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Seven Against Luoyang (or, Sophocles' Antigone is No Chinese Philosopher)

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Abstract

In this paper I argue how, on the one hand, prehistoric *Greek* myth in its account of the catastrophic Labdacid dynasty of Bronze-Age Thebes presented a horror story whose cautionary value Chinese of all schools would have appreciated. Indeed, it even exceeded the worst political and moral scandals in the *Book of History/Book of Documents* with its accounts of early Chinese dynasties in steep and fatal decline. On the other hand, the 5th-century BC Athenian playwright Sophocles unknowingly, of course, yet with an uncanny intuition for human possibilities, embodied in characters of his tragedy *Antigone* (ca. 440 BCE) three major ancient Chinese philosophies, namely, in the title character's sister Ismene a "Daoist", in their uncle Creon a "Legalist", and a "Confucian" in Antigone's cousin and fiancé Haemon. As we shall see, the Athenian tragic poet found all three of these persons and their initial positions wanting when contrasted with his own Hellenic-heroic standard of human virtue/excellence. That, of courses is what his protagonist Antigone herself epitomizes. She alone, though dead by her own doing, is fulfilled at the end of the disturbing play.

Keywords: Antigone; Sophocles; Daoism; Legalism; Confucianism; Mencius; Han Fei

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The “seven” in my title are the legendary King Laius, his wife Jocasta, and their son Oedipus, plus Oedipus’ four children: brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, who slew one another in reciprocal fratricide, and their two younger sisters, Ismene and the famous rebel Antigone. The city Luoyang was principal capital of the Later or Eastern Zhou dynasty, which governed—or failed effectively to govern—a weakened, decentralized empire from 771 BCE through the “Spring and Autumn” period and which suffered slow disintegration during the troubled times of “Warring States” from about 475 BCE onward (or, rather, downward). That long period included the times through which Kong Fuzi/Confucius and Laozi, Mozi, and later Mengzi/Mencius and Zhuangzi lived, taught, and sometimes wrote, contemporaries of grim precursors of Han Feizi. During those turbulent centuries were shaped the three sharply contrasting Chinese philosophies of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism.¹

My investigation and speculation here is a trans-Eurasian thought experiment, since I hardly argue for diffusion of such geographically remote Classical Chinese thought into the “barbarian” Aegean world. Classical Chinese philosophy is largely social and moral in reach and grasp, and above all political. That is why I, an outsider, have come to admire it; and that is why a quarter of a century ago it seemed to me and still seems pertinent to consider examples of its thinking in relation to the mixed message of Sophocles’ overtly political tragedies, for example his relatively early plays *Ajax* and *Antigone*, each named

¹ The origin of this article was a lecture of the same title that I developed for “Civilizations Compared” course at the University of Denver in the 1990s. In the first of its three segments, the antiquarian one that treated ancient China and classical Greece, I from Languages and Literatures participated with colleagues from three other departments (Art History, History, Religious Studies). A descriptive paper was presented at the annual conference of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Associate in Phoenix, Arizona, in October 1991. Readers will best follow my argument with a version of Sophocles’ *Antigone* at hand in any of several adequate translations that indicate line numbers of the original.

after a heroic suicide.

In the former the title character grandly rejects the principles of all three Chinese schools. He defies all gods and all men, particularly goddess Athena and mortals who claim tenuous authority over him, but also his spear-won wife Tecmessa and the masses as represented by the soldier-chorus of the play. He is a radical individualist, with concern only for the little son who survives him, who will bear Ajax's enormous shield (after which the little boy is named Eurysaces, "Broad-Shield") and will be known to his generation as proud Son of Ajax.

In the *Antigone* another suicidal title character positively stands for something radically un-Chinese. Not only does she die for it, but she compels three quasi-philosophic supporting characters to abandon their principles. Moreover, surprisingly for such a heroic figure, she *is* a *she*, and a young female at that.²

We look here into probably the later of these two plays with its world-famous protagonist who gives it her name and whose bold stand against her uncle and king Creon has inspired many adaptations and imitations.³

To Antigone's sister Ismene we first turn our attention.

Ismene in effect espouses classical Chinese **Daoism**. Several salient features of her deftly drawn character would indeed "prove" her a Daoist were such a thing conceivable. In the first place, of course, Ismene is female but unlike her sister is in several respects feminine, even stereotypically so. The two very young women's relative ages cannot be determined. It may even be that in the earlier tradition Ismene, named on a perplexing 6th-century BC vase, had neither an older sister nor a younger one.⁴

2 Since she is engaged to her cousin Haemon but not yet his wife, Antigone cannot be older than her mid-to-late teens, since in ancient Greek society an unmarried female would normally be married before age twenty, even well before that age.

3 Including what turned out to be a provocative one staged—briefly—in the PRC. See http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2012-11/30/content_15975618.htm

4 The object, a 6th-century Corinthian amphora in the Louvre (E 640), shows one of the Seven versus Thebes attackers, Tydeus [named], threatening with a sword to slay reclining Ismene [also named]. Google "Tydeus Ismene" and you will see it. (The status of a figure "Antigone" before Sophocles is too long for this note. See the brief Appendix that follows the body of this article).

