

KONFUZIUS, *Gespräche*. Neu übersetzt und kommentiert von Hans van Ess. München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2023. xxxii, 803 pp. Illustrations, Map, Bibliography, Index. € 48.00 (HB). ISBN 978-3-406-79734-7

This comprehensive book, released by the publisher C.H. Beck in a luxurious hard-cover edition, adorned with a ribbon page marker and enriched with interspersed pictures from one of the versions of the *Kongzi shengji tu* 孔子勝跡圖 (Traces of the Life of Master Kong), is presently listed on the publisher's website among its top titles. It has already attracted the attention of non-specialists and specialists, albeit not always with a positive resonance, and since this reviewer was asked to write a review for this journal she will do her best to do justice to this work.

The *Lunyu* 論語 (probably to be understood as “Collected Conversations,” hereafter called *Lunyu* or *Conversations*) is one of the early Chinese texts with the highest number of translations and also has already been the focus of a multitude of analyses. It therefore takes some courage, or even boldness, to offer the reader yet another translation, as Hans van Ess has dared to do.

As the author states, most of the translators have hitherto regarded the *Lunyu* as a collection of mostly disconnected sentences. His new translation pursues the opposite approach, namely that the *Lunyu* we have today is a thoroughly and coherently composed text, possibly put together from earlier and previously isolated statements that find their origin in different traditions related to Confucius.<sup>1</sup> And besides, van Ess assumes, a redaction possibly datable to the first century BCE or a little earlier, had arranged the text in a chronological way so that it was consistent with the then known biography of Confucius.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that the impulse to compile an authoritative version of the *Lunyu* occurred at the time when Emperor Wu of Han (r. 140–87 BCE) had decided to establish an academy in which scholars paid by the state were installed to specialize on the one or other canonical text is indeed intriguing.<sup>3</sup> The *Lunyu*, as the author assumes, was then used as a text book, given to young students of the nobility before they were introduced to the more difficult canonical scriptures.<sup>4</sup> This was also the time, van Ess continues, when applicants for future positions as imperial officials were for the first time selected on the basis of their abilities to understand and interpret texts of the Confucian canon. As van Ess further imagines, the text could well

<sup>1</sup> Van Ess (hereafter: HvE), p. 15: “Bisher sind Übersetzer zumeist davon ausgegangen, dass die *Gespräche* aus weitgehend unzusammenhängenden Sätzen bestehen. [...] Die vorliegende Übersetzung verfolgt den umgekehrten Ansatz: Sie geht davon aus, dass die *Gespräche* des Konfuzius, so wie sie heute vorliegen, ein bis ins kleinste Detail durchkomponierter Text sind.”

<sup>2</sup> HvE, pp. 15–16: “Möglicherweise setzt er sich zusammen aus älteren und früher unverbundenen Aussagen, die aus unterschiedlichen Konfuzius-Traditionen stammten. Doch hat eine Redaktion vermutlich im ersten vorchristlichen Jahrhundert den Text in eine Reihenfolge gebracht, die mit der damals bekannten Biographie des Konfuzius in Einklang steht und die das Ziel verfolgte, die *Gespräche des Konfuzius* als einen Lehrtext zu verbreiten, anhand dessen zentrale konfuzianische Glaubenssätze in logischer Sequenz zu lernen waren.”

<sup>3</sup> For the hypothesis that the *Lunyu* as a book did not exist prior to about 150 to 140 BCE but was shaped no later than the Western Han, see also John Makeham, “The Formation of *Lunyu* as a Book,” *Monumenta Serica* 44 (1996), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> HvE, p. 17.

have been used by teachers to adduce the one or other sentence by the master to teach these applicants basic ideas of the Confucian doctrine.<sup>5</sup>

The guiding idea of this book, namely that the *Lunyu* as we have it today should be read as a coherent whole, is indeed a refreshingly new approach, after so many attempts to see the book as a layered text redacted in various phases.<sup>6</sup> It was, however, as van Ess concedes, not wholly his own idea but inspired by Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–585),<sup>7</sup> who in a commentary that had been transmitted in Japan<sup>8</sup> explains for every chapter why it had been made and why it was positioned in the book exactly where it is now.<sup>9</sup> It is the main purpose of his translation, van Ess writes, to further pursue this thought and to show that behind the succession of the texts in the book a compiling hand – or even several – may be supposed.<sup>10</sup>

The received *Lunyu* is, van Ess claims, to be understood as both thematically and chronologically arranged. The central axis along which the conversations and events are arranged is a biographical one. Both parts follow roughly the major stages or stations of Confucius' life, but while the plan of the first half is the life of Confucius, in the second half of the book, as van Ess continues, considerations about circumstances in which certain decisions should be taken are more important than the events themselves.<sup>11</sup> The content of each of the altogether 20 chapters is then summarized.<sup>12</sup> In more detail van Ess explains, "the text did not serve purely philosophical speculation, but the description of various situations, with which a Confucian official – in special cases also the emperor – might be confronted in his everyday life. The life of Confucius and his disciples served thus as a foil to illustrate dilemmas, situations of conflict and all kinds of exemplary behavior. Perhaps the quotes were only aspects of larger contexts in which these situations were to be embedded."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> HvE, p. 67: "Die Lehrer konnten die einzelnen Sätze also heranziehen, um über die Stellung des Konfuzius zu extemporieren."

