SAGEHOOD AS SPIRITUAL RHETORIC – The concept of language in Confucianism

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of the following reflections is language, as understood in the Confucian tradition. In the Western world, we are used to consider language an important philosophical problem; particularly since the 20th century, language constitutes a "ontologically" distinct domain, which manifests human spontaneity, as well as human historicity and the being of difference. Language qua interpretation has become essential for contemporary philosophy, especially, of course, for hermeneutics. Famously, Hans-Georg Gadamer has formulated the Heideggerian thesis that "Being that can be understood is language". When we now turn to the Chinese world, we cannot but remark a decisive difference: although premodern Chinese civilization had a distinctive notion of philosophy and the philosophical life, it was a *world without Platonism*. Therefore, strictly speaking, we are not allowed to understand Chinese reflections on language on the basis of Platonism or the various philosophical world-views which tried to overcome Platonism (as f.ex. Kantianism or Heideggerianism). It is quite difficult to imagine what Western culture would look alike, if there were not the erotic speeches from the *Symposium*, or the famous remarks about the difference between the written and the spoken word in the *Phaidros*. But premodern Chinese thinkers found themselves exactly in this situation: to think about language without any form of Platonism. And as Confucius (trad. 551-479 B.C.) turned away from the heavenly things and limited himself entirely to the human things, language became not only subject of philosophical reflection, but also the most important tool for ordering the world.

Chinese thinkers are still hardly *accessible* in the Western world: as we do not yet have anything comparable to the *Loeb Classical Library* for ancient Chinese texts, the number of readers of Chinese texts is extremely low. In this context, the fundamental question of translatability has been asked many times; indeed, it seems highly doubtful whether there ever can be a truly adequate

translation from Chinese into a Western language.1 [1] On the other hand, when we try to engage different traditions, we always risk becoming entrapped by them. Sinological research in the West tend to take place outside the institutions of philosophical learning; thus, research on Chinese thought often is not exposed to regular philosophical critique. However, as the Chinese civilization has already become part of our daily routine in the West and will certainly even more directly affect our political practice in the coming decades, we cannot continue to overlook Chinese thought; what we need is the beginning of a truly philosophical debate between Chinese and Western thinkers. Only through this kind of free and open exchange of ideas a global civilization, even a true "Unity of Mankind" (Eric Voegelin),2 [2] can take shape.

One possible point of departure for this kind of enquiry is the question of language. In the following pages, I will present some important Confucian thinkers, analyze their ideas about language and discuss the philosophical framework these ideas presuppose. What is language for Confucians? How did Confucians understand language, its nature and purpose? And how do we have to interpret the philosophical and political meaning of language in Confucianism? Roughly, Confucians assume that a mature commitment to the moral ideal described by Confucius requires political and practical action; thus, as we will see in the following paragraphs, language was rarely understood in purely theoretical terms by Confucians, but always in a political and practical context. I will use the term "spiritual rhetoric" to sum up the decisive features of the Confucian intellectual tradition.

Although we only rarely find comprehensive theories of language in premodern Chinese thought, there is an extremely rich tradition of scattered philosophical reflections on language. As I focus on the Confucian tradition, I will not speak about the complicated and highly philosophical theories of language in Daoism (for example Wang Bi's 王弼 interpretation of Zhuangzi's 莊子

1 [1] For a detailed discussion of the problem of translatability see Robert Wardy, *Aristotle in China . Language, Categories and Translation* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2000).

2 [2] See "World-Empire and the Unity of Mankind", *Published Essays*, ed. by Ellis Sandoz, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia und London : University of Missouri Press , 2000), vol 11, 134-155.

famous metaphors of the "fish-net" and the "hare-trap") or in Buddhism.3 [3] My discussion will only deal with the context of Confucianism, while also from time to time referring to the Western tradition, especially to the writings of Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt, as I believe that these thinkers can foster our understanding of the Confucian tradition: because they are highly critical of the mainstream of Western modernity, while at the same time reaching back to the roots of our philosophical heritage, they can help us understand how our own intellectual tradition and the Chinese intellectual tradition possibly relate to each other under the new conditions of global modernity.

2. SOME IMPORTANT FEATURES OF CHINESE LANGUAGE

The Chinese language is one of the most ancient and certainly also most reliable communicative tools of mankind. But what is the nature of Chinese language? In fact, its nature, the relation between Chinese language and Chinese thought, the deeper meaning of the difference between Chinese and Western languages are relatively popular subjects among sinologists, linguists and even philosophers.4 [4] Since the French sinologist Marcel Granet has attributed some sort of magical power to the Chinese language (he regarded the Chinese word as an

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3 [3] On Wang Bi compare Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (Albany : SUNY Press, 2003).