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Let me demonstrate her Daoist tendency. Of indigenous Chinese philosophies the Daoist “Way” may be the most widely known and reasonably well appreciated outside of the Middle Kingdom itself and the Chinese diaspora. I quote two short texts from the *Dao De Jing* to remind us of some of its ethical tenets and of its spirit. First from Poem 38:⁵

{1} **A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue.** A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue. **The former never acts yet leaves nothing undone. The latter acts but there are things left undone.** A man of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive. A man of the highest rectitude acts, but from ulterior motive. **A man most conversant in the rites acts, but when no one responds rolls up his sleeves and resorts to persuasion by force.** Hence when the way was lost there was virtue; when virtue was lost there was benevolence; when benevolence was lost there was rectitude; when rectitude was lost there were the rites.

**The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and good faith
And the beginning of disorder;
Foreknowledge is the flowery embellishment of the way
And the beginning of folly.**

(Tranlation by Lau, 1963)

A Daoist, therefore, would praise neither Antigone’s nor Creon’s course of activism, whether insisting upon personal “rites” (Antigone, of course) or striving for political-scientific “foreknowledge” (Creon). He (or she) rejects such personal aggrandizement as Sophocles’ confronted characters each intend, Antigone in defiant glory and sense of belonging (to a family that is honorable only in her esteem), Creon in authority and resolute selfless exercise of power (for the state’s good). Ismene rejects both kinds.

5 Not knowing Chinese, Classical or otherwise, I depend upon translations at once authoritative (I hope!) and clear. In all such quotations the most pertinent sentences appear in bold. However, I give these in context and offer brief comments that indicate my understanding.

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In second place I quote Poem 33 in its entirety:

{2} He who knows others is clever;
He who knows himself has discernment.
He who overcomes others has force;
He who overcomes himself is strong.
He who knows contentment is rich;
He who perseveres is a man of purpose;
He who does not lose his station will endure;
He who lives out his days has had a long life.

(Translation by Lau, 1963)

Suggesting something like the Delphic injunction of the Greeks “Know Thyself”, the Philosopher urges us to know our place and to resist impulses based upon dissatisfaction with who we are. Ismene in vain reminds her sister that they are women as well as subjects.

Daoist traits of Ismene thus include apolitical restraint and quietism, indeed all the ‘womanly’ characteristics as ancient Greeks and Chinese alike supposed these to be.⁶ To these we may add her deferential attitude toward others, the high value she places upon living, and a paradoxical lack of concern about the long future and yet a hope that things may turn out all right for the two orphan girls now: without her (or her sister’s) action.

I cite finally a famous third passage from the *Dao De Jing* that I believe captures the non-Hellenic essence of the Dao, yet well describes the behavior of Sophocles’ Ismene in the prologue and, partly, in her second scene as well, from Poem 67:

{3} I have three treasures
Which I hold and cherish.
The first is known as compassion,
The second is known as frugality,

6 A somewhat tendentious discourse on “Ismene’s Choice: Prologue (1-99)” appears as Chapter 2 in Tyrrell and Bennett (1998). The authors may infer too much about what an audience of Athenians are likely to have gotten from the play in performance.

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**The third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire;
Being compassionate one could afford to be courageous,**

Being frugal one could afford to extend one's territory,
Not daring to take the lead in the empire one could afford to be lord over
the vessels [sic: i.e., officials].

**Now, to forsake compassion for courage, to forsake frugality for
expansion, to forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in
death.**

Through compassion, one will triumph in attack and be impregnable in
defence.

What heaven succors it protects with the gift of compassion.

(Translation by Lau, 1963)

Defiance and self-assertion are to be avoided, whereas pity or compassion
is true to the Way—and is opposed to “courage.” Action, if any at all,
must not be arbitrary.⁷

This policy fits Ismene perfectly during the opening sequence of the play
(especially in her speech at 49-68) and in much of her behavior during
its second episode (526-572). Initially she adheres to inaction or rather
to gentle, reactive persuasion as a mode of behavior, in efforts to talk
Antigone out of recklessly defying Creon, Creon out of hastily executing
his niece and affianced daughter-in-law Antigone. That reflects the key
Daoist principle of *wei-wu-wei*, “non-action action” or “no arbitrary
action”, which Ismene urges others to share. On the other hand, even
before her second entrance she is frantic about her sister's chosen fate
(491-492); and when she reappears she lies about active complicity in
the prohibited burial (536-537). She fears for her activist sister, but also
for herself if left alone, lonely last of their deceased parents' children.

In fact, 5th-century logician and moral philosopher Mozi and the Mohists
might also claim Ismene with her loving, non-violent attitude that is so
different from her heroic sister's arrogant *philia*, Antigone's passionate
and reckless devotion to their cursed family. However, Ismene's

⁷ I thank one of the anonymous readers of my manuscript for the observation that *wu-wei-wu* in the *Laozi* has a clear political application and may be rendered “do not act arbitrarily.” I thank *both* readers for gentle corrections and improving suggestions.

