conflicts himself. For example, Master Zeng provides a terminus ad quem
for demonstrative mourning in observing that “When the grass is old on
the grave of a friend we no longer wail for him.”

It is, however, with the cultivation of xiao that Master Zeng’s name
is most closely associated in early Chinese thought. There are a number
of stories, some of them very probably apocryphal, narrating an extreme
concern and reverence for his parents. Indeed, the fact that he also re-
ceives mention for such sentiments in the canonical texts of non-Confu-
cian schools of thought such as Daoism (in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子) and Legal-
ism (in the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子) as well is sure testimony to his commitment
to family reverence.
This persistent association of the name of Master Zeng with family reverence has undoubtedly been reinforced by his appearance in the *Classic of Family Reverence*, even if it is unlikely that he authored this text (for details of authorship, see below, p. 19). Many of the other disciples of Confucius either had political careers or at least aspired to such; Master Zeng is one of the few who does not seem to have had such goals himself, focusing instead on personal cultivation.

Two other dimensions of Master Zeng’s life are worthy of note to aid readers in imagining the dynamic between him and Confucius in the conversations that make up the *Classic of Family Reverence*. First, while Master Zeng was one of the Master’s later disciples, his father Zengxi 曾皙, also called Zeng Dian 點, was an early student. Zengxi appears in only a single passage of the *Analects*—one of the longest passages in the entire work—and it is most revealing of Master Zeng’s father as a person, describing as well some of the other disciples of Confucius, and telling us a great deal about Confucius too. Hence this chapter deserves to be quoted in full:

Zilu, Zengxi, Ranyou, and Zihua were all sitting in attendance on Confucius. The Master said, “Just because I am a bit older than you do not hesitate on my account. You keep saying, ‘No one recognizes my worth!’ but if someone were to recognize your worth, how would you be of use to them?”

“As for me,” Zilu hastily replied, “give me a state of a thousand chariots to govern, set me in among powerful neighbors, harass me with foreign armies, and add to that widespread famine, and at the end of three years, I will have imbued the people with courage, and moreover, provided them with a sure direction.”

The Master smiled at him, and said, “Ranyou, what would you do?”

“Give me a small territory of sixty or seventy—or even fifty or sixty—li square, and at the end of three years, I will have made sure the people have what they need. As for observing ritual propriety (li) and the playing of music (yue), these must wait upon an exemplary person (junzi).”

And what would you do, Zihua?” asked the Master.

“Not to say that I have the ability to do so, but I am willing to learn: In the events of the Ancestral Temple and in the forging of diplomatic alliances, donning the appropriate ceremonial robes and cap, I would like to serve as a minor protocol officer.”
“And what about you, Zengxi?” asked the Master. Zengxi plucked a final note on his zither to bring the piece to an end, and setting the instrument aside, he rose to his feet.

“I would choose to do something somewhat different from the others,” he said.

“No harm in that,” said the Master. “Each of you may speak your mind.”

“At the end of spring, with the spring clothes having already been finished, I would like, in the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain, and then return home singing.”

The Master heaved a deep sigh, and said, “I’m with Zengxi!”

Zilu, Ranyou, and Zihua all left, but Zengxi waited behind and asked the Master, “What do you think of what my three fellow students have said?”

“Each of you has simply spoken his mind, that’s all,” replied the Master.

“Why did you, sir, smile at Zilu?” said Zengxi.

“I smiled at him because in governing a state you need to observe ritual propriety, and yet in what he said there was no deference at all,” said the Master.

“Was it only Ranyou who did not speak of governing a state?” he asked.

“How can one speak of a territory of sixty or seventy—or even fifty or sixty—li square, and not be referring to a state?” replied the Master.

“Was it only Zihua, then, who did not speak of governing a state?” he asked.

“If the events of the Ancestral Temple and diplomatic alliances do not involve the various lords, then what are they? If he is only going to serve as a minor protocol officer, then who is able to take a major role?” (11.26)

With this depiction of Zengxi, we first gain a clearer insight into what is meant by ritual propriety (li). It is of course significant that, given the inseparability of ritual propriety and music, Zengxi brings a piece of music that he is playing to a conclusion before he answers Confucius. For Confucius, li is a living, vibrant, and profoundly earthy tradition in which a religious reverence is to be found in song and dance, and the
ordinary pleasures of family and friends. The heart of ritual propriety is hearth and happiness, with less concern for sometimes rarified, anemic, formalities. And about Zengxi himself we learn that, in demonstrating his worth, he chooses as his first priority the observance of just such ritual propriety. His answer and Confucius’ response to it suggest that he, unlike the other three students, understands that any kind of political success is going to depend upon setting a model of excellence for the people and leading them with ritual propriety (2.3). Appropriate ritualized living, like the proper use of language, is a social discourse that is fundamental to effective governing (13.3). At the same time, Confucius is making it clear that the path to governing effectively must also at times include simple pleasures and lightheartedness; though governing is serious, if it becomes too much so, a zealousness to rule “properly” can lead to exactly the opposite result.