4 [4] See f.ex. Wilhelm von Humboldt, "On the Grammatical Structure of the Chinese Language," in: T.Harden and D.Farrelly, eds., John Wieczorek and Ian Roe, trsl., *Essays on Language / Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 1997); Y.R. Chao, "Notes on Chinese Grammar and Logic," *Philosophy East and West* 5/1 (1955), 31-41; Chad Hansen, *Language and Logic in Ancient China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983); Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth'," *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol XLIV (May 1985), No. 3:491-519; Zhiming Bao, "Language and World View in Ancient China," *Philosophy East and West* Vol XL (1990), No. 2: 195-210; John Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1999); and Hans-Georg Moeller, "Chinese Language Philosophy and Correlativism." *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000):98-103.

"emblème" of standardized behavior, which it immediately calls forth, simple by being uttered),5 [5] Western thinkers have been attracted by this alternative mode of *Welterschließung* (world-disclosure). In speaking about Chinese language, the danger always consists in describing the various patterns of Chinese as *deficiencies* which an ostensibly inferior, non-morphological grammar entails for philosophical thinking. Philosophers of language as Johannes Lohmann have claimed that Chinese represents the "form of consistent ontological difference," the "state of the primitive human language" which stands close to that of the ape and the Neanderthal.6 [6] Furthermore, since Hegel, it has become a topos to speak of an ostensible absence of "reflection" in China, and modern sinologists like Chad Hansen have argued that the Chinese language has no place for autonomous reason or individuality at all, and therefore – we could add – also no place for philosophical enquiry independent of the established ethos.7 [7] As we know more about Chinese civilization and are less and less willing to believe in a general superiority of Western civilization, these claims have become highly dubious. In the following, I want to abstain from this kind of general, reductive statements, but only want to describe some distinctive characteristics of the Chinese language, which could be important for our enquiry into the Confucian understanding of language.

Although the Chinese language, as every language, is a spoken language, from very early time onwards a gap between spoken and written Chinese has developed; as the sinologist Christoph Harbsmeier writes, "Literary Chinese became increasingly (but never completely) an autonomous

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5 [5] See Marcel Grant, *La pensée Chinoise* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1934).

6 [6] Quoted in Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 13.

7 [7] Heiner Roetz has rightly criticized Chad Hansen's claim that Chinese lacks a "built-in principle of individuation", as Chinese nouns are "mass nouns" (not "count nouns" as in Indo-European languages) and never denote individuals of a class or of a kind; therefore, Chinese thought lacks the idea of human beings as by nature rational agents (cf. Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, 13-7). It seems highly dubious to describe structural features of the Chinese language and, than, make general statements about the Chinese culture, ignoring for example the fact that Chinese philosophers often have used their language as a tool to dissociate themselves from this very culture.

written medium."8 [8] Texts like the *Analects* , the *Mencius* 孟子 and other canonical documents of the Confucian tradition, especially historical and philosophical material from the Classical age, which originally probably came very close to the colloquial language of their time, later on became a kind of second language not identical with the spoken language (or the local dialects) of later dynasties. However, the Chinese language never has been an "ideographic" language:9 [9] characters became an important medium of communication (for example in philosophical or literary texts), but always were secondary to the spoken language. We shall add, however, that – although there are examples of persuasive speeches in front of a ruler – the Chinese culture never estimated the public delivery of speech as high as for example the Classical Greek culture; oral performance never counted as much as an inspired memorial.10 [10] We do not find the high admiration for rhetors like Alcibiades or Pericles in the Chinese civilization, and consequently rhetoric never became an important stem of traditional knowledge.

3. THE SUBTLE NATURE OF THE MASTER'S SPEECH

In many ways, the historical Confucius had no comprehensive doctrine at all. His legacy is more an *attitude* (and, quite often, a very erratic attitude), than a distinctive *doctrine*, more a *paradigm* of practice than a *theory* of practice; later thinkers like Mencius or Xunzi tended to project their own philosophical convictions into the words of this thinker, who was much too humble to formulate an independent set of philosophical sentences, and much too conservative to

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8 [8] See Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*. 7, part I of *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

9 [9] H.G. Creel has described what he called the ideographic conception of the Chinese characters, which regards Chinese characters as a kind of natural *Begriffsschrift* or an "alphabet of thought" (Leibniz). Specialists in modern Chinese linguistics, however, now generally share a logographic conception of Chinese characters: characters stand for pronunciations of morphemes and, only secondarily, have autonomous dimensions of their own (see Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 34).