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fundamental indifference to external standards of justice and holiness, even of truth —“indifference” may be slight overstatement, but I do not think it misstates her stance— made her more a follower of Lao’s universal Way than of Moh and his distinct -ism.⁸ “Made,” however, since she abandons that position. She is suddenly audacious enough to wish to join Antigone in condemnation, suicidal though this is. At the same time, her conduct remains profoundly different from that of her angry, self-assertive sister whom “Heaven” hardly succors.

For in Antigone the gods take care of their own business. Although Antigone’s will and theirs coincide to a point, i.e., that even the treasonous son of Oedipus who led an unholy attack on his native city must be buried —not honored, but buried— they really do not care what she does. They satisfy their own minimum requirement by covering Polyneices’ corpse with dust from at least one dust storm (417-422) and, although this is controverted, appear to have done so by a previous one as well (its preternatural effect described 255-258).⁹ On the other hand, the gods do chastise the secular ruler who tried to prevent even token interment, by what in discussing divine and human malevolence I call “sublime punishment.”¹⁰ By the end of the play Creon will have caused and must mourn the deaths of a future daughter-in-law whom he thought good enough to betroth to his sole remaining son, of that son, and of his wife Eurydice to boot.

Next in order of appearance in Sophocles’ drama as a foil to Antigone is the more central character Creon, to whom we now turn. Oedipus’

8 Our entry-level undergraduate course did not deal separately with Mohism or even mention it, because for simplification my Asianist colleagues deemed that currents of Mohism merged with later Legalism and with the less radical currents of Daoism.

9 Tyrrell and Bennett (1998) deny that gods are responsible for the first covering of Polyneices’ corpse with dust “as if by one escaping guilt-of-pollution” (*agos*, 256). They suggest that gods above, who control weather, would not be interested in the rights (and rites) of gods below. However, Sophocles does not distinguish so sharply between them, as we understand in his posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus* (OC 1647-1662). In fact, Creon’s sin is not to prohibit loyal citizens from undertaking a token yet sufficient “burial,” but to undo gods’ intervention—which, even worse, he expressly, angrily denies to be divinely caused (*theēlatos*, 278-288).

10 This phrase describes cruel action whereby an attacker leaves his or her targeted victim physically unharmed, but instead kills, sometimes quite atrociously, one, several, or even all other persons, themselves usually unoffending, who are dearest to the offender. Instances abound in Greek myth, for example in the story of Niobe.

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natural-successor *sons* are both dead, as of yesterday. Therefore, the late king's maternal uncle and also (in this tangled family) his brother-in-law Creon is promptly acknowledged as regent-king of Thebes. His public words in the office through the first half of the play coincide with doctrine on state policy of the harsh socio-political science-and-engineering movement **Fajia** known in English as **Legalism**. This is probably the least familiar of the Chinese schools in the West—ironically, since a plethora of home-grown political movements in Western lands, based on rigid dogmatism with or without added religious sectarian or racist dimensions, bear unpleasant resemblance to it. For this dour and pessimistic current of middle Confucianism espoused a totalitarian-statist political philosophy.

Creon's Inaugural Address that opens Episode 1 declares that in the current crisis the state must be everything, family ties nothing (162-210). His angry response to his defiant niece Antigone in Episode 2 explains why, for consistency and firmness in maintaining right order in the state, he must punish her and her distraught sister harshly (473-496). In the 3rd episode his stern lecture to his disloyal son Haemon asserts that, as women must defer to men, sons must do so to fathers, and all to ordinances of the state—all in order that the state may be militarily strong (639-680).

Although early advocates of such thinking date to the early 4th century BCE (Shang Yang et al.) its bitter flavor can be indicated by four short quotations from its principal mature theoretician, the later third-century Qin minister Han Feizi.¹¹

{4} When the sage rules the state [Han Fei writes], he does not count on people doing good of themselves, but employs such measures as will keep them from doing any evil. If he counts on people doing good of themselves, there will not be enough such people to be numbered by the tens in the whole country. But if he employs such measures as will keep them from doing evil, then the entire state can be brought up to

11 From DeBary (1960, pp. 124-136).

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a uniform standard. Inasmuch as the administrator has to consider the many but disregard the few, he does not busy himself with morals but with laws.

So the effective ruler must forestall evil and disorder by setting down ‘Thou Shalt Nots’ and make examples of violators by punishing them swiftly harshly and conspicuously.

Later in his handbook of government Han Fei offers a ruler this admonition:

{5} Those who are ignorant about government insistently say: “Win the hearts of the people.” **If order could be procured by winning the hearts of the people, then even the wise ministers Yi Yin and Kuan Chung [though separated by nine centuries, both were famous for making their states strong, respectively Shang and Qi] would be of no use. For all that the ruler would need to do would be just to listen to the people. Actually, the intelligence of the people is not to be relied upon any more than the mind of a baby.** If the baby does not have his head shaved, his sores will recur; if he does not have his boil cut open, his illness will go from bad to worse. However, in order to shave his head or open the boil someone has to hold the baby while the affectionate mother is performing the work, and yet he keeps crying and yelling incessantly. **The baby does not understand that suffering a small pain is the way to obtain a great benefit.**

The “baby” here is society, the “boil” a law-breaker. Anglophones have the expression ‘Spare the rod and spoil the child’, which Han Fei might have amended to ‘Spare the axe and unleash the subject’.¹²

Regarding obstructive superstition and religious customs the Legalist declares:

¹² It is a curious fact that the ancient Athenians experimented for a time in the 7th century with a broadly death-dealing ‘Draconian’ criminal code, but soon discarded it.

