

The Poor Chinese Scholar

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惟乖於時、乃與天通 (韓愈)

Only when you get along awkwardly
with your own age are you in contact
with Heaven. — Hân Yü

East Asian tradition prescribes an attitude considered appropriate to scholars living in poverty. Below, I describe some of its expressions in ancient Chinese literature.¹ In particular, I describe three elements to this attitude: poverty in the abstract, poverty seen personally, and voluntary poverty or poverty acquiesced in.

Poverty in the abstract, as presented in political philosophy

In Bronze Age Chinese literature, meaning those texts that survive cast into excavated bronze vessels or scratched onto excavated pieces of bone and shell, we find nothing at all about poverty. The reason for this lack has to do with the function of the surviving literature: bronze texts are monumental inscriptions memorializing honors paid by a ruler to a meritorious subject. Bone and shell texts were made for the purpose of divination: “Will it rain today?” “Will the king’s consort give birth tomorrow?” And so on. In neither case is there much chance for the subject of poverty to come up.

Discussion of poverty first appears in what we call Classical literature, which spans a period of time (in terms of the research of many of our colleagues) very approximately coterminous with the existence of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, or the Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires, out here in Far West: 6th century B.C.E. to 2nd century C.E. (at the latest). These texts (Classical literature) are part of a received tradition and many are concerned with the moral philosophy of government (Chinese civilization having long been focused intently on matters of power, prestige, and hierarchy). References to poverty in the philosophy of government are mainly in general terms, mentioning the bad state of the common people as evidence of incompetent rule. Among the examples that come up most often are famine and inadequate clothing.

The basic idea may be summed up in a line from the philosopher Mencius (4th c. BCE). As is often the case, he is in dialogue with a king:

1. This literature is the earliest in the tradition not only of “China” itself but also of Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. The written tradition in East Asia appears to be Chinese in origin, not only because the native writing system developed in lands that are Chinese today but also because the phonological structure of the writing system by the Warring States period shows a clear connection to a substantial part of the modern Chinese spoken vocabulary.

以刃與政、有以異乎、曰、無以異也

Mencius asks, “Between [killing with] the edge of a blade and [killing with] poor administration, is there a difference?” The king replies, “There is no difference.” (梁惠王上)

Mencius is a highly discursive moralist, so let me give you one of his more vivid examples. Again, he is addressing a king:

庖有肥肉、廄有肥馬、民有飢色、野有餓莩、此率獸而食人也、獸相食、且人惡之、為民父母、行政不免於率獸而食人、惡在其為民父母也、仲尼曰、始作俑者、其無後乎、為其象人而用之也、如之何其使斯民飢而死也

There are fat meat in your kitchen and fat horses in your stables. But the people wear expressions of famine on their faces and there are starved corpses in the lands beyond the town. That means you are leading beasts to eat people. Beasts eat each other and humans despise them for it. But to be the “father and mother to the people” [a term for the ruler] and yet fail to prevent your administration from leading beasts to eat people — what part of that consists of being “father and mother to the people”? Confucius said, “The first person to make human burial figurines must have had no descendants!”, [merely] because [he disapproved of] using things that [even] looked like human beings. Then what of making the people starve to death?

Mencius is one of the sterner moralists in the Early Chinese record, but the subject comes up in plenty of other places. There is a somewhat later book called the *Guānzǐ*, an anthology of administrative philosophy addressed to the ruler, containing many passages about the effects of official corruption, heavy taxes, and heavy conscription in impoverishing the people. Poverty is seen in the *Guānzǐ* as an effect and therefore an index of the quality of rule and regulation.

主之所以為功者、富強也、... 主之所以為罪者、貧弱也

The things that constitute a ruler’s achievements are the wealth [of the people] and [military] strength. ... The things that constitute a ruler’s faults are the poverty [of the people] and [military] weakness.” (I: 69)

There are many other such statements:

II: 171. “if [the ruler’s] taxes and levies are too onerous and exhaust the wealth of the people... aggressive and violent behavior will become inevitable” (95.8)

II: 379. “if people are too poor, punishment cannot be used to intimidate them” (67.5)

There are also references to peasants having to sell their children because of policy failure at the level of the state.

The point is that poverty among the people is a sign of bad government.

