

15 Li Fu: *The Shortcomings of Teachings Dealing with Transcendent Matters* (1740)

Introduced and translated by Hubert Seiwert

Introduction

The treatise reproduced here in excerpt is entitled *Yuan Jiao* 原教 (“On the Original Meaning of *Jiao*”). Its author, Li Fu 李紱 (1673–1750), was a high-ranking official in the imperial administration, and an eminent scholar. In addition to historical and philosophical works, he wrote numerous poems.

The treatise joins a series of essays by Confucian scholars that are all similarly titled “On the Original Meaning of *Jiao*.”^I *Jiao* 教 literally means “to teach” or “teaching.” The central concern of the authors here was to determine the proper understanding of the Confucian teaching. On the one hand, the texts often criticise other schools of Confucianism, which, according to the authors, misunderstand the doctrine; on the other hand, Buddhism and Daoism, as well as occasionally Islam and Catholicism, are criticised as inherently false teachings.

Li Fu’s essay is selected here, because it shows that a distinction between religious and secular doctrines was already made during the early Qing dynasty (1644–1911), even though no native Chinese concepts of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ existed at that time. Li Fu discusses the meaning of *jiao* 教, in order to determine the differences between Confucianism, on the one hand, and Buddhism and Daoism, on the other. In the parlance of his time, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism were often referred to as the “three teachings” (*san jiao* 三教),^{II} making them appear to be similar and equivalent. Li Fu argues that this view is wrong, because Confucianism alone manifests *jiao* in the correct sense. To substantiate his thesis, he establishes a connection between the two terms *jiao* and *dao* 道. In Li Fu’s understanding, *dao* (“the Way”) means the way of ordering society shown by the sage rulers of antiquity. *Jiao*, he writes, denotes the teaching through which this way is spread throughout the world. Therefore, only the Confucian teaching can be called *jiao* in the proper sense.

I For a comprehensive introduction to and translation of various *Yuanjiao* texts, see Wolfgang Omerborn, *Die rechte Lehre und die falschen Lehren: Konfuzianische Yuanjiao-Texte aus der Qing-Zeit* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 2013).

II In older Western literature, the term *san jiao* is often translated as ‘three religions’ (e.g. William Edward Soothill, *The Three Religions of China: Lectures Delivered at Oxford* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913]).

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Li Fu points out that the teachings of Buddhism and Daoism share structural similarities that fundamentally distinguish them from Confucianism. Buddhism and Daoism refer to matters “beyond the human sphere” (*renwai* 人外) – i.e. matters outside the mundane world. On the other hand, the Confucian teaching (*jiao*) relates exclusively to inner-worldly matters – i.e. interpersonal relations and the safeguarding of social order. Without rules for social coexistence, there would be no social institutions or peace, and chaos would reign in the world. Therefore, he maintains that the Confucian way (*dao*) and the Confucian doctrine (*jiao*) are necessary prerequisites of social order, and will inevitably prevail. Buddhism and Daoism, by contrast, do not contribute to the preservation of social order, because their teachings are directed only toward otherworldly goals.

The expression “beyond the human sphere” (*renwai*) can be interpreted in modern terminology as ‘otherworldly’ or ‘transcendent.’ In Li Fu’s view, Buddhism and Daoism refer to the realm of transcendence, while Confucianism remains within the realm of immanence. This distinction can also be understood as reflecting the difference between ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ teachings, even though these concepts did not exist in classical Chinese.

Li Fu’s essay proves that structural differences between religious and secular teachings were perceived before the concept of religion became available in the nineteenth century under Western influence. However, it is noteworthy that, for the author, only Confucianism can be considered a *jiao* 教 in the proper sense, and he does not consider the two religions, Buddhism and Daoism, to be full-fledged *jiao*. This understanding of *jiao* did not prevail, however. In modern usage, *jiao* can often be translated as ‘religion.’ The word is part of the neologism *zongjiao* 宗教, which was introduced in the late nineteenth century from Japanese (Japanese pronunciation: *shūkyō*), as a translation of ‘religion.’ However, even after this, the Confucian teaching was not classified as a religion, but rather as a secular doctrine – a categorisation consistent with Li Fu’s view.