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{6} **When witches and priests pray for people, they say: “May you live as long as one thousand and ten thousand years!” Even as the sounds, “one thousand and ten thousand years,” are dinning upon one’s ears, there is no sign that even a single day has been added to the age of any man. That is the reason why people despise witches and priests.** Likewise, when the Confucianists of the present day counsel the rulers they do not discuss the way to bring about order now, but exalt the achievement of good order in the past. They neither study affairs pertaining to law and government nor observe the realities of vice and wickedness, but all exalt the reputed glories of remote antiquity and the achievements of the ancient kings. Sugar coating their speech, the Confucianists say: “If you listen to our words, you will be able to become the leader of all feudal lords.” Such people are but witches and priests among the itinerant counselors, and are not to be accepted by rulers with principles. **Therefore, the intelligent ruler upholds solid facts and discards useless frills. He does not speak about deeds of humanity and righteousness, and he does not listen to the words of learned men.**

Whatever Heaven is, its will cannot coincide with the fakery of the “learned” and their specious “humanity”, Han Fei maintains, nor approve disorder that is not good for anyone and certainly not good for the entire realm.

Efficient social order is the prime value of Legalism. Heaven is trusted to be on the side of the militant ruler who maintains this, however brutally, as long as he gives due thanks to that Heaven. For the Legalist ruler has no illusion about innate good sense of his subjects nor about the practical effect upon their conduct of the teachings of scholars and holy men. People are understood to be selfish and unruly, venal and easily corruptible. This is the view of Creon (*Ant.* 221-222; cf. 293-303), according to whose suspicions, first, a dutiful military guard (322), later the reverent prophet Tiresias (1035-1039) have been suborned by enemies of the state.

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One final passage from Han Fei has particular pertinence —indeed, almost reference— to the Creon of the *Antigone*:

{7} If you maintain that good government will always prevail whenever the ruler and the ruled act towards each other like father and son, you imply that there are never any wayward fathers or sons. According to the nature of man, none could be more affectionate than one's own parents. And yet in spite of the love of both parents not all children are well brought up. Though the ruler be warm in his affection for his people, how is that necessarily any assurance that there would be no disorder? Now the love of the ancient kings for their people could not have surpassed that of the parents for their children. **Since we could not be certain that the children would not be rebellious, how could we assume that the people would definitely be orderly?** Moreover, **if the ruler should shed tears when a penalty was inflicted in accordance with the law, he might thereby parade his humanity, but not thus conduct his government.** Now tearful revulsion against penalties comes from humanity, but necessity of penalties issues from the law. Since even the early kings had to permit the law to prevail and repress their tears, it is clear enough that humanity could not be depended upon for good government.

Sympathy for anyone, loyalty toward a relative, even affection for a wayward son must not deflect the right-thinking ruler from inflicting an advertised penalty.

We may now review the conduct of Creon as ruler. It is often claimed that Creon is a tyrant through and through, that his decree should offend us from the outset. However, not only he is single-mindedly dedicated to what he judges to be good for all members of the state, but his decree is called a *kērugma* (6-8 et alibi), i.e., a publicly “heralded” ordinance, and not merely a *nomos* (59 and later), broadly a “law”, but a *psēphos turannōn* (60), “voted on law of de facto rulers”; indeed Creon names the decree *teleia psēphos*, “fully operative law” at 632. That he is called *turannos* does not mean that he is “tyrant” as we use the term but only

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that, although he is impromptu *basileus* (155), “king,” he cannot claim kingship by male succession in the royal line of Cadmus. Creon is also called *stratēgos* (8) “general” and *arkhōn* (156), “government officer”—both constitutional titles under Athens’ democracy. The former belongs to that elective office which Pericles held though most of his seldom contested government of the Athenians, the latter to an office in the 5th century assigned by divinely guided lot.

In his severity toward both his daughter-in-law-never-to-be and his son, and in his disregard for the “disorderly” sentiments of his people (represented by the chorus of aged citizens) who suggest that he mercifully rescind the death sentence that he has imposed upon Antigone, he is not demagogue-tyrant but Legalist through and through. To his unruly niece’s *philia*, “family-thinking”, thematic in the script, Creon expressly opposes *politeia*, “state-thinking”.¹³ This is Legalist. Likewise Legalist, as we saw from a quotation above, is his contempt for venerable yet useless customs, for priestly rites and hocus-pocus, and for unpatriotic belief in gods who would do anything *but* support law and order, when gods have proved their support for Thebes by the miraculous defense of the city in the battle of the preceding day under Creon’s supreme command. Their city’s survival against coordinated onslaught by seven formidable attacking columns still amazes the shaken, now relieved and grateful citizen chorus as they enter the theater. They mention several gods who unmistakably supported, even participated in the city’s defense (100-154).