The personal view of poverty

But a message like “poverty means bad government” is very abstract. “The poor” are part of an argument, but their state of mind is not really of interest to the writer. We would really like to know what *we* ourselves should do if we encounter poverty. How should we act or think about our situation? Although it isn’t a major part of what we associate with the East Asian tradition, Confucian philosophers have left some advice about how the educated person should approach

poverty on personal terms.

The most important notion appears in the *Analects* of Confucius. It is expressed in the two words *gùqióng* 固窮: ‘to approach poverty with an attitude of persistence’, ‘to persist through poverty’ (parallel to *ānpín* 安貧 ‘to be at peace [even] in poverty’). Here is the locus classicus:

在陳絕糧、從者病、莫能興、子路慍見曰、君子亦有窮乎、子曰、君子固窮、小人窮斯濫矣 (15:2)

Confucius ran out of provisions while in the state of Chén. His followers were so afflicted that none of them could get up from bed. His disciple Zǐlù was resentful and had an audience with the master, saying, “Is the well-bred person sometimes poor, too?” The master said, “The well-bred person persists through poverty; the petty person, when poor, loses control because of it.”

The notion of “persisting through poverty” dovetails with other ideas Confucius has about how to behave — he generally urges flexibility in all but the most crucial matters, in which however he demands intransigence.

The most forceful Confucian phrase about persistence is 以直報怨: ‘requite wrongdoing with straightness’ — not being swayed by wrongdoing from doing what is right, not reacting to wrongdoing.²

In the received record, one of the few people Confucius explicitly praises is his student Yán Huí, for his unfading enthusiasm for learning, even though he is poor:

一簞食、一瓢飲、在陋巷、人不堪其憂、回也不改其樂 (6.11)

“A container of cooked rice, a dipper of drink, and living in a run-down alley. Others would be unable to bear the worry of it; but Huí, he never changes his cheerful attitude.”

For Confucius as a teacher, no one is turned away because of poverty; he encourages them to persist:

子曰、自行束修以上、吾未嘗無誨焉 7.7

The master said, “As long as someone presents me with of a bundle of dried meat as a [token tuition gift], I have never failed to give them instruction.”

On the subject of the poverty of students, there is another famous phrase: *yǒujiào wúlèi* 有教無類 (15.39). It survives as an idiom in modern speech, with a somewhat different meaning,³ but its original meaning was:

He did not make [class] distinctions [between people] when he taught them.

In general, for Confucius, you are not supposed to serve the state unless there is a reasonable chance your advice will be taken seriously. The purpose of serving the state,

2. Since *zhí* 直 ‘straight’ appears to be part of the graph for *dé* 德 (historically also written 意) ‘virtue’, this saying may have been intended as a graphic pun, to be read *zhíxīn* 直心 ‘an upright heart’. It is possible that there is a semantic connection between the two words, but standard phonological relationships do not make this a necessary interpretation.
3. It is often used today in the sense “to teach all comers, to refuse instruction to no one.”

according to Confucius, is named by Mencius as *shìdào* 事道 ‘serving the Way (the truth)’ (also *wèi dào ér shì* 為道而事 ‘serving for the sake of the Way’). (萬章下:4) If that is not happening, before long you resign.

The philosopher Xúnzǐ puts it this way:

事亂君而通、不如事窮君而順焉、故良農不為水旱不耕、良賈不為折閱不市、士君子不為貧窮怠乎道

Being completely successful while serving a ruler who does not govern properly is not as good as being obedient while serving a ruler who is impoverished. And so a good farmer does not stop ploughing because of floods and droughts; a good merchant does not stop going to market because of having to sell at a loss. And the scholar and well-bred person does not become lazy about the Way (the truth) because of poverty. (Xiūshēn)

This point also explains one of the lingering puzzles in the *Analects*: Why does Confucius not like to praise people, especially not for *rén* ‘humaneness’, one of the key ideas he advocates? It seems that what he objects to is the reputation for humaneness; he seems to reserve his praise for people who have actually been put to the test:

吾之於人也、誰毀誰譽、如有所譽者、其有所試矣 (15.25)

The way I interact with others — who I condemn and who I praise — is this: if I praise someone, he will have been tested.

Being put to the test is evidence that persistence in the face of opposition has actually been demonstrated.

Two more familiar Confucian concerns come up in this connection in the work of Mencius: your behavior must be in keeping with your status, and you must never seem to connive at wrongdoing.