10 [10] Some examples of persuasive speeches at the court can be found in the *Stratagems of the Warring States* (*Zhanguo ce*; third century B.C.).

claim complete ignorance like Socrates. Still, this *attitude* of the master predetermined the conceptual perspectives of later thinkers; as thus, it functions very much like Plato's oeuvre: he left a legacy of common questions. Thus, generally speaking, we can learn a lot about Confucius and the Confucian world-view, just by focusing our attention on the distinctive characteristics of the master's speech in the *Analects* and how it was understood by later generations – thus repeating the experience of dozens of generations before us who read this text in this way.11 [11]

As we go through the text of the *Analects*, we immediately remark the high esteem the master had for the spoken and written word:

"If you do not know about words, you do not have what it takes to know about men."12 [12]

Obviously, this high esteem for language influenced Chinese civilization as a whole: reading and writing always played an extremely important role, were even considered to be a value in itself, as part of "culture" (*wen* 文), an expression of a cultivated man's inner self.13 [13] Later generations placed this high esteem on the master's speech itself: although his sayings sometimes

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11 [11] For an analysis of the complicated effective history of this text see John Makeham, *Transmitters and Creators: Chinese Commentators and Commentaries on the Analects* (Cambridge : Harvard University Asia Center , 2003). Chinese scholars traditionally believed that Confucius compiled or even wrote documents like various commentaries to the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of Odes* or the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. One of the challenges of any traditional scholar was to discover the ostensibly "hidden" unity of these texts; modern interpreters, however, tend to doubt whether there is any close relationship between the historical Confucius and these documents.

12 [12] See *Analects* 20.3. All quotations from the *Analects* refer to the book and passage numbers in Yang Bojun , *Lunyu yizhu* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), the modern standard edition of this text in the Chinese world. The English translations are mostly by D.C. Lau (see D.C. Lau, transl., *Mencius*, revised edition (London : Penguin Books, 2003)).

13 [13] Compare also Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*.

only seem to be fragments and dry, even hackneyed assertions, they were seen as being a coherent whole, which expressed the sum of his sagely wisdom. In other words, the rhetoric of the sage never meant to speak in *dialogues*: as the master never entered into a true dialogue with his disciples like Socrates, where no statement can claim to be valid without a serious philosophical verification, his speech always follows the master-disciple pattern: the master speaks, the disciple asks for advice or just listens.14 [14] Confusion and doubt, although not entirely absent, are never systematically encouraged. Let us also not forget that Confucius' conversations with his disciples imply a hierarchic understanding of communication: only the most excellent disciples are thought to be receptive for the most philosophical parts of the master's message (and even to his brightest disciple, the famous, but unfortunate Yan Hui 顏回, Confucius never revealed his whole teaching). In order to adapt to his various audiences, Confucius often practices the art of *dissimulation*.15 [15]

Second, contrary to the Socratic speech in the Platonic dialogues, the master's speech is free of maieutic irony, erotic attraction and madness.16 [16] Whenever the master speaks to his disciples, he develops his ideas about the correct behavior as an official and personal cultivation; rarely we hear cracking jokes by the master. Furthermore, with one exception,17 [17] only men have the opportunity to speak with Confucius, young serious men seeking for advice. They are sober and devote in front of the master who, for the most time, is fairly remote from his disciples;18 [18] the kind of ambiguous relationship which Socrates and Alcibiades share seems totally unimaginable for Confucians – the wisdom, which the master wants to share with his disciples, is

14 [14] True dialogues where the participants exchange their views on one topic are extremely rare in the *Analects*; also, Confucius rarely ever self-reflectively talks about his goal in speaking to his disciples (see especially *Analects* 11.22).

15 [15] See especially *Analects* 4.15.

16 [16] One rare exception would be the famous passage *wu yu Dian* (*Analects* 11.26).

17 [17] Only one woman appears in the *Analects*, Nanzi , who was said to be a lascivious woman (*Analects* 6.28); therefore, Confucius' disciple Zi Lu criticizes the master for visiting her.