Legalist, finally, is the General’s insistence that political authority owns an absolute duty to enforce its laws, whether “good” ones *or* (by thinking of “the wise”) “bad,” firmly and consistently, even if it thereby offends traditional family pieties, for example, concern for a sister’s daughter or even for one’s own son. “Unwise” laws that a Han Fei would defend are, in fact, simple, clear, well publicized, and *consistently enforced*

13 Creon’s first son Megareus (or Menoeceus) had died in defense of Thebes, by meeting a predicted death in the battle or as a human sacrifice. Creon’s role either way is unclear (and in Euripides’ late *Phoenician Women* he tries to prevent his son’s death!); however, in *Antigone* his wife Eurydice blames him for the death of both their sons (1301-1305). If priest-prophet Tiresias prescribed his first son’s death, Creon has reason for ill will toward the prophet!

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ones that would reject Confucian scholars' subtleties and "wisdom", and dismiss their confidence in the power of mere good example and moral exhortation. Creon says frankly to his son that he will *not*, by relenting from his death sentence upon a manifest rebel, no matter her relationship, prove himself false to the *polis* (655-658). He goes on to say that "Whoever transgresses or violently opposes laws or is minded to give orders to those in authority will never meet with my approval; but whomever the *polis* has set [in power] he must heed even in matters small, just and the opposite" (...*kai smikra kai dikaia kai tanantia*, 663-667; my translation). What "just things" *are* may, of course, be disputed, as by every unconfessed criminal or fanatic; in fact, the ruler dictates right and duty.

Last but hardly least important, we must consider Creon's son Haemon. Haemon stands, as it were, for the kinder, gentler **Confucianism of Mengzi (Mencius)** that advocated moral example and persuasion, and promoted those very harmony-producing pieties, especially filial devotion together with ritual observance, which Legalists despised. Neither *Ur*confucianism of the *Analects* nor Mencian Confucianism must be confused with the conservative philosophical Neoconfucianism of the Later Empire or with the popular "Confucianist" religion of ancestor-worship. Therefore, I again offer texts, more of them than before for a reason I explain below. We begin with anecdotes of the Great Master Kong himself.¹⁴

{8} The Duke of She observed to Confucius: "Among us there was an upright man called Kung who was so upright that when his father appropriated a sheep, he bore witness against him." Confucius said: "The upright men among us are not like that. **A father will screen his son and a son his father —yet uprightness is to be found in that.**" [XIII:18]

Law and laws, therefore, are subordinate to personal relationship.

¹⁴ Five of these —numbered 8-10, 12-13— come from DeBary (1960, pp. 20-33). The other four —11, 14-16— are from D.C. Lau's translations (1979). I choose between them by the criterion of which I find to offer somewhat smoother, clearer articulation of an extract, though on its basic import both translators are agreed.

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{9} Confucius said: “**If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders.** But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders they will not be obeyed.” [XIII:6]

{10} Confucius said: “Lead the people by laws and regulate them by penalties, and the people will try to keep out of jail, but will have no sense of shame. **Lead the people by virtue and restrain them by the rules of decorum, and the people will have a sense of shame, and moreover will become good.**” [II:3]

These two quotations make clear the requirement that a ruler lead by personal moral example.

{11} The Master said, “When those above are given to the observance of the rites, the common people will be easy to command.” [XIV:41]

This adds ritual correctness to the qualifications of an effective ruler.

{12} Confucius said: “There are three things that a gentleman fears: he fears the will of Heaven, he fears great men, he fears the words of the sages. **The inferior man does not know the will of Heaven and does not fear it, he treats great men with contempt, and he scoffs at the words of the sages.**” [XVI:8]

This requires that everyone of worth, the “gentleman” (*junzi*), be pious, deferential, and receptive to wise counsel (such as that of the Master himself, of course!) The “inferior man” anticipates, by several generations, Legalist thinking against which the Master hopes to inoculate his disciples as well as rulers smart enough to take his advice. No. 10 above does the like.

{13} Confucius said: “The gentleman is broad minded and not partisan; **the inferior man is partisan and not broad minded.**” [II:14]

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Another translation of this extremely important statement, Arthur Waley's, goes thus:

{13b} “The Master said, A gentleman can see a question from all sides without bias. **The small man is biased and can see a question only from one side.**”

The straightforward, simplistic, unnuanced judgment of a Legalist is unworthy of a good and thoughtful person, who gathers facts and ponders alternatives, even changes of course.

In keeping with this Creon's son Haemon adopts that critical attitude toward the General as a ruler and as a highly placed man which Nos. 11-13 above would prescribe. This is in part because of his father's haughty and obstinate character, but also because he does not measure up to the positive qualifications indicated in preceding Nos. 8-10.