Bibliographical Information

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Translation by Hubert Seiwert

What is the original use of the concept of *jiao* 教 (“teaching”)? The *Doctrine of the Mean* says: “*jiao* means cultivating the Way (*dao* 道).”^I Where can the Way be found? The Way manifests itself in the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brothers and younger brothers, and between friends. If the Way is realised in these relationships, then there is also the teaching (*jiao*). The teaching emerged for the first in the time of Tang 唐 and Yu 虞,^{II} when Xie 契 was appointed minister of education, and respectfully spread the five elements of the teaching, which are: between father and son there must be closeness, between lord and subject rightfulness, between husband and wife appropriate distinctions, between seniors and juniors the correct sequence, and between friends there must be trust.

Mencius^{III} explained [the significance of] *jiao* during the Three Dynasties:^{IV} schools were established to teach (*jiao* 教) to the people, and explain human relationships. When human relationships are clarified by those ruling above, there will be close relations among the common people. However, if the five basic principles of the Way are abandoned, and the rules of human relationships are disregarded, [p. 1a/1b] one cannot speak of *jiao*. [. . . p. 1b/2a . . .]

Regarding social classes, there is a distinction between rulers, ministers, high and low officials, and the common people; regarding professions, there is a difference between scholars, peasants, artisans, and merchants. However, they all belong to the human species, and, therefore, rulers, ministers, fathers, sons, husbands, wives, elder and younger brothers, and friends are all bound together by the five forms of human relationships. This is why there cannot be a Way (*dao*) in the world that is not concerned with human relationships, which implies that there cannot be any human being outside the Way. Since there is no human being outside the Way, it is implied that there cannot be teaching (*jiao*) not referring to the human sphere (*renwai zhi jiao* 人外之教). Since the time of the two emperors and three kings [of antiquity], this has not changed. Later generations [p. 2a/2b] only regarded the teaching of the sages as Confucian (*ru* 儒). However, aberrant theories, which separated from the Way of the Confucians and advocated distorted views, were founded, and often also labelled a ‘teaching’ (*jiao*). [. . . p. 2b/3a . . .]

I HS: Literal quotation from the introduction of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), which is one of the *Four Books* regarded as the core of the Confucian teaching during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

II HS: Legendary rulers of high antiquity, better known under the names Yao 堯 and Shun 舜.

III HS: Mengzi 孟子 or Mencius (372–289 BCE) is often considered the second highest authority of Confucianism, after Confucius. Like the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the book *Mengzi* belongs to the classical *Four Books*.

IV HS: The Three Dynasties refer to the three first dynasties in Chinese history (Xia, Shang, and Zhou). Their idealised institutions were highly esteemed by Confucius.

If we come to later times, there appeared what is called Daoism and Buddhism. Only then was there the talk of a 'Way' (*dao*) not concerned with human relationships; only then were there people outside the Way, and teachings (*jiao*) not related to the human sphere. But what is this so-called Way that is not concerned with human relationships? Consider that human beings are endowed with rational understanding (*li* 理), spirit (*shen* 神), vital energy (*qi* 氣),^V and a physical body (*xing* 形). Rational understanding manifests in [the virtues of] humanity (*ren* 仁), rightfulness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 智), and trust (*xin* 信). Spirit manifests in conscious actions, vital energy manifests in movements and breathing, and the physical body manifests in ears, eyes, mouth, nose, and the four limbs. Spirit is controlled by rational understanding, vital energy is moved by spirit, and the physical body is moved by vital energy. If individuals practise and generations act according to these [basic truths], correct human relations appear. This is what is called the Way.

If we turn to the 'Way' of the Buddhists, we find that they are only concerned with quietly guarding their spirit (*shen*). They know that there is spirit but ignore that there is rational understanding, and only fear that something might disturb their spirit. Therefore, they regard everything as empty. Even if people leave behind and abandon the five human relationships, they do not care. To raise to the utmost significance the practice of quiescence in search of understanding [p. 3a/3b], and to aim to act with knowledge of past and future existences, is confused thinking.

The 'Way' of the Daoists only concentrates on vital energy (*qi*). They know about the existence of vital energy, but ignore that there is rational understanding, and only fear some event may cause a loss of their vital energy. Therefore, they talk about being clear and pure and non-acting. Even if there are events that leave behind and abandon the five human relationships, they do not care. To raise to the utmost significance the practice of concentration on vital energy in order to overcome illness and extend one's lifetime, is doomed to fail.