18 [18] Compare *Analects* 7.24, 9.1, *passim*.

in no need of "bodily proximity".19 [19] In one word, whereas the atmosphere of Plato's *Symposium* stands for – as Leo Strauss writes – "perfect anarchy in the literal sense of the term" (open doors, drinking, erotic love),20 [20] the *Analects* show us an atmosphere of high civility and nearly perfect harmony; only rarely do the traces of chaos and destruction lurk behind the surface of the text.21 [21] Language in Confucianism, in other words, is about reticence and sternness, not about the relentless quest for divine madness.

Third, the master sometimes seems to share a profound doubt whether words are an altogether effective means of expressing the "Way", as language may distort the true nature of the "Way" and of the sagely existence.22 [22] Nevertheless, because Confucius always was seeking political office and was constantly trying to associate himself with political power, he seems to have abandoned these doubts. Whereas Daoists escaped from this political reality by abandoning language, he believed into language as an effective tool of regulating behavior and governing people.

Another point needs out attention. Through the *Analects*, Confucius promotes a rhetoric of frankness, unembellished and raw frankness; the subject only has to speak out what the moral self thinks, in order to achieve moral perfection. In other words, frank and persuasive speech are identical. This could remind us of Socrates' imperative "Know thyself". But there is an important difference: although the master often attacks "intellectual garrulousness" (*ning*), no sophist, i.e. a person with persuasive ability who does not care about the truth or an argument, ever challenges

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19 [19] See Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, edited and with a Foreword by Seth Benardete (Chicago & London : The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 33. Although Confucius only since the Song dynasty was regarded as truly sacred, already in the early editions of the Analects he often seems evasive and veiled in a kind of mysterious sageliness. Furthermore, he often seems to claim that he possesses true wisdom which sets him apart from other men (see especially *Analects* 17.19).

20 [20] Leo Strauss, *On Plato's Symposium*, 32.

21 [21] For example in *Analects* 15.2, when hunger afflicts the master who has just left the state of Wei.

22 [22] See especially *Analects* 17.19.

him. In other words, Confucius never has to stand up against sophistic rhetoric – the starting point, from which, in the West, Socrates and Plato were to develop a notion of reasoning and discursive philosophy.23 [23] As a consequence, Confucius uses simple arguments and speaks out his main truths in short maxims, while never searching for something similar to the logical architecture of a Platonic dialogue or of Aristotle's *Organon*.24 [24] Dialectic is essential to the *logos* of Western philosophy: in this kind of conversation about opinions concerning various things which leads towards the truth of things, language plays a crucial part, as it is the very place of the discursive enquiry. In comparison, the Confucian tradition seems to lack any complete notion of *elenchos* in which serious attempts at the refutation of preexisting beliefs would be formulated, in which errors would be understood as necessary steps towards a single and unified explanation of the subject matter, and "a rationally grounded conception of goods and of the good which can claim the status of knowledge" were to be the final goal.25 [25] The goal of Confucian thinkers was not to search for a rational justification, but to furnish an authoritative account of the intentions of the sage Confucius which, of course, did not entirely forbid the use of rational justification. In one word, the philosophical activity was not about the soul *conversing* with itself, but about *transforming* the soul following the intentions of Confucius.

The last point is directly linked to the way how Confucius used language in his daily life and to the pragmatic, hermeneutical paradigm he has established. As the sinologist Yang Xiao has persuasively argued in a recent article, the Confucian interpretative tradition can be understood

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23 [23] See f.ex. *Analects* 5.5 and 16.4; compare Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 96; compare *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 15, Order and History*, edited with an introduction by Athanasios Moulakis (Columbia and London : University of Missouri Press , 2000), 341-405.

24 [24] Hereby, I don't want to say that there were no profound arguments and true debate in the history of Chinese thought; however, it is widely admitted that Chinese thinkers rarely tended to formulate their thoughts in a discursive manner. Christoph Harbsmeier has described some important forms of arguments in Chinese thought like syllogism, modus tollens, modus ponens, etc. (see *Language and Logic*, 278-86).

25 [25] Compare Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of "rational enquiry" (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 73; 79-81).

from a a speech-act perspective.26 [26] What does this mean? As is well known, Confucius gave different answers to different disciples (in Chinese: "giving different answers to the same question" *wen tong da yi*) because he wanted to transmit his message, while taking into account the different temperament and receptivity of his interlocutors. In other words, Confucius never only took into account the propositional value of his words, but always carefully thought about their practical purpose. He was "*doing things with words*": he saw each utterance as an action. While reading the *Analects*, we indeed discover various speech-acts.27 [27] Now, we can also understand why later commentators of the *Analects* often focus not so much on the literal meaning of Confucius' sayings, but on his intention in formulating this utterance, and why they often try to take into account the broader context of a saying by the master, the quality of its audience, its dramatic locale, its historical and practical context. Although somehow resembling to the Socratic "maieutic art", the Confucian speech functions differently: the goal is not to draw the interlocutors into reflecting upon the implications of their uncritically held opinions, but to correct their moral being, to transmit wisdom. Later thinkers searched to express their vision of the Confucian teaching through some kind of "reenactment" of the master's intentions; their point was, as the *Mencius* states, that "the first to awaken" (i.e. Confucius) have the duty of "awakening those who are slow to awaken" (later readers).28 [28] The rhetoric of the sage was *psychagogic*.