Three further statements from the Analects are especially apt for understanding Haemon as Creon's *son* at the beginning of his scene with his father, in the central episode of Sophocles' play. Initially the young man begins duly deferential to his father (635-638, even 683-687), yet makes clear —I think we must believe him— that Creon's authority in the state may be impaired by widespread popular disapproval. The Thebans, the young man says, may disagree with his father's decree after hearing Antigone's public defense of her action, and certainly with his condemnation of the princess, who, Haemon says, is in fact widely admired (688-700). He explicitly urges judicious flexibility instead of stubborn rigor (710-718). However, by the end of the episode (751-765) and later in his reported behavior at the underground chamber after he finds Antigone already dead (1212-1239), he has become a rebel himself, a violent unfilial one.

Here is some Confucian thought on filial duties:

{14} Yu Tzu [an eminent disciple of the Great Master] said, “**It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as**

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a son and obedient as a young man to have inclinations to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of for one who has no such inclination to be inclined to start a rebellion. The gentleman devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way will grow therefrom. **Being good as a son and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man's character."** [I:2]

{15} The Master himself said, **"A young man should be a good son at home and an obedient young man abroad,** sparing of speech but trustworthy in what he says, and should **love the multitude at large but cultivate the friendship of his fellow men."** [I:6]

{16} The Master said, **"In serving your father and mother you ought to dissuade them from doing wrong in the gentlest way. If you see your advice being ignored, you should not become disobedient but remain reverent. You should not complain even if in doing so you wear yourself out."** [IV:18]

The first and third of the above statements speak for themselves. Here we have the prescribed behavior of a son, whose first duty is to his father, yet in cases where a father is doing wrong he must correct him respectfully, or keep trying if he resists. No. 15 declares that a son may love "the multitude", but not that he must heed or should be guided by it. Confucianism is hierarchic, not democratic. A noble youth's solidarity is with the gentlemen-elite, with those like himself and like his father in status.

In our play both father and son have failed. Creon never followed the Way, Daoist or Confucian, and promptly lost whatever Mandate of Heaven Thebes' crisis thrust upon him. In contrast, Haemon at first walks it, including in his attention to "the multitude"; but then he willfully departs from it, allowing the Theban people to influence him and, in the heat of sexual passion (*erōs*, of whose dangerous power the chorus sing in the immediately following third stasimon at 781-800). In

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public he defies and even vilifies his father as starkly as Antigone did. He loses his way by the end of the father-son-episode

Within a century and a half after the death of Confucius in 479 BCE several distinct schools had arisen, all purporting to follow the Great Master's teachings. (Likeness to the several and diverse Greek schools that claimed Socrates as their founder is striking, not to mention multifarious Christian sects.)

The following two anecdotes from the book *Mencius* shows Mengzi, an optimist in his assessment of innate human goodness, confronted with the Confucian Kao, whose thinking about people's basic resistance (like willow wood) or at best, indifference (like water) to good order and morality anticipates that of the Legalists —and resembles Creon's:¹⁵

{17} Kao Tzu said, "Human nature is like the ch'i willow. Dutifulness is like cups and bowls. To make morality out of human nature is like making cups and bowls out of the willow."

"Can you," said Mencius, "make cups and bowls by following the nature of the willow? Or must you mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls? **If you have to mutilate the willow to make it into cups and bowls, must you, then, also mutilate a man to make him moral?**" [Mencius VI.A.1]

Mengzi here asks what he hopes is a rhetorical question with a negative answer. But that is not Kao's or Creon's. Both believe in the need for rough, exemplary coercion.

{18} Kao Tzu said, "Human nature is like whirling water. Give it an outlet to the east and it will flow east; give it an outlet in the west and it will flow west. Human nature does not show any preference for either good or bad just as water does not show any preference for either east or west."

15 Mengzi is quoted from D. C. Lau (1970).

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“It certainly is the case,” said Mencius, “that water does not show any preference for either east or west, but does it show the same indifference to high and low? **Human nature is good just as water seeks low ground. There is no man who is not good; there is no water that does not flow downward.**

“Now in the case of water, by splashing it one can make it shoot up higher than one’s forehead, and by forcing it one can make it stay on a hill. **How can that be the nature of water?** It is the circumstances being what they are. **That man can be made bad shows that his nature is no different from that of water in this respect.**” [Mencius VI.A.2]

“Circumstances” indeed precipitate Haemon’s moral collapse. His father is to blame, of course; yet it is Antigone’s one-woman rebellion that set in motion a chain reaction of tragic activity.

Two further pieces from the *Mencius* will show this thinker’s positive and hopeful view of human possibility and government’s responsibility:

{19} Mencius said, “No man is devoid of a heart sensitive to the sufferings of others...

“My reason for saying [this:] Suppose a man were, all of a sudden, to see a young child on the verge of falling into a well. He would certainly be moved to compassion, not because he wanted to get in the good graces of the parents, nor because he wished to win the praise of his fellow villagers or friends, nor yet because he disliked the cry of the child. From this it can be seen that whoever is devoid of the heart of compassion is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of shame is not human, whoever is devoid of the heart of courtesy and modesty is not human, and whoever is devoid of the heart of right and wrong is not human. The heart of compassion is the germ of benevolence; the heart of shame, of dutifulness; the heart of courtesy and modesty, of observance of the rites; the heart of right and wrong, of wisdom.

