

To share one's joy with the people:
An early Confucian request and its metamorphoses in Song times

The Confucian request I will talk about is taken from the *Mengzi*.

The *Mengzi* (or Mencius, as the Jesuits used the Latinized form) is a philosophical text rooted in the teachings of Master Kong (or: Confucius). In it, the teachings of Meng Ke, who is said to have lived in the fourth century B.C., were recorded, probably by his later disciples.

The text of the *Mengzi* was not part of the Confucian canon until the 12th century, when the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi included it among the “Four Books”. However, already from the second half of the 11th century on, knowledge about the *Mengzi* had become part of the imperial palace examinations, and candidates were encouraged to discuss actual political issues based on ideas formulated in the *Mengzi*.

In my talk I will raise three examples of allusions to the *Mengzi* text. As we shall see, one and the same request was used quite differently, dependent on the occasion, the context and the intentions of those who made these allusions. All three examples point, as I think, towards major aspects of transformations that occurred in Song times and I will, at the end of this paper, try and summarize these changes under the term of what I call “metamorphoses” here.

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The request I am referring to occurs in altogether three passages of the *Mengzi* text. In two of them the philosopher addresses King Hui of Liang, and the third passage is related to a meeting between Meng Ke and King Xuan of Qi. Both meetings may be dated as having taken place around 320 B.C., at a time when the Zhou dynasty was in decline and the state of Qin whose rulers trusted harsh laws more than virtue gained ever more power. Meng Ke, who pleaded for a monarchy based on moral authority, is said to have been searching for a worthy ruler who would heed his advice and who would in consequence be able to extend his rule over the whole empire.

In his talk with King Hui of Liang, the king was standing near his pond, looking at his wilde geese and deer, when the philosopher came, and he asked Meng Ke whether things such as ponds and terraces were also enjoyed by a worthy ruler. Meng Ke responded that only a worthy ruler would be able to enjoy them. This response roused the king's interest, and he wanted to hear more about that. Meng Ke explained that it was with the labour of the people that King Wen of the Zhou dynasty had built his terrace and pond. And because King Wen shared his terrace and pond with the people they were delighted about them.¹

1 *Mengzi* 1.2.

In the first of the two meetings with King Xuan of Qi, the philosopher talks with the king about his fondness for music. Contrary to the king's expectation that the philosopher might condemn his fondness, Meng Ke tells him that if he has a fondness for music there was perhaps hope for the state of Qi. The king wants to hear more about this, and Meng Ke suggestively poses some questions, first

„Which is greater, enjoyment by oneself or enjoyment in the company of others?” (*du le le, yu ren le le, shu le* 獨樂樂, 與人樂樂, 孰樂)

[King:] “In the company of others.” (*yu ren le le* 與人樂樂)

[Mengzi, again:] “Which is greater, enjoyment in the company of a few or enjoyment in the company of many?”

[The king's response:] “In the company of many.”

Meng Ke then explains that if the people hear the king's performances of music, being excluded from these entertainments and suffering from their hardships, they would all “with aching heads and knitted brows” complain about the king's indulgence in luxury.

If, however, the king shared his joys with the people, the people would be pleased when they heard the sound of bells and drums and the notes of pipes and flutes.

Thus, the philosopher concludes the dialogue, if the king shared his joy with the people, he would be a “true king”.²

At his second meeting with Meng Ke, the king asked whether it was true that King Wen of Zhou had a park that was seventy miles³ square. Meng Ke responded this was truly so, but even so the people found the park small. – Upon thus, the king complained:

“My park is only forty *li* square, and yet people find it too big. Why is this?”

Meng Ke answered that whereas King Wen's park was open to woodcutters as well as to catchers of pheasants and hares, and since he shared it with the people, there was no wonder that the people found it small. Contrarily, when he, Meng Ke, first arrived at the border of the king's state, he was told that in this state it would be regarded as an offence equal with the killing of a man if someone dared to kill a deer in the king's hunting park. Thus, the philosopher concludes, was it a wonder that the people found it too big?⁴

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2 *Mengzi* 2.1.

3 Probably about 30-50 square kilometers.

4 *Mengzi* 2.2.

The first example is found in the *Dongjing menghua lu* [A Dream of Paradise in the Eastern Capital], a text that describes the life in the capital Kaifeng during the reign of Emperor Huizong (r. 1101–1125) shortly before the collapse of the Northern Song dynasty.

Under the section “Lantern Festival”, the activities accompanying this important Chinese yearly festival, which preceded the beginning of the Chinese New Year, is depicted. According to the *Dongjing menghua lu*, the emperor used to mount the Xuande gate tower, the main entrance door to the Imperial Palace at the Northern end of the Imperial boulevard, to watch the spectacles, and near him was a pole surmounted by the inscription: “The Xuanhe-(Emperor) shares his joy with the people! (*Xuanhe yu min tongle* 宣和與民同樂)” Upon this, the spectators who stood on both sides of the Imperial Boulevard, all cried enthusiastically: “Ten thousand years! Ten thousand years!”