4. THE DOCTRINE OF "ZHENGMING"

Aside from concentrating upon the character of Confucius' speech in the *Analects*, we also need to further reconstruct his notion of *political language*: as we have already mentioned, the

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26 [26] See Yang Xiao, "How Confucius Does Things With Words: Two Hermeneutic Paradigms in the *Analects* and Its Exegeses," *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 66, No. 2 (May) 2007: 497-532.

27 [27] Like ask a question (*Analects* 12.20), to make an assertion (1.1, 1.3), to tell a joke (17.4), to express a wish (5.7), and to quote an important saying (3.12) (compare Yang Xiao, "How Confucius Does Things With Words", 504).

28 [28] See *Mencius* 5A /7, compare Lau, *Mencius,* 108.

rhetoric of the sage was never thought to be purely theoretical, in other words, whereas texts like the *Republic*, the *Apology*, and the *Crito* emphasize an inescapable tension between philosophical speech and politics and Socrates relentless questioning of any authority is ultimately subversive, the tension between the language of the sage and the political world seems to be of a different kind in Confucianism: the master seems to be ready to accept office and to cooperate with rulers; he also strongly encourages his disciples to accept office. In one word: the sagely language of Confucius ideally must appear not only in the private discussion between master and disciple, but at the court. Thus, what is the nature of the relationship between sagely language and the political community?

A first hint can be found in the doctrine of the "rectification of names" (*zhengming*), which became one of the leitmotifs for the Classical Confucian tradition. Its *locus classicus* is *Analects* 13.3; aside from this, "Zhengming" – "On the Correct Use of Names" – is also a famous chapter in the *Xunzi* .29 [29] The relationship of "names" and things (normally "object" *shi*) was a problematic shared by many ancient thinkers, as for example Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Zhuangzi, Laozi, Mozi, Guanzi, Han Feizi, Shang Yang and others. What it originally meant in the context of the *Analects* (or even to Confucius himself) continues to be subject of interpretative controversy; some scholars even contend that the term *zhengming* is a later, probably legalist interpolation. As the dating of most of the highly disparate chapters is debated, for the time being we have to accept the traditional supposition that the "rectification of names" was indeed an important idea of the historical Confucius.30 [30]

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29 [29] See Cheng Shude , *Lunyu jishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 885-96.

30 [30] A huge amount of secondary literature on the "rectification of names" exists in Western languages; see f.ex. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 268-75; John Makeham, *Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 35-47, 163-5; Christoph Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic*, 52-3; Carine Defoort, "Ruling the World with Words: The Idea of *Zhengming* in the *Shizi*." *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2001):217-42; and one important monography in German: Robert H. Gassmann, *CHENG MING, Richtigstellung der Bezeichnungen, Zu den Quellen eines Philosophems im antiken China, Ein Beitrag zur Konfuzius-Forschung* (Bern, Frankfurt a.M., New York, Paris: Peter Lang, 1988).

Let's first analyze the passage in the *Analects*. I quote D.C. Lau's translation which generally has been accepted as the most authentic:

> Tzu-lu said, 'If the Lord of Wei left the administration (cheng) of his state to you, what would you put first?' The Master said, 'If something has to be put first, it is, perhaps, the rectification (cheng) of names.' Tzu-lu said, 'Is that so? What a roundabout way you take! Why bring rectification in at all?' The Master said, 'Yu, how boorish you are. Where a gentleman is ignorant, one would expect him not to offer any opinion. When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success; when affairs do not culminate in success, rites and music will not flourish; when rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not fit the crimes; when punishments do not fit the crimes, the common people will not know where to put hand and foot. Thus when the gentleman names something, the name is sure to be usable in speech, and when he says something this is sure to be practicable. The thing about the gentleman is that he is anything but casual where speech is concerned.'