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Man has these four germs just as he has four limbs. **For a man possessing these four germs to deny his own potentialities is for him to cripple himself; for him to deny the potentialities of his prince is for him to cripple his prince. If a man is able to develop all these four germs that he possesses, it will be like a fire starting up or a spring coming through. When these are fully developed, he can take under his protection the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if he fails to develop them, he will not be able even to serve his parents.**" [Mencius II.A.6]

And finally:

{21} Mencius said, **"The people are of supreme importance; the altars to the gods of earth and grain come next; last comes the ruler... When a ...lord endangers the altars to the gods of earth and grain he should be replaced.** When the sacrificial animals are sleek, the offerings are clean and the sacrifices are observed at due times, and yet floods and droughts come, then the altars should be replaced." [Mencius VII.B.14]

This rules out Creon's first stance and sanctions Haemon's initial position. However, in his rash lunge to kill the head of state (and his own father), Haemon ultimately shows that his interest in "the people" and in right social order is of no more consequence than his fiancée's claim about what divine laws require. For later, in Antigone's final scene, on her way to living interment she is forced to confess that her reasons for defiant burial of her brother were personal, not moral.¹⁶ We learn in retrospect that the princess had adduced "the gods" for a pretext, every bit as speciously as those priests whom Han Fei vilified ever did. Through to the end Antigone, too, ignores the interest of the state and dismisses the sympathy of the chorus.

We spend so much space on Confucius and Mencius because their original position, in two senses, ought not to be misunderstood. Ideologically, both of them were critics of the petty kings and would-be emperors

¹⁶ More on this below.

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of their times, not, like the Neoconfucianist Mandarins, boosters—and flatterers—of Sui, Tang, and especially Song rulers and beyond, through successive dynasties all the way till 1911. Nor in religion were they mere ritualistic (and superstitious) ancestor-worshippers, but rather were concerned to establish a hierarchical orderliness that embraced all persons, including the reverend dead, and to maintain careful ritual performance, *li*, a cardinal virtue, with respect to the living and the dead alike. Everything, for them as for Haemon in the first part of his scene with his father, must be based upon the two premises that people are fundamentally good, and can be induced to show this to be so by a benevolent ruler *who will learn from good advisers and sometimes from his own mistakes*. However, regardless of what “Heaven” may want (note that Haemon makes no appeal to the gods), regardless, too, of the fact that piety like Antigone’s is natural and beneficial to *human* society (which it is, in Confucian thinking, but not as an absolute) Haemon allies himself passionately, recklessly with the rebel against his father and a state in crisis.

There, then, are three dramatic characters and their philosophies-in-action. Tested by confrontation with Antigone’s most un-Chinese self-assertion each of them falters and fails, abandoning her or his initial position. Their respective “philosophies” fail to sustain them.

Between the two scenes in which **Ismene** appears, after meditating on what Antigone has proposed and has done, she herself becomes activist, too, and even suicidal (536-566). Her “reason” is admiration for Antigone and unwillingness to be separated from her, even if it means her own untimely death. In fact, she tries to join in Antigone’s punishment, showing an unexpected eagerness for retrospective action—action, and action falsely claimed at that. Her refusal to “herald” her sister’s rebellious act, as Antigone herself urged her to do (86-87), is hardly complicity.

Before the end of the single scene in which he appears **Haemon** becomes violent, and anything but filial, toward his father; subsequently, in the presence of Antigone’s corpse in a shocking off-stage scene that a

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messenger narrates, he lunges at Creon with a sword, suddenly a would-be patricide. So much for Confucian pieties!

Creon himself, terrified by Tiresias and concerned for his family after all, surrenders when he attempts to pardon Antigone even though she openly, knowingly violated his one and only decree. He gives in to his niece and subject. Tragically for him he arrives at her living tomb too late to save her. He gives in also to Haemon, even humbly abases himself in *suppliant* pleading (1230) before a son who has gone over to his antagonist's side, whom likewise he cannot save. Finally he yields to the non-rational, non-patriotic gods, whose comfort his niece never enjoyed but whose wrath he himself certainly feels, as noted above.

The new king learns pretty much the lesson a Confucius or a Mencius might wish him to learn—too late. Victorious in the end are those fickle Greek gods, but also in a grandly tragic way the glorified anti-social heroine who asserted *herself* in a most discordant way, who displayed loyalty to her agnate family (virtuous in Confucian thinking) but no shame or deference before a man, an elder, and a ruler; no pity for her frightened sister; nor any feeling at all for the young man who loved her.