The political ends that the central government pursued in performances such as these have aptly been summarized by Peter Sturman in an article focussing on the political function of auspicious images at the court of Emperor Huizong. Referring to the above described festival he writes:

It was an open and prolonged celebration utilized by the court to establish the public image of a benevolent yet powerful emperor whose primary concern is the welfare of his subjects. On the one hand, the splendor of the court was displayed in fullest fashion. [...] But the Lantern Festival was also the occasion when the emperor and his officials were presented at their most visible and approachable, joining with the populace in their appreciation of the colorful lights and praying for their well-being. The people, in turn, pronounced their wish for the emperor’s longevity. It was a celebration of that most fundamental of Chinese ideals: the unity of the emperor and his people.⁵

To this it might be added that the name plaques on which the Mencian request is written demonstrated that the ruler, since he acted in according with this request was a worthy one, a “true king”. – We may wonder if this was merely a symbolic gesture or if the emperor may have indeed believed that by winning thus the support of his people he might be able to keep the Dschurdschen troupes away from invading the Northern Song territory.

The second example relates to the scholar-official and poet Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (1007–1072). There are two essays in which he explicitly refers to the “sharing of one’s joy with the people”. At the time when he wrote both essays he had a post as governor of Chuzhou, some forty miles northwest of Nanjing – in fact this was a place of banishment, since he had been accused of an illicit affair with a cousin of his and thus had lost his former office in the capital.

5 Sturman: “Cranes above Kaifeng”, 40.

In the first essay, titled “Record of the Pavilion of Good Harvests and Joy” (Fengle ting ji” 豐樂亭記) written in 1046, Ouyang Xiu describes how he first got accustomed to the life in Chuzhou, and how he learned more and more to love the place and the people of Chuzhou, and how he often asked them to accompany him on an outing to enjoy the landscape. At the end of this essay he writes:

To proclaim the Emperor’s grace and virtue and to share joys with the people are, after all, part of a governor’s duties. And so I wrote this account to name the pavilion.⁶

What seems remarkable to me here is that the duty of sharing one’s joy with the people not only has shifted from being a prerogative of rulers to something perceived to be also the responsibility of a governor. And it is also interesting that sharing one’s joy is here applied on taking local people to one’s own pleasant outings into nature.

But it is in the second essay, titled “Record of The Old Drunkard’s Pavilion” (*Zuiveng ting ji* 醉翁亭記), that the kind of joy Ouyang Xiu felt when he enjoyed himself with the people of Chuzhou discloses a further peculiarity. To convey the special character of this scenery, I would like to cite the relevant passage in full:

The pleasures of the feast are not those of strings nor flutes. One man shoots and hits the target, while another wins at a game of chess. Goblets and tallies are strewn about in the chattering hubub of men, some sitting and others standing; these are the enjoyments of the guests. Then there is one man with a wrinkled face and white hair who sprawls on the ground; this is the drunken Governor.

Later, the setting sun touches the mountains and the men’s shadows overlap; this signals the Governor’s departure, with the guests close behind. Then the forest lies in darkness, with no sound but the chirping of birds; the revelers have left and the birds are joyous.

But although the birds know the joys of the mountain forest they do not know the joys of the guests. And although the guests know the joy of accompanying the Governor, they do not know the Governor’s joy in their joy. While drunk, he shares in their joy, and when he sobers up he records it all in writing; this is the governor. Who is the Governor? Ouyang Xiu of Luling.⁷

The joy Ouyang Xiu is talking about here is, in principle, the same joy as the one described in the first essay, namely the generous joy who takes joy in organizing a feast which makes the local people feel happy.

6 See üs Egan/ Literary Works, 214.

7 Egan, 216f.; cf. Liu, *Ou-yang Hsiu*, 146-7; Chen Yu-shih: „Literary Theory and Practice“: 82-84.

But the way in which Ouyang Xiu depicts different types or levels of joy – the joy of the birds who do not know the joy of the guests, the joy of the guests who do not know the governor’s joy, enjoying their joy, one gains the impression there is something special about the joy Ouyang Xiu is feeling: In my view it is not necessarily, as Lian Xianda has argued in a study on Ouyang Xiu’s writing, an elitist attitude, but certainly there is something of an untouchable privacy in it, it is kind of joy that those for whom the feast is arranged cannot fully comprehend.

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Even though in the case of Ouyang Xiu, it may be open to debate whether or not his attitude should be called elitist or rather not, in the last case I would like to adduce here we have without doubt an example of a quite elitist attitude, even though, as we shall see, here too the matter turns out to be not that easy as it may seem at first sight.