Of course, it is possible to read this passage as a general (philosophical) statement on the relationship between things ands words – this has been done by many interpreters in the past. Thus, Confucius does not presuppose a theory of *adequatio rei et intellectus* or anything similarly complex, but shares a conventional understanding of the relationship between "names" and things. Strictly speaking, however, this passage has a distinct political meaning, as the master is asked by his disciple, what he would do once charged with the administration of the state Wei. In other words, his statement gives us his view on *political language*.

We do not need to discuss the details of the exegetical history of this passage. Different interpretations of this passage are possible and were wildly held among traditional Chinese scholars. The conventional interpretation is that "names of various social, political and ethical institutions were rectified so as to accord or conform with certain immutable standards inherited from tradition."31 [31] In this case, "rectifying" essentially meant "describing", not "prescribing". On the other hand, reformist interpretations were shared by many interpreters in the past: according

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31 [31] See John Makeham, "Zheng ming", *RoutledgeCurzon Encyclopedia of Confucianism*, ed. by Xinzhong Yao (London and New York , RoutledgeCurzon: 2003), vol. 2, 813-4.

to them, the "names" were highly normative concepts resembling more an utopian image of the future than of the historical or mythical past.32 [32] In other words, the real value of names was to prescribe, and not simply describe the socio-political reality. It is difficult to reconstruct Confucius' original intention; obviously, he reacted in this passage to the terminological confusion of his time which was provoked by the decline of Zhou culture and which is documented f.ex. in *Analects* 16.14 (about the correct naming of a ruler's wives and concubines).33 [33] Presumably, he also realized that language has an important function in organizing and regulating human behavior and tried to restore the orthodoxy of the Zhou dynasty. According to Zhu Xi (1130-1200), however, Confucius, while making his claim about the "rectification of names", had another very concrete goal: at the moment of the conversation between the master and Tzu-lu (Zi Lu), many of his disciples had already become officials at the court of Wei 衛; the ruler of Wei, Prince Ling , also wanted to employ the master himself and asked him – through Zi Lu – for advice. However, the master was highly critical of the *entourage* of Prince Ling, especially of his wife Nanzi , who seems to have been involved in the power struggle about the succession to her husband.34 [34] Thus, we can say that in this passage, where Eros unexpectedly plays a hidden role in the person of Nanzi, Confucius directly critized the powerful of Wei and asserted that the wrongly chosen dauphins of Prince Ling had to be "rectified" (as their behavior did not correspond to their social role). It is very tempting to wonder whether Confucius in this situation did not assume the role of

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32 [32] Confucianism always had the potential for reformism and conservativism at the same time, as f.ex. exemplified by the opposing views of Sima Guang (1019-86) and Wang Anshi (1021-86) in the Song dynasty.

33 [33] Compare also *Analects* 6.25; *Mencius* 1B/8 and 6B/9.

34 [34] See Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* (Section and sentence commentaries and collected annotations on the Four Books) (Beijing : Zhonghua Ed.), 141-2; compare also ibid, 91. Zhu Xi's commentary has been translated into French by Séraphin Couvreur (1835-1919): "K'ouai kouei, héritier présomptif de Ling, prince de Wei, honteux de la conduite déréglée et licencieuse de sa mère Nan tzeu, voulut la tuer. N'ayant pas réussi, il s'enfuit. Le prince Ling voulut nommer Ing son héritier. Ing refusa. A la mort du prince Ling, sa femme Nan tzeu nomma Ing héritier de la principauté. Ing refusa de nouveau. Elle donna la principauté à Tche, fils de K'ouai kouei, afin d'opposer le fils au père. Ainsi, K'ouai kouei, en voulant tuer sa mère, avait encouru la disgrâce de son père ; et Tche, en prenant l'autorité princière, faisait opposition à son père K'ouai kouei. Tous deux étaient comme des hommes qui n'auraient pas eu de père. Evidemment, ils étaient indignes de régner."

the unironic, "radical critic" of his community.35 [35] Also, by formulating his critique against the community and by still being deeply embedded in this community, Confucius tended to loose his relationship with its other members and to become marginalized – because of the sternness of his words, his critique does not seem to have had any chance of success at all.36 [36] Now, we also understand why later Confucians often risked getting lost in hypocritical debates about how to correctly describe political matters from a rigidly moralist perspective: as Confucius was a sage, he was unable to speak about political reality on its terms, but necessarily tried to transcend it. At this point, we have to concentrate on the prior question that we already have been tracking in the third part of this paper: what exactly is the status of the sage and of sagely language? What is the relation between sagehood and language?