In addition to Master Zeng’s reputation for family reverence, another noteworthy aspect of his life is that he was the teacher of the grandson of Confucius, Zisi 子思, a role that later led to Master Zeng being given the title Zong Sheng 宗聖, “Ancestral Sage.” Indeed, Zisi shared with Confucius and with his teacher, Master Zeng, a reputation for being expert in the details of ritual propriety. However, while Master Zeng was not particularly interested in achieving a position of political influence, Confucius and Zisi both expressed considerable frustration at being sought out for counsel by persons of high political station but then being ignored when it came time for political appointments.22

Zisi became a teacher in the Confucian mold himself, with one of his own students in turn very likely being the teacher of Mencius (375?–289 BCE). The book that bears the latter’s name later achieved canonical status as one of the “Four Books” of Confucianism, and Mencius himself was accorded the title of the “Second Sage.” Moreover, two of the remaining three texts included in the “Four Books”—the Analects of Confucius being the fourth—are chapters from the Record of Rituals: that is, the Zhongyong 中庸 (Focusing the Familiar) and the Da Xue 大學 (Great Learning), the authorship of which is traditionally ascribed to Zisi and Master Zeng respectively.23

In sum, Master Zeng can be seen as the initiator of that school of Confucian thought that came to dominate the later philosophic commentarial tradition; and thus, given that the concept of family reverence plays such a defining role in Confucian thought, it should not be surprising that he comes to occupy such a prominent place in the Confucian pantheon.
4. The Text and Its Historical Context

A central current running through Chinese intellectual history ever since at least the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) has been a tradition of sophisticated textual scholarship. The skills necessary to closely and carefully analyze the philological, syntactic, phonetic, and semantic properties of a text; to compare and contrast these texts with others of similar vintage; to do so with attentiveness to historical circumstances and philosophic ideas—these have been the defining qualities of the scholar in China. And such scholarship has been in large part a prerequisite for passing the imperial examinations, a credential necessary for admission to China’s distinctive civil service as a gateway that opens out onto the pathway of rapid social advancement for oneself and for one’s family.

In order to understand this scholarly preoccupation with texts and, more specifically, to place the *Classic of Family Reverence* properly in its original context, we must briefly sketch the specific historical circumstances under which it was composed. One reason generally given to justify concerns about the textual authenticity of particular works is that, while many writings were produced in China from at least the eleventh through the third centuries BCE, a bibliographic holocaust occurred in 213 BCE, shortly after the several states of ancient China were consolidated under the rule of the First Emperor of the Qin dynasty (of terracotta tomb-soldier fame). Many texts were irretrievably lost during this infamous “Burning of the Books.” But the Qin dynasty survived for only sixteen years (221–206 BCE), and the Han dynasty was established four years later, at which time the intelligentsia made an immediate attempt to recover and reconstruct the lost manuscripts.

While this standard account of a conflagration has the cachet of being a specific event that is integral to the Chinese intellectual tradition, more recent scholarship suggests that another compelling reason for the drive to authenticate texts and their authors was that, with the unification of the central states as empire and the systematization of knowledge it entailed, a process of unification also had to take place at different levels within the culture. Thus, in addition to the standardization of the written language, weights and measures, coinage, axle widths, and other conventions established by the short-lived Qin dynasty, comprehensive histories were written, compendia of knowledge were compiled, ritual practices were codified, a mosaic of competing mythologies and cultural heroes was synchronized and integrated, and a body of texts inherited from earlier generations was canonized.

In this process of recovering lost texts and consolidating a cultural
canon, a tradition of textual scholarship was inaugurated that would last for two millennia. It was at this time that the *Classic of Family Reverence* became a popular text.\(^{24}\) Like many older works, although it had *jing* (classic) in its title, it was not officially accorded that honor until the Tang dynasty, in 838 CE.\(^{25}\) Indeed, the commentaries point out that although *jing* was already part of its title in the earliest reference to it, this term would not as yet have been used formally to designate a text as a “classic.” Indeed, in this context, *Xiaojing*, far from describing a classic would have probably meant something like “constant tenets.” Hence, *Xiaojing* would translate as something like “On the Basic Precepts of Family Reverence” or “Constant Guidelines for Family Reverence.”\(^{26}\) What is also clear, however, is that whatever *jing* meant in this first reference, the text soon after emerged and then continued to function across the centuries as a “classic” in the fullest sense of the English term, and it is on this historical warrant that we translate it herein as the *Classic of Family Reverence*.\(^{27}\)