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., the accretion theory that E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks have formulated with regard to the *Lunyu* text in *id.*, *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia, 1998), p. vii.

<sup>7</sup> These are the life dates given by the author on p. 20, but later in his book van Ess expresses doubts regarding the true age of this commentary (HvE, p. 745, fn. 1) and even regarding the authenticity of the text as a whole (HvE, p. 787, fn. 39).

<sup>8</sup> The title of this commentary is *Lunyu jijie yishu* 論語集解義疏 (Subcommentary on the Meaning of the Collected Explanations of the *Lunyu*). The first print of Huang Kan's book in China was authorized by the Confucian scholar Lu Wenchao 盧文弨 in 1788.

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of the first and the seventeenth chapter, Huang Kan's views on the coherence of the book are summarized (and often discussed) at the beginning of each chapter of the present book. It would be interesting to know if apart from Huang Kan there were also other commentators who have tried to trace an inner coherence of the received text of the *Lunyu*.

<sup>10</sup> HvE, p. 61: "Das Hauptziel der vorliegenden Übersetzung ist, diesen Gedanken [des Huang Kan] weiterzuverfolgen. Sie will zeigen, dass hinter der Textabfolge der *Gespräche* eine ordnende Hand zu vermuten ist – oder auch mehrere."

<sup>11</sup> HvE, p. 62: "Für die ersten zehn Kapitel ist dieser Plan das Leben des Konfuzius. [...] Auch die zweite Hälfte des *Lunyu* aber ist biographisch angelegt, wenn hier auch mehr Überlegungen zu bestimmten Entscheidungen im Vordergrund stehen, die Konfuzius im Laufe seines Lebens fällte, als reale Ereignisse."

<sup>12</sup> HvE, pp. 61–68.

<sup>13</sup> HvE, pp. 67f.: "Der Text diente nicht rein philosophischer Erbauung, sondern der Beschreibung verschiedener Situationen, mit denen ein konfuzianischer Beamter – aber im Spezialfall auch

In fact, by reading the *Lunyu* chapter for chapter in van Ess' new translation, one gains a much more vivid and to some degree more "down to earth" picture of the everyday life and training of Confucius' disciples. Their training is shown as not only aimed at becoming ethically and morally "good" individuals, but also prepared them very concretely for future administrative posts – capabilities which would also enable them to fill out positions in a centrally organized unity as the imperial court, a thought that fits with the idea of the assumed time of the text's compilation and is indeed suggested by many of the comments that van Ess adduces for contextualizing the disciples' questions and their dialogues with the master.

At first sight, these many comments adduced in the discussions of each chapter may seem confusing in their multitude, all the more because they often date from very different times, and in order to contextualize these comments it would have been helpful to list them along with the titles of their writings and the commentators' life dates separately in the appendix, but at least to a Sinological reader it is already helpful to know which editions of the *Lunyu* van Ess has mainly consulted.<sup>14</sup>

As for the question of when exactly the compilation of the received *Lunyu* was finalized, van Ess, however, does not really confirm the idea formulated at the beginning of his book that it would fit well into the time when Emperor Wu had favored the rise of Confucian learning and that the *Lunyu* was then used as a textbook. Instead van Ess suggests that several passages in the *Conversations* point to the fact that the process of editing had not been finalized even at the end of the Former Han, but underwent further changes still in the 1st century CE.<sup>15</sup> He even writes that "it is well possible and even plausible that many words from the mouth of Confucius in the *Shiji* represent an earlier version of the *Lunyu* than the one we have today."<sup>16</sup> These statements are quite confusing and diminish a bit the plausibility of the initial idea.

But let us take a closer look at how van Ess justifies why in his view yet another translation of the *Lunyu* – in spite of the many previous translations already existing – was needed.

With regard to the more recent translations that deserve the label "academic," van Ess writes that

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ein Kaiser – in seinem Alltag konfrontiert sein konnte. Das Leben des Konfuzius und seiner Schüler war also Folie zur plastischen Illustration von Dilemmata, Konfliktsituationen und vorbildlichem Verhalten jeglicher Art. Vielleicht waren die Sprüche nur Anhaltspunkte für die größeren Zusammenhänge, die in ihrem Hintergrund standen."