The statesman, scholar and poet Sima Guang 司馬光(1019–1086), who after permanent quarrels with Wang Anshi about his reform policies, decided to retire in Luoyang, purchased a garden there that he called “Garden of Solitary Joy” (*Dule yuan* 獨樂園). In an essay devoted to his garden (*Dule yuan ji* 獨樂園記), Sima Guang writes:

If Mengzi said that enjoyment by oneself is not as good as enjoyment in the company of others and that enjoyment in the company of a few is not as good as enjoyment in the company of many, he is referring to the joy of great men like kings and dukes and not something which could be attained by the poor and the lowly.

Confucius said, “Even in eating coarse rice, drinking water, and using your elbow for a pillow, there is joy to be found.”⁸ Yanzi lived on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water, and yet his joy was not affected.

That was the joy of the sages and worthies, which cannot be attained by the foolish. And yet a wren nesting in the woods seeks nothing more than one branch, and a mole drinking in the Yellow River seeks nothing beyond what fills his belly. Each just takes what is in its lot and is contented with it.

That is what the Impractical Oldster (i.e. Sima Guang) enjoys.⁹

8 *Lunyu* 7.16.

9 Sima Guang: “Duleyuan ji”: 孟子曰。獨樂樂。不如與人樂。樂。與少樂樂不如與眾樂樂。此王公大人之樂。非貧賤者所及也。孔子曰。飯蔬食飲水。曲肱而枕之。樂亦在其中矣。顏子一簞食。一瓢飲。不改其樂。此聖賢之樂。非愚者所及也。若夫鷦鷯巢林。不過一枝。鼯鼠飲河。不過滿腹。各盡其分而安之。此乃迂叟之所樂也。[QSW 28: 1214-548; transl. Yang Xiaoshan, 227.]

By referring to the *Mengzi* already at the outset of his essay, Sima Guang not only implicitly admits that by the very decision to name his garden the “Garden of Solitary Joy” he had indeed intended to allude to the Mencian request. The way he discusses that request also shows that he was well aware of possible objections from the part of others. But, as Sima Guang argues, his joys are not comparable with those of a king or duke, but only those of a commoner, and thus, in his view, the Mencian request is not applicable on him.

Slightly later in his essay, Sima Guang introduces a – probably – imagined – interlocutor who criticizes him by again alluding to the Mencian moral request, saying: “I have heard that the joy of a superior man should be a joy he shares with other people”.¹⁰ To this Sima Guang responds:

With my foolishness, how can I compare with a superior man? When I am afraid that [this garden] is not even enough to provide joy for myself, how can I extend it to other people? Furthermore, what I enjoy is simple and rustic, that which is rejected by the world. Even if I pushed it to others, they would not take it. How could I force it upon them? Should there be those who would want to share my joy, I would bow twice before offering it to them. How would I dare to keep it just to myself?¹¹

Hence, what may seem as a purely elitist attitude first, turns out, at closer scrutiny, to be an attempt of self-defense rather than an attack against those who demand of him to share his joy. Sima Guang thus by humbly calling his joys too rustic than being worth to be shared with others, preserves for himself some private space against the demand from others.

But what seems to me most remarkable is that Sima Guang’s self defense discloses that by his lifetimes the Mencian request once reserved for kings seems to have undergone such a change that it was applied on individuals forced by others to share with them their private sphere.

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Coming to the end, I would like to summarize the three kinds of “metamorphoses” we have touched by these examples and to sketch shortly in which respect I think that they should be examined more closely:

The first metamorphosis was the appropriation of a request that was made by a philosopher to the ruler of a small feudal state of the Warring States period by an emperor of the 12th century A.D. By demonstratively pointing out that he had heeded Meng Ke’s advice by sharing his joy with the people,

10 “Wu wen junzi suo le, bi yu ren gong zhi.”

11 吾聞君子所樂。必與人共之。今吾子獨足于己。不以及人。其可乎。迂叟謝曰。叟愚何得比君子。自樂恐不足。安能及人。況叟之所樂者。薄陋鄙野。皆世之所棄也。雖推以與人。人且不取。豈得強之乎。必也有人肯同此樂。則再拜而獻之矣。安敢專之哉。 [QSW [50] 28/1224/584-586; cf. Yang (2003), 229.]

Emperor Huizong depicted himself as a “true ruler”. It would be interesting to examine more closely to which degree Song rulers, and especially Emperor Huizong, instrumentalized allusions to the classics in order to strengthen their autocratic emperorship.

The second metamorphosis concerns the shift from a ruler-related request to share his joy with the people to that of the responsibility of an official in relation to the local populace. We saw this twice in essays by Ouyang Xiu datable to the middle of the 11th century. It would be interesting to search for more textual evidence whether this was an attitude that mirrors a general trend of officials at that time, in combination with an ever increasing self-confidence of this social group.

The third “metamorphosis” would be the shift from the official, public sphere to the private sphere of individuals, or the relationship between equals. This could be felt already in Ouyang Xiu’s essays where he talks about his very private “joy”, and even more in Sima Guang’s discussion about his “Garden of Solitary Joy”.

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