5. ZHU XI AND THE QUEST FOR SAGEHOOD

Without any doubt, Zhu Xi was one of the few Chinese philosophers who placed emphasis on the discursive function of language, thus standing apart from many thinkers who tended to prefer the moment of silent enlightenment to the endless repetitions of human speech.

Furthermore, Zhu Xi deeply transformed traditional Confucianism and created the new philosophical and cultural phenomenon of "Neo-Confucianism". He did not replace the traditional notions of Confucian thought, but found a new balance which proved particularly convincing for later generations. But two distinctively new features can be highlighted in his thought: the *interiorization* and *universalization of sagehood*.

To a new degree, sagehood became the most important problematic in Zhu Xi's interpretation of this classical text; according to John Makeham, Zhu, in his commentary to the *Analects*, the *Collected Annotations on the Analects* , is very much preoccupied with the question whether (and

35 [35] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry, Encyclopedia, Geneology and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 168.

36 [36] This point has already been made by later scholars who were critical of Zhu Xi's interpretation.

how) ordinary people can learn to become sages.37 [37] What, than, does sagehood mean and what does it stand for? Sagehood denotes a state of the mind in which man and the "Way" (*Dao*) become one; following the texts of *The Great Learning* and the *Mencius*, which in Zhu Xi's interpretation became truly orthodox for the first time, the inner self plays a new role: it has to undergo a long process of self-cultivation which is characterized by the more "empirical" dimension of book learning and the more ascetic (transformative) dimension of the purification of one's "vital power" (*qi*).38 [38] In general, everybody shall begin this process of self-cultivation; however, the most important actor is the emperor himself. As text of *The Great Learning* claims, the political transformation of the empire has to happen exactly in the same way, as the moral transformation of the inner self happens. Only when the emperor will be able to directly embody the "Way" and when the language of the sages (primarily Confucius, secondarily the mythical sage-rulers of antiquity Yao and Shun) will be directly applied in the political realm, the empire will be transformed into a harmonious political entity.

Thus, we understand why there is a new need for "spiritual rhetoric": as Zhu Xi to a new degree believed in the unity of the inner self and the outer world (including the political, social, and natural realm), the most essential question is how the ideal of sagehood can be spread through political language, how, in other words, the perfection of the inner self could effectively achieve a perfection of the outer world. Probably for the first time in Confucianism, the idea of a strong unity between inner and outer realm was systematically developed: an integrated order took shape, in which the spiritual and political existence are identical. Political language had to embody the notion of sagehood entirely: rulers, exactly in the same ways as ministers, fathers and all individuals, have to speak the language of Confucius – only then, the empire would be rectified.

What are the main features of this sagely language? Roughly, some features are similar to the account in the original *Analects*, some are different: words do not have a propositional meaning (that is why the question of propositional truth is irrelevant), but a transformative power in the

37 [37] See John Makeham, *Transmitters and Creators*, Chapter 6 and 7.

38 [38] See f.ex. Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 67-9, 136-8.

process of one's moral cultivation and we have to pay attention whether words are "correct" in the sense of their moral value.39 [39] The rhetoric of the sage claims that the language of the sages directly affects the listeners by the emotive power of "sincerity/wholeness" (*cheng* 誠). Sagely language does not include any notion of coercion: only the coercive moment of the experience of self-cultivation is essential. Thus, Confucians systematically avoid speaking about violence, power politics, chaos, etc.;40 [40] the language of the sage has to be harmonious and shall not be distorted by any sign of anger. Zhu Xi expresses this clearly when he designates Confucius as the true sage and Mencius only as "worthy": according to him, Mencius was not able to control his language as well as Confucius; therefore, in his dialogues with rulers, he showed signs of anger and aggression.41 [41]

Although, for Zhu Xi himself, the language of the sage was about the creation of a tightly knotted community of moral actors, we cannot but mention a fundamental difficulty of this kind of "spiritual rhetoric": because only the individual itself can ever know for sure what its intentions are and whether they meet the standard of moral "rectification", this new interiorization of Confucian speech always risks ending up in *moral solipsism*. When we analyze how Zhu Xi, at the climax of his political career, failed to convince Emperor Ningzong (reg. 1194-1224) and did not understand how his language about sagehood was manipulated by the hidden motives of the emperor, we understand why later Confucians should never escape the solitude of the wise; their political projects would constantly fail and they were unable to enter into a true dialogue with the political power (only into some kind of *dialogue des sourds*). As Hegel says: "The *heroism of silent service* becomes the *heroism of flattery*."42 [42] The Confucian notion of language has played a decisive part in this tragedy.