<sup>14</sup> The three probably most relevant editions used by van Ess and listed in his bibliography are Cheng Shude's 程樹德 (1877–1944) *Lunyu jishi* 論語集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), Yang Shuda's 楊樹達 (1885–1956) *Lunyu shuzheng* 論語疏證 (Shanghai: Kexue chubanshe, 1955 [1986]), and Huang Huaixin's 黃懷信 *Lunyu huijiao jishi* 論語匯校集釋 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2008). On p. 738, fn. 22, van Ess writes that this last edition contains almost all the comments mentioned in the book.

<sup>15</sup> HvE, p. 19: "Mehrere Stellen in den *Gesprächen* deuten darauf hin, dass der Editionsprozess auch am Ende der Früheren Han-Zeit noch nicht abgeschlossen war, sondern dass der Text auch im ersten nachchristlichen Jahrhundert noch verändert wurde."

<sup>16</sup> HvE, p. 56: "Es ist gut möglich und sogar plausibel, dass viele Konfuzius-Worte in den *Aufzeichnungen der Chronisten* eine ältere Fassung repräsentieren, als wir sie aus den *Gesprächen* kennen."

the new translations almost without exception do not provide the reader with really new insights under an academic aspect. Instead they mirror the personal preferences of the translators in rendering difficult terms in old Chinese and of ambivalent sentences, which, however, are seldom corroborated by an academic argumentation.<sup>17</sup>

This is indeed a harsh judgement passed on all the more recent translations almost without any differentiation, and it is no wonder if among those who have already reacted quite critically to the author's new translation are some experts or even translators of the *Lunyu*. Van Ess will have to accept that his new approach will also be examined according to his own high standards. The two main criteria he has adduced as characterizing an academically based good translation from one that merely mirrors personal preferences is firstly a contextualized translation,<sup>18</sup> and secondly a translation based on a terminology that is as consistent as possible, because, as van Ess emphasizes, "a translation that does not strive for consistency with regard to terminology may be more easily readable, but will easily cause misunderstandings and makes the translation useless for a serious academic dialogue between the cultures."<sup>19</sup>

To begin with the question of terminology, van Ess is, of course, perfectly right in requesting that a translation of the *Lunyu* should be wholly liberated from the terminology that is still pervaded by the terms used by Christian missionaries, who were among the first to render the classical texts from Chinese into Latin, French, English or German and are still of impact, as van Ess bemoans, on modern translators.<sup>20</sup> While the terminology that James Legge (1815–1897) used was imbued with a mixture of Christian and humanistic terms already used by the predominantly Jesuit missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries, Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930) used a terminology that combines the vocabulary of Luther's Bible with that of German classical literature and Friedrich Nietzsche. So if one takes the key term *ren* 仁 as an example, the translations Legge used for it were indeed not consistent but, dependent on the context, "benevolent," "good," "humanity," or "virtuous."<sup>21</sup> Turning to Richard Wilhelm's translation of the *Lunyu*, we find here the terms "Menschentum," "Menschenliebe," and "Sittlichkeit."<sup>22</sup>

Van Ess' own proposal is to understand *ren* as "sensitivity in dealing with others," because a rendering with "humanity" would not be fitting in contexts where the term

<sup>17</sup> HvE, p. 13: "Grund ist, dass die neuen Übersetzungen fast ausnahmslos wissenschaftlich keine wirklich neuen Erkenntnisse liefern. Vielmehr spiegeln sie die persönlichen Vorlieben der Übersetzer bei der Wiedergabe der schwierigen Begrifflichkeiten des Altchinesischen und uneindeutiger Sätze wider, die aber selten durch eine wissenschaftliche Argumentation abgesichert sind."

<sup>18</sup> HvE, pp. 67f. He criticizes, e.g., the approach by Edward Slingerland (Confucius, *Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), although he appreciates it for having adduced many early commentaries but without taking decisions in favor of the one or other.

<sup>19</sup> HvE, p. 78: "Das [= eine inkonsistente Übersetzung] macht die Texte zwar leichter lesbar, sorgt aber bei nicht des Chinesischen mächtigen Lesern leicht für Missverständnisse und macht die Übersetzung für eine ernsthafte wissenschaftliche Auseinandersetzung, einen Dialog zwischen den Kulturen, unbrauchbar."

<sup>20</sup> HvE, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> HvE, p. 77.

<sup>22</sup> See also the discussion of the term in Richard Wilhelm, *Gespräche* (Jena: Diederichs, 1921), p. 30.

is used in a context of social competence, where someone is judged with regard to his ability to treat others well.<sup>23</sup>

This is all very plausible, but one has to be cautious because *ren* can mean both a social quality of dealing with others but also an inner quality of an individual wholly independent of others.