孟子曰、仕非為貧也、而有時乎為貧、...為貧者、辭尊居卑、辭富居貧、辭尊居卑、辭富居貧、惡乎宜乎、抱關擊柝、孔子嘗為委吏矣、曰、會計當而已矣、嘗為乘田矣、曰、牛羊茁壯、長而已矣、位卑而言高、罪也、立乎人之本朝而道不行、恥也 (萬章下:6)

Although you do not [normally] take an official post because of poverty, there is a time for doing so because of poverty. ... When it is done for poverty, you refuse high rank and settle into low rank; you refuse wealth and settle into poverty. What would be appropriate, in refusing high rank and dwelling in low rank? Gatekeeper or beater of the night-watches. Confucius was once a minor official at a granary. He said, “As long as the accounts tally, that’s everything.” He was once a minor official in charge of herding domestic animals. He said, “As long as the oxen and sheep are sturdy and grow properly, that’s everything.” It is blameworthy if what you talk about is higher than your rank. And it is shameful for the Way (the truth) not to be put into practice when you are established at someone’s court.

Xúnzǐ adds an idea to this generalization:

君子貧窮而志廣、富貴而體恭、...君子貧窮而志廣、隆仁也、富貴而體恭、殺執也⁴

When a well-bred person is poor, his ambitions are broad; when wealthy, his comportment is respectful. ... His ambitions become broadened because he practices kindness on a

4. Reading 執 as *shì* 勢.

larger scale; his comportment is respectful because he cuts down the sense of power he exudes. (Xiūshēn)

A few of the more vivid classical images of persistence in learning even though poor are collected in a passage by the 6th century Yán Zhītuī:

握錐投斧	to wield an awl (to stick oneself when one feels sleepy) and toss axes (as a test of persistence)
照雪聚螢	to read by light reflected from the snow, or with collected fireflies;
鋤則帶經	when one hoes, to have classics bound in one's sash;
牧則編簡	when one herds cattle, to have bamboo strips bound together. (<i>Yánshì jiāxùn</i> 44a-b)

To review the notion of “persisting through poverty”, there are some poetic confessions, from somewhat later eras, illustrating this Confucian ideal.

The poet Yáng Xióng (53 B.C.E. – 18 C.E.) left a work called the “Zhúpín fù 逐貧賦,” the “Presentation-piece on Expelling Poverty.” The poet’s voice wishes Poverty would go somewhere else, and Poverty replies by pointing out how many advantages it has conferred on him, for instance:

處君之家	With me living in your house,
福祿如山	good fortune [has piled up] like a mountain.
忘我大德	You forget my great virtue;
思我小怨	and remember only your own petty resentments. ⁵
堪寒能暑	You can bear cold, tolerate heat ⁶
少而習焉	and have been used to them since childhood.
...	...
人皆重蔽	Others all hide behind many walls;
予獨露居	you alone can live exposed.
人皆惶惕	Others all quake in fear,
予獨無虞	you alone have no worries.

In the end, the poet apologizes and says:

長與汝居	“Long will I dwell with you;
終無厭極	I will never tire of you or feel myself pushed to an extreme.”
貧遂不去	So Poverty did not leave
與我遊息	but travels and flourishes with me.

Hán Yù (768 – 824) left a composition in a superficially similar form — also an argument with Poverty, ending in reconciliation — called the “Sòngqióng wén 送窮文” “The Composition on Sending Off Poverty.” In it, the persona of the poet prepares a ritual for sending away a troublesome spirit, the spirit of Poverty. The spirit appears and challenges him to show that he knows what the spirit is really like, and the poet says there are actually five spirits in all:

智窮	Poverty Due to Wisdom
學窮	Poverty Due to Learning
文窮	Poverty Due to Writing
命窮	Poverty Due to Fortune
交窮	Poverty Due to Personal Connections.

5. Reading 怨 as *yuān* 冤.

6. Reading 能 as *nài* 耐.

He has various trenchant things to say about each of them, for instance, of Poverty Due to Writing, he says:

不專一能	He has no special skill
怪怪奇奇	and is somehow peculiar.
不可時施	He cannot go forth when the times require it,
祇以自嬉	only when he wants to, himself.