The protracted labor leading up to the birth and unification of the Qin empire is known as “The Period of the Warring States,” and is aptly named. The then-extant Zhou dynasty (1050–256 BCE) had long since ceased to exercise control over its domains in north China, and independent political entities had developed south of the Yangtze River as well. A semifudal hereditary order was breaking down everywhere. Sometimes claiming genealogical right or the moral high ground, or simply employing military might, the leaders of these states engaged in increasingly ferocious warfare, made all the more violent because it was conducted in a zero-sum milieu in which if you did not win decisively, you lost utterly.\(^{28}\)

This same period is also known as the Golden Age of Chinese Thought with the flourishing of the “Hundred Schools of Philosophy”—remembering as it does yet another dimension of a much contested world. At roughly the same time as the Buddha was preaching in the southwest and the Greek philosophical tradition was developing in the far west, Chinese thinkers were engaging each other philosophically about what constitutes the good life for persons and for society.

It was in the midst of this social tumult, political adventurism, savage warfare, and philosophical disputation that the *Classic of Family Reverence* was born. (We lack, however, a birth certificate for it.) Because Master Zeng appears prominently in the text, we know that it could not in any case have been written much before he died in 436 BCE. As mentioned above, the *Classic of Family Reverence* is first cited, however, in another text (the *Lushichunqiu* 呂氏春秋) that is known on independent grounds to have been composed no later than 239 BCE; thus we can feel confident,
at the least, that the *Xiaojing* was composed sometime during the height of the convulsions of the Warring States period that anticipated the birth of imperial China.29

The lack of a specific date for the composition of the text carries over to the question of authorship. We do not know who wrote or edited the document. One tradition attributes the work to Confucius himself; another allows that the words were his but Master Zeng wrote them down. Still a third tradition, developed later, attributes the composition of the work to some of the disciples of the disciples of Master Zeng—to students, that is, at two removes from Master Zeng and three from the Master himself. The fact that Master Zeng is referred to honorifically as “Master” in itself recommends the third tradition as the most probable.30

In any event, little that is said in the *Classic of Family Reverence* is out of keeping with what we know of both Confucius and Master Zeng from the *Analects* and is consistent with their conversations as they appear in the *Record of Rituals* (*Liji*). We thus surmise that the book in its present form very probably dates from the early Han period if not earlier, and thus has been read and studied by some eighty generations of Chinese students and scholars.

One indication of the importance of this text is both the stature of the participants in the debates that surrounded it during this transmission and the ferocity with which they advanced their arguments. Just to take three examples, in 719 the Tang Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 commanded that his Confucian officials provide him with a definitive text of the *Xiaojing*. In response, one of his ministers, Liu Zhiji 劉知幾, wrote a document entitled *Twelve Items of Evidence* that advocated a return to the ancient script version of the text associated with the Han dynasty commentator, Kong Anguo 孔安國. This same document rejected the modern script version associated with the Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 commentarial tradition that had been edited by Liu Xiang 劉向 and had served as the basis for the popularly received version, claiming that it was a later forgery. Another minister, Sima Zhen 司馬貞, challenged Liu Zhiji’s assertions, providing his own evidence that in fact it was the ancient script version Liu endorsed that was itself a spurious text concocted by later Confucians, and that the Kong and the Zheng commentarial traditions both had to be consulted. Emperor Xuanzong, in an attempt to restore order, ultimately insisted that indeed both versions had to be preserved, revising his own 712 commentary in 743. He also had the text and the imperial commentary carved in stone and placed before the entrance to the Chang’an academy as his endorsement of its canonical stature and in order to perpetuate its influence in the
empire.\textsuperscript{31} From then on, his imperial commentary superseded the Kong and Zheng commentaries as the standard text.

Again in the Northern Song, the great statesman Wang Anshi 王安石 wrote his “Explanations of the Xiaojing” based on the modern script text, only to inspire the equally prominent Sima Guang 司馬光 to find a copy of the ancient script version in the national archives and to compile his counterpoint, “An Exposition of the Ancient Script Xiaojing.”

Thereafter the Southern Song philosopher Zhu Xi 朱熹 wrote his famous \textit{Amended Text of the Xiaojing 孝經刊誤}, arguing that only a third of what was purported to be the \textit{Xiaojing} was in fact the original text. He took the ancient script version as the basis of his commentary, dividing the twenty-two-chapter edition into fifteen chapters of text and consigning the opening seven chapters (six in the modern text version) to the status of later appended commentary. He further argued that the citations from the \textit{Book of Songs} and the \textit{Book of Documents} that punctuated each chapter were later editorial additions to the original document. From then on, the imperial commentary of Tang Xuanzong and the amended text of Zhu Xi competed with each other for authority within the academy, eclipsing any influence of the original Kong and Zheng commentaries. And so the story continued.\textsuperscript{32}