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39 [39] This becomes clear in Zhu Xi's interpretation of *Mencius* 2A /2 (compare Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought*, 112-5.

40 [40] See Zhu Xi on *Analects* 7.21, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 98.

41 [41] See *Mencius* 4B/3, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, 290-1.

42 [42] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford , 310).

6. CONFUCIUS, MACHIAVELLI, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF "SPIRITUAL RHETORIC"

At the end of these reflections, it can be said that inside the Confucian tradition the relation between language and action was fare more important than that between language and objects. Language does not serve primarily to refer to a world of objects, but is an expressive medium for actions. As David L. Hall and Roger Ames write: "That is to say, the Chinese are more concerned with the effects of language in behavioral terms than with questions of meaning as grounds for the truth or falsity of propositions."43 [43] Thus, the conflict between truth and politics is replaced by the antagonism between sagehood and the political sphere.44 [44] In this context, we could also think of Hannah Arendt's famous distinction between "rational truth" and "factual truth".45 [45] In Confucianism, the notion of "factual truth", of course, is important for the political discourse, too; however, lacking the epistemological pattern of mathematics or science, the notion of "rational truth" was absent or, more generally speaking, relatively weak. It seems that a notion of inner sagehood took its place in which frankness ("sincerity/wholeness") was one important feature.

Of course, this rhetoric of frankness was very difficult from Immanuel Kant's "modern rhetoric of frankness" (Stanley Rosen).46 [46] Neither did it depend on scientific evidence and logical argumentation, nor did it presuppose the public use of reason (resp. the famous "principle of publicity") or the notion of progress. Confucians also never had an agonistic notion of public speech and political language. Furthermore, although Confucians had the idea that their actions

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43 [43] David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 263; see also *Language and Logic*, 46.

44 [44] Of course, I do not want to say that Chinese thinkers never were preoccupied by questions of meaning and truth (on this question see f.ex. Angus Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong and London: Chinese University Press, 1978)).

45 [45] See Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in: *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. with an introduction by Peter Baehr (New York : Penguin Books, 2000), 545-75; here: 548.

46 [46] See Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 27-49.

would be remembered and, thus, would be judged by posterity, they do not seem to have had a philosophical notion of public glory, nor the passion for "emulation" ("let us be seen in action"), which Hannah Arendt, following John Adams, has famously described in her book *On Revolution*.47 [47] Confucians, while talking about the public goal, had to speak a language which was essentially centered around the inner self. Under this condition, it was extremely difficult to develop a notion of political representation.

Immanuel Kant has played an extremely important, but also highly ambivalent role in the encounter between Confucianism and Western philosophy in the 20th century.48 [48] It is, indeed, tempting to reconsider which role the Confucian tradition could play in the age of global Enlightenment. Probably, the "friendly alliance between philosophers and princes" whose most famous representative in the West, according to Leo Strauss, was Machiavelli,49 [49] has happened at a very early stage in Chinese history. Whether it was a true alliance, is debatable; the fate of Enlightenment in the East may depend on this question. The question which role the Confucian "spiritual rhetoric" could play in an open, rational society, is extremely difficult to answer. Although China is rediscovering its intellectual heritage, it is unclear whether and how Confucianism can sharp the future of a country which has accepted the horizon of scientific reason.

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47 [47] See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 127.

48 [48] The courageous passion of inner sageliness which identified morality and politics, but failed to dominate the political and physical world, came to clash with the sober reticence of modern philosophy à la Immanuel Kant who ambiguosly restricted the use of reason, in order to achieve true autonomy. The philosopher Mou Zongsan (1909-95) asserted that "intellectual intuition" is possible, thereby opening the horizon of reason and, inspired by Eastern philosophy, creating a new super subject, which unites theoretical and practical reason. Thus, Confucianism triumphs over Kantianism (compare Hans-Rudolf Kantor, "Ontological Indeterminacy and Its Soteriological Relevance: An Assessment of Mou Zongsan's Interpretation of Zhiyi's (538-597) Tiantai Buddhism," in: *Philosophy East and West* 2006, 16-68; and, in German, Olf Lehmann, *Zur moralmetaphysischen Grundlegung einer konfuzianischen Moderne, 'Philosophisierung' der Tradition und 'Konfuzianisierung' der Aufklärung bei Mou Zongsan* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2003), 209-317).

49 [49] See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 15.

For the moment, it seems that Confucius once more practices the art of *dissimulation* – by retreating into silence.