But the spirits eventually interrupt him and point out that they are his most loyal companions and supporters:

人生一世	A man lives one generation —
其久幾何	how long is that?
吾立子名	If we establish your name
百世不磨	in a hundred generations it will not be worn away.
小人君子	To be a petty man or to be a gentleman,
其心不同	the frame of mind required is not the same.
惟乖於時	Only when you get along awkwardly with your own age
乃與天通	are you in contact with Heaven.
攜持琬琰	Holding the block of jade [that makes up your noble soul],
易一羊皮	you would swap it for a goatskin.
飫於肥甘	Having eaten your fill of rich food
慕彼糠糜	you long instead for a porridge of husks
天下知子	If the world knows you,
誰過於予	who more so than we?
雖遭斥逐	Though we meet with your rejection and expulsion,
不忍子疏	we cannot bear to be far from you.
謂予不信	If you say we are not to be believed,
請質詩書	kindly consult the <i>Shī</i> and <i>Shū</i> .

In the end, the poet relents and hangs his head, inviting them to take seats of honor in his home.

Voluntary poverty — the tradition of escape

Yáng Xióng and Hán Yù seem to be saying that in accepting poverty they agree to remain somewhat detached from the ambitions of most other literati. Of course, to thinkers like Confucius and Mencius, your ambition is not supposed to be for yourself, but for the “Way” (the truth), so that accepting poverty is perhaps an inevitable part of that brief.

However, avoiding office is the subject of actual advocacy — effusive and satirical advocacy — by some Classical authors, and in a somewhat later period becoming a hermit became a fad, but right now we are concerned with the views expressed by the political moralists.

Why should you want to escape at all? In a few words, contact with sycophancy and greed.

Mencius provides us with a one-liner about this from Zēngzǐ, Confucius’s grandson and his own teacher:

曾子曰、脅肩諂笑、病于夏畦 (滕文公下:7)

Zēngzǐ said, “inclined shoulders and ingratiating smiles are even more of an affliction than farming vegetables in the summer.”

子路曰、未同而言、觀其色、赧赧然、非由之所知也 (滕文公下:7)

Zilù said, “When someone speaks up even though not in agreement, and by observation of their expression they seem embarrassed — that is not something I understand.”

From among many Classical accounts of capable people fleeing official posts, let me offer you one from the *Lǚshì chūnqū*.

以貴富有人易、以貧賤有人難、...或遇之山中、負釜蓋笠、問焉曰、請問介子推安在、應之曰、夫介子推苟不欲見而欲隱、吾獨焉知之、遂背而行、終身不見 (介立)

It is easy to win people over with the promise of rank and wealth; it is difficult to do so with poverty and low rank. ... [The book then tells a story about Jiè Zituī, who made great sacrifices for his ruler Duke Jin of Wén when the Duke was in need, but eventually resigned when the Duke was reinstated on the throne.] Someone encountered him in the mountains, with an overturned pot on his head as a hat, and asked him, “May I know where Jiè Zituī is?” He replied, “Jiè Zituī wishes to retire from society, rather than to be seen. How is it that I alone know where he is?” And he turned his back and left, never to be seen again.

The writer sums up:

人心之不同、豈不甚哉、今世之逐利者、早朝晏退、焦唇乾嗑、日夜思之、猶未之能得、今得之而務疾逃之、介子推之離俗遠矣

How could the difference between people’s mindsets fail to be great? People in the modern day who chase after gain attend court in the morning and retire from it very late; they burn up their lips and parch their throats; they think of [their goal] day and night and still are unable to obtain it. Jiè Zituī obtained it and then made up his mind to flee from it in haste. Far indeed was he from the common run.

Confucius and Mencius certainly provide for the possibility of not finding an appropriate position. But they are opposed to leaving the world altogether and living permanently in poverty.

Mencius mentions the case of Chén Zhòngzǐ, a man so pure of principle that he lives only by bartering straw sandals that he weaves himself. He refuses to stay in the home of his brother, who is an official with a good salary, because he considers the salary to be “不義之祿 [an unrighteous emolument]”; he refuses to eat food prepared by his mother because she once slaughtered and cooked a goose that had been given to his brother, presumably for reasons that he also considered unworthy. Mencius says of this sort of purism, “若仲子者、蚓而後充其操者也 [as for someone such as Chén Zhòngzǐ, you could take up his way of life only by becoming an earthworm].”

Mencius also claims that stratification of society into officials and the ruled is necessary. (滕文公上:4) He quotes an old saying:

或勞心、或勞力、勞心者治人、勞力者治於人、治於人者食人、治人者食於人 (滕文公上:4)

“Some labor with their minds, some labor with their strength. Those who labor with their minds rule; those who labor with their strength are ruled. Those who are ruled feed others; those who rule are fed by others.”