Oedipus' resolute daughter-and-sister demonstrates no self-preserving wisdom, nor even a selfless devotion to the rituals, as her shocking words about why she had to bury her *brother* betray. She admits that she would have had no such compulsion to perform funeral rites for a dead *husband* or *child*, making this so clear that incredulous scholars have gravely proposed cutting the offending verses from the script (905-915). Indeed, she may be compared to Ajax who, by his suicide-sacrifice, compels the gods to heed him as he curses hated persons, effecting death to countless Greeks drowned on their way home, to others, like Agamemnon, when they arrived there, and much suffering to Menelaus and Odysseus. Likewise Antigone, by a valedictory prayer (925-928) and invocation (938-943) and then by her willful suicide, dooms Creon to a pathetic widowed, sonless life. Her "sublime punishment" of the offender is at most partially conscious, since she can hardly anticipate the second and thirds suicides that follow hers. However, like her wish

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that her brother be buried, this catastrophe coincides with the intentions of the gods. As in every play by this poet *they* know well what *they* are doing. In any case, no Chinese scholar of any school would eagerly kill himself in order to rejoin dead kin, let alone to punish an impious enemy. *Tian*, “Heaven”, on the other hand, when time comes to reinvest its Ming, “Mandate”, might well so treat a Creon as it does evil emperors who bring an end to their dynasties.

Appendix: “Antigone” and “Creon’s Decree” before Sophocles’ hypothesized extraordinary invention in *Antigone*

There is no textual evidence for a girl child “Antigone” as fruit of Oedipus’s incestuous marriage before Aeschylus’ *Seven against Thebes* staged in 467 BCE. That is, it “*premiered*” in that year as we might say. However, convergent testimonia indicate that a son of the playwright (Euphorion is named) was specially licensed to revive his father’s plays in the 420s.

Because of close attention, even allusion that Euripides and Sophocles suddenly paid to material from Aeschylean trilogies, for example, to the central play of the *Oresteia*, we infer that the Theban trilogy can also have been re-staged, i.e. *Laius*, *Oedipus*, and *Eteocles*-alias-*Seven Against Thebes*. On that occasion the script of the concluding play may have been adjusted to acknowledge an “Antigone” whom Sophocles [1] had irrevocably added to this catastrophic royal family in the 440s, [2] included as one of Oedipus’ two silent, maiden daughters *unnamed* at 1462-1514 in his *Oedipus Tyrannus* of (probably) the early 420s, and [3] brought back as an important speaking character, with sister Ismene, for the posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Euripides answered the challenge of Sophocles’ *Antigone* by composing one of his own, lost, but probably late. We think we know something about it. Antigone *lived* and, after secret obsequies for Polyneices, eloped with Haemon. The couple both die later, however, discovered and confronted by a dastardly “Creon,” this one resembles the haughty and

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belligerent “Creon” who remains offstage in the Euripidean *Suppliants* and the melodramatic villain “Creon” whom Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* brings on stage, but not at all the unpatriotic weakling “Creon” in Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*.

Biles (2005-2006) casts doubt on any special license for and even on the postulated Aeschylean revivals in the 420s. Whether or not the late playwright’s Theban plays were restaged then, we know of 4th century performances of works by all Athens’ Big Three tragedians. Any of the “Antigones” mentioned above that followed Sophocles’ *Antigone* or even a recorded 4th-century *Antigone* by a poet named Astydamas the Younger could have suggested alterations at the end of *Seven* before the texts were supposedly fixed in the 340s or ’30s. Indeed, its alternate name *Seven against Thebes*, familiar in the late 5th century (Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, 1021), may come from a revival. Comic Aristophanes knew Aeschylus’ play that has come down to us as *Choephoroe* under the title *Oresteia* (equivalent to “*Orestes*” since his verse wanted the extra syllable: *Frogs*, 1124.) This may hint at revival of that play first performed half a century before.

Another question arises. How old is the “Athenian tradition” (as venerable Sophoclean scholar R. C. Jebb calls it) that the crisis government of Thebes prevented funerals for its fallen attackers? Boeotian Pindar contradicts it (*Nem.* 9.21-27 and *Ol.* 6.12-17), and would likely have refuted it explicitly had he known it. Does it too come from this momentous play?

Probably not. In Aeschylus’ lost *Eleusinians* Athenians persuaded Thebans to allow proper funeral rites for (all?) the slain attackers. On the other hand, there was an old tradition, followed eventually by Roman Statius, that Oedipus’ fratricidal sons were both burned on a single conflicted pyre (*Theb.* 12.429-436). Polyneices’ corpse was secretly added to the smoldering pyre of his brother by their sister Antigone and Polyneices’ widow Argia.

Euripides’ *Suppliants* addresses the post-battle crisis from the side of

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all the attackers' families who want their dead relatives' bodies back duly to bury (and who will recover them only thanks to Athenian armed intervention). An evil Creon reigns at Thebes, who sends an equally evil herald to Athens declaring his prohibition. This jingoistic play is certainly later than the Sophoclean *Antigone*, from a time when Athens and Thebes were openly at war. (The year 423 BCE has been conjectured.)

The Thebans were enemies of Athens throughout the fifth century. For Athenian writers to make their ancestors guilty of such atrocity as Iliadic heroes at their most brutal intended (exulting Hector to slain Patroclus's corpse) or perpetrated (wrathful Achilles to Hector's) would be pleasing nationalist propaganda. Furthermore, it would be tactful on the part of Sophocles who, though elected admiral once by the Athenians, was no admirer of democracy and demagogues, to displace critique of his countrymen's own irreligious policy that prohibited burial on Attic soil to traitorous citizens who attacked the democratic state. See the thoughtful discussion in Anderson (2015) with background information and analysis in Rosivach (1983).

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