This [i.e. the practices of Buddhism and Daoism] is what is called a 'Way' (*dao*) not concerned with human relationships. A 'Way' not concerned with human relationships has nothing to do with family, state, and the whole world. Therefore [Buddhists and Daoists] are people outside the [true] Way. People outside the Way have nothing to do with maintaining order and establishing peace. Therefore, one speaks of teachings (*jiao*) beyond the human realm (*renwai zhi jiao* 人外之教). Master Han from Changli^{VI} demanded the restriction and cessation of such teachings, which corre-

V HS: There is no adequate translation for the Chinese concept of *qi* 氣. It originally meant breath or air, but early on it became a fundamental concept in Chinese cosmology. Its meaning is broad and ambivalent, depending on the discursive context. For the neo-Confucians, it was primarily the subtle material essence that, depending on its state of aggregation, underlies all manifestations. The Daoists, in addition, stressed the aspect of vital energy, which must be maintained to preserve life.

VI HS: Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), a Confucian philosopher renowned for his critique of Buddhism and Daoism. See Han Yu's treatise translated above in this volume (p. 119–122).

sponds to the demand of Mencius to eliminate them. Master Ouyang^{VII} demanded the cultivation of the root [of the Confucian teaching] to defeat them, which corresponds to the saying of Mencius of returning to the orthodox root. However, I say that there is no need to restrict and stop them. Even if they are not restricted, our [Confucian] teaching will certainly flourish, and even if they are not stopped, our teaching will certainly prevail. Nor is it necessary to cultivate the root to defeat them, because our root exists by itself. Because our root naturally exists, all other [teachings] will be defeated by it.

Why do I say so? Our Confucian teaching (*jiao*) is the teaching of the sages. [p. 3b/4a] The teaching of the sages is about practising the Way (*dao*) of the five fundamental relationships. If the teaching of the sages were to not flourish, be practised or cultivated for a single day, it would not be worth being called sage. Why do I say so? Without proper relations between ruler and subject, the powerful would oppress the weak, and the numerous would commit violence against the few; accordingly, social chaos would prevail in the world. Without proper relations between parents and children, and between husband and wife, human life would cease to continue; accordingly, everything would practically come to an end. Parents and children, and husband and wife, necessarily exist in relationship to each other; likewise, if there are friends, there also must be mutual relationship. This is the firm foundation of our Confucian Way that eternally pervades the world. Why then should we need to restrict and stop the two schools of Buddhism and Daoism, and only then spread and practise [the Confucian Way]?

Some say: In these later times, the teaching of the sages cannot be cultivated in the same manner as in the times of the rulers of high antiquity. As the root is not sufficiently firm, the followers of those teachings [i.e. Buddhists and Daoists] are numerous. How can one, under such conditions, be sure to defeat them? I answer: The root is firm and has never been uncultivated. Although in later generations [the teaching of the sages] has been observed sincerely and correctly, it flourished and declined depending on the times. Because nobody can govern the world while ignoring the teaching of the Five Relationships, our root is cultivated every day. [p. 4a/4b] As the root is cultivated every day, the teaching of Confucians is respected by everyone, and the question of defeating [Buddhism and Daoism] is irrelevant. An erudite scholar doubts that [followers of] Buddhism and Daoism are numerous, and that those who keep to the Confucian teaching are only a few. Confucians do not necessarily wear ritual headgear and robes with wide sleeves. All those who rule the world facing south are rulers, and they are also Confucians; those who pass on the good customs and spread the commands of the ruler to reform the world are ministers, high and low officials, and they are also Confucians; those who are zealous in offices are scribes and clerks, and are also Confucians; those who till the field for good crops are farmers, and are also Confucians; those who trade and all who ex-

VII HS: Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1005–1072), a famous politician and scholar.

haust themselves in physical labour are merchants and craftsmen, and are also Confucians. Why is it possible to say so? Such people follow the way of correct relations between ruler and subject, father and child, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends. That means that they all follow the teaching (*jiao*) of the sages.

Those who have abandoned the Way of the five fundamental relationships, to become Buddhists or Daoists, only practise a single method of cultivating their spirit or cultivating their vital energy. However, among innumerable people only one or two of them [practise these methods]. Since it is only one or two, why should there be inflated talk about the existence [of these few people] or whether they should be defeated or not? For this reason, I maintain that there cannot be a Way that is not concerned with the five human relationships, [p. 4b/5a] and, accordingly, there are no human beings outside the Way. And because there are no human beings outside the Way (*dao*), there cannot be a teaching (*jiao*) that refers to matters outside the human sphere.