And Mencius adds, 天下之通義也 “This is the way of the world.”

And therefore, he concludes, it is not possible for all worthy people to avoid taking office and live simply without official pay.

Mencius also describes three conditions under which it is acceptable to enter official service:

迎之致敬以有禮、言將行其言也、則就之...雖未行其言也、迎之致敬以有禮、則就之...其下、朝不食、夕不食、飢餓不能出門戶、君聞之、曰、吾大者不能行其道、又不能從其言也、使飢餓於我土地、吾恥之、周之、亦可受也、免死而已矣 (告子下14)

First, if you are welcomed with respect and decorum and they say your advice will be carried out; second, if your advice is not carried out, but at least you are welcomed with respect and decorum; and third, if you have nothing to eat, morning and night, and are starving to the point of being unable to leave the house, and the ruler decides that he has reduced you to this condition because he has failed to carry out your advice and feels ashamed.

In such a case, Mencius says,

周之，亦可受也，免死而已矣

If the ruler offers you relief, this too may be accepted, simply as a way of avoiding death].

Confucius has views on refusing to serve in office that are somewhat hard to find in the records left of him: his point is that it may be done in response to disappointment or sorrow or frustration. He has quite a number of stray sayings (which I won't quote here) about the fact that ability is more important than fame, that you shouldn't feel bad if you are not appreciated, and that he himself feels misunderstood and unappreciated and worries about his reputation. The *Analects* also contains one very explicit passage in which Confucius critiques the lives of some famous men who fled society:

子曰、不降其志、不辱其身、伯夷叔齊與、謂、柳下惠少連、降志辱身矣、言中倫、行中慮、其斯而已矣、謂、虞仲夷逸、隱居放言、身中清、廢中權、我則異於是、無可無不可 (18.8)

For not lowering their ambitions or polluting themselves, [you have] Bó Yí and Shú Qí. Liǔxià Huì and Shàolián did lower their ambitions and pollute themselves, but what they said stayed within the framework of proper social relationships and their actions stayed within what was thoughtful; they did that much and that is all. Yú Zhòng and Yí Yì lived in hiding and said whatever they thought; their selves stayed pure and their squandering [of their place in society] served an appropriate political function. As for me, I am different from them: there is nothing that I insist is all right or not all right to do.

Here is another passage against reclusion:

子貢曰有美玉於斯、韞櫝而藏諸、求善賈而沽諸、子曰、沽之哉、沽之哉、我待賈者也 (8:13)

Zìgòng said, "I have some fine jade here. Shall I keep it, hidden away in a cabinet? Or shall I sell it, having sought a good buyer?" The master said, "Sell it! Sell it! I am waiting for a buyer."

The “buyer” of course is a metaphor for an appreciative ruler and the jade for a person’s talent or virtue; you shouldn’t hide your gifts away; you should find some way to see them put to use.

In this connection, poverty and reclusion are described as valid alternatives to employment under certain conditions:

危邦不入、亂邦不居、天下有道則見、無道則隱、邦有道、貧且賤焉、恥也、邦無道、富且貴焉、恥也 (8.13)

You should not enter an unstable state or stay long in a badly run state. If the world possesses the Way, you make your appearance. If it does not, you go into reclusion. If the state possesses the Way, it is shameful to be poor and of low rank; but if the state does not possess the Way, it is shameful to be rich and of high rank.

The Chinese tradition of political philosophy is at times so moralistic that it may be that only the thought of escape enables Confucianists to live with themselves.

There is a historian of the 2nd century BCE who says that suffering and loss of rank is actually necessary to great achievement. Sīmǎ Qiān lists a number of people who composed visionary works after having been disgraced or even mutilated. He sums up:

此人皆意有所鬱結、不得通其道、... 終不可用、退論書策以舒其憤、思垂空文以自見

These people were all frustrated in what they wished to accomplish, and could not make their chosen paths lead to a desirable end, ... It was impossible for them to be useful, and so they retreated from ordinary activities and wrote books in order to give expression to their frustration, hoping to hand down their impractical writings in order to make themselves known.

For Sīmǎ Qiān, as perhaps for the poets Yáng Xióng and Hán Yù, poverty is actually one of the conditions without which the highest achievement is not possible.

[end]