That China was indeed in transition at the beginning of this long and eventful history when the \textit{Classic of Family Reverence} was first compiled and circulated, with violence being commonplace, can be discerned by the careful reader, for Confucius is clearly concerned to effect the necessary political and social reforms in a more peaceful and humane way. He holds no “might makes right” doctrines; military prowess is not the mark of a good ruler for the Master, who instead insists on a compassionate concern for the common people. As the \textit{Analects} narrates:

\begin{quote}
The Master said: “Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishment but be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.” (2.3)
\end{quote}

And again, the same text records that once, when asked about military matters by a territorial lord, the indignant Confucius said, “I have heard something about the use of ritual vessels, but I have never been a student of military matters.” And this same passage concludes with Confucius
punctuating his visceral displeasure at the suggestion of using military force by a prompt and conspicuous departure: “On the next day Confucius left the lord’s territory” (15.1).33

Relatedly, while nowhere does the Classic of Family Reverence advocate the abolition of the aristocracy, it does make clear that true aristocrats are such because of the nobility of their exemplary qualities, not their bloodlines. (It is noteworthy, perhaps, that whereas fourteen of the eighteen chapters of the text attribute all that is said therein to either Confucius or Master Zeng, the four chapters—3, 4, 5, and 6—that deal with the family reverence appropriate to very distinct social classes have no identifiable voice or spokesperson.)

This shift from blood lineage to merit as the prime determinant of a person’s worth was carried further by the later Confucian philosopher Xunzi (320?–238 BCE), who, in an essay on how a true king should govern, writes:

> Although they be among the progeny of kings, dukes, officials, and ministers, if they are not able to comport themselves appropriately and with ritual propriety, they are in fact nothing but commoners. Although they be among the progeny of commoners, if they lay up learning and culture, attend to their personal conduct, and are able to comport themselves appropriately and with ritual propriety, they belong among the ranks of high ministers and court officials.34

Ten of the eighteen chapters of the Xiaojing, in a pattern typical of early Confucian texts, conclude with a quotation from the Shiijing 詩經, variously translated as the Book of Poetry, Book of Odes, or Book of Songs. Although regularly cited in support of some weighty aesthetic, ethical, political, or religious points that Confucius and other early philosophers wished to make, the original 305 poems that comprise the Songs are just that: songs to be intoned and chanted aloud. While some of them do indeed have an ethical import that can be read in them, the majority are simply reflective of life in early historical China. There are love songs and songs lamenting a son or husband going off to war; songs dealing with nature, with hunting and fishing, with friendship, with planting and harvest festivals; there are court ballads and dirges; and there are songs dealing with legends, ancient rituals, and ancestor reverence. Collectively the poems of the Songs paint what must be the most accurate picture we have of the everyday life of the Chinese—aristocrats and commoners alike—living in approximately the ninth century BCE.35
In addition to appealing to an extensive store of shared images and metaphors among a competent audience, the *Book of Songs* has been employed with punctuating effect in the Confucian texts. Indeed, it is because the *Book of Songs* is an anonymous reflection on life in early China, capturing the honest feelings of the people broadly, that it has had enormous affective force in closing an argument or endorsing some interpretive observation. The veracity of the *Book of Songs* is quite simply beyond dispute, making it a favorite device among philosophers for terminating discussion by clinching their point.

In sum, then, the reader of the *Classic of Family Reverence* needs to keep in mind both the routine life of the people and the rapid pace of change and violence endemic to the period in which this document was compiled, and to appreciate how it lived on in the tradition to shape the values and the character of the Chinese culture. The text’s call to preserve the past and respect tradition may be construed not merely as the lament of reactionary and authoritarian intellectuals, but also as containing the keen insight that much of who and what we are is always linked to the past. Indeed, obliterating our past leaves us with a diminished sense of who we are, an immediate consequence of which is the loss of guidelines for who and what we might become—in a more peaceful world. The Russian composer Igor Stravinsky made this point succinctly: “Tradition is entirely different from habit. . . . A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present.”

**III. Philosophical and Religious Background**

1. *Xiao* in Classical Confucianism

In the opening chapter of the *Classic of Family Reverence*, Confucius proclaims that family reverence is the “root of excellence” (*de* 德). This may strike the reader as odd (if not hyperbolic): Of course we should love, respect, and honor our parents (and our ancestors as well) but how are such activities tied to developing such qualities as temperance, courage, and wisdom (to name only the three cardinal virtues first analyzed and discussed at length by Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, and then later by Aristotle)?

In the *Classic of Family Reverence*, the familiar Confucian vocabulary—“consummate person or conduct” (*ren* 仁), “appropriateness” (*yi* 義), “ritual propriety” (*li* 禮), and “wisdom” (*zhi* 智)—is muted by a sustained focus upon family reverence (*xiao* 孝) as the root from which the entire tradition grows. Simply put, when family reverence is function-