Take, e.g., the passage in *Lunyu* 7.15 where Zigong, one of the disciples of Confucius, asks his master for his opinion on Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齊, two brothers who left their home state Guzhu 孤竹 at the end of the Shang dynasty because they both could not accept their father's wish to install the younger brother (Shuyi) instead of the elder (Boyi) as his heir.<sup>24</sup> Van Ess renders this passage as follows: "Question: 'Did they feel resentment?' Response: 'Who requests decent treatment and receives decent treatment, what should he feel resentment for?'"<sup>25</sup>

To render *qiu ren er de ren* 求仁而得仁 with "to request decent treatment and receive decent treatment" is indeed a translation that differs wholly from previous ones, because *ren* is regarded here as something that is requested from others, an interpretation that fits well in other contexts but certainly not in this one. If one compares this translation with those by Legge<sup>26</sup> and Wilhelm,<sup>27</sup> they both interpret *ren* as an attitude, an inner state that someone seeks to attain and which is wholly independent of others. In this reviewer's opinion their renderings are, in spite of their Christian connotations, much more fitting than van Ess' approach, and besides, the term *ren* is clearly not rendered consistently here.

As for the second aspect, namely the contextualization, the same *Lunyu* passage will be taken here to look if the contextualization of the quotation justifies van Ess' decision to translate the passage so differently. Van Ess has adduced the "Boyi liezhuan" 伯夷列傳 (Arrayed Memoir of Boyi) of the *Shiji* 史記 here and explains that the story of the two brothers is split up into two parts here. The first part consists in the two brothers' decision to leave Guzhu and thus to renounce their father's heritage. The second part, which is in van Ess' view of relevance for the understanding of the term *ren* here, relates to the brothers' plan to travel to Xibo Chang 西伯昌 (Chang, the Earl of the West, posthumously King Wen 文), of whom they had heard that he was a wise man, only to learn that he had already died and his son, the later King Wu 武, was already on his way to dispose of the last ruler of the Shang, an act they criticize as a regicide and not *ren*. As the reviewer has examined, none of the commentaries of the three before-mentioned editions of the *Lunyu* (by Cheng Shude, Yang Shuda, and Huang Huaixin) explains *qiu ren er de ren* in the context of what van Ess denotes as the second part of the Boyi/Shuqi story in the *Shiji*, but only with regard to the first part

<sup>23</sup> HvE, p. 78 ("Sensibilität im Umgang mit anderen").

<sup>24</sup> HvE, p. 313. The larger context of this question, namely a question concerning the Duke of Wei, is not of relevance here.

<sup>25</sup> "Frage: 'Grollten sie?' Antwort: 'Wer anständige Behandlung fordert und anständige Behandlung erhält, was hat der noch zu grollen?'" See HvE, pp. 313f. In other contexts, the term is rendered with "guter Umgang mit den Menschen," e.g., p. 260 (*Lunyu* 6.7).

<sup>26</sup> "They sought to act virtuously, and they did so; what was there for them to repine about?" See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics, Vol. I: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1893), p. 199.

<sup>27</sup> "Sie erstrebten Sittlichkeit und erlangten sie. Was [hätten sie] unzufrieden sein sollen?" See Wilhelm, *Gespräche*, p. 67.



where the two brothers to decide to leave Guzhu<sup>28</sup> – this decision is why the two brothers received the *ren* they had strived for – probably a good rendering would be “humaneness” here.

The above case is something that a Sinologist trained in reading these commentaries can do – albeit also with some additional work – but how should a non-specialist be able to verify the criteria according to which the author has made his decisions for an “academic” translation? This lack of transparency is certainly at least partly caused by the guidelines of the publisher Beck, who had probably admonished the author to confine his notes to a minimum, but if an author puts so much emphasis on an academic methodology, he would perhaps better have published a book as this one with an academic publisher.

As the above example has also shown, the idea to use the *Shiji* as a source to “contextualize” the *Lunyu* is quite problematic. The authors of the *Shiji*, Sima Tan 司馬談 (?–110 BCE) and Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 – ca. 85 BCE), were themselves masters of contextualizing quotes from earlier texts and constructing a biography from dispersed quotations and recorded events, as they did, e.g., in the “Kongzi shijia” 孔子世家 (Hereditary House of Master Kong).<sup>29</sup> But to speculate on the basis of comparing *Lunyu* passages with parallels in the *Shiji* that “it is very probable that the compilers of the text [of the *Lunyu*] knew Sima Qian’s biography of the *Shiji*, or at least earlier sources on which this [biography] was based,”<sup>30</sup> is indeed somewhat confusing. Certainly the second possibility, namely that there existed a text that arranged the stations of Confucius’ life in a roughly biographical manner – perhaps compiled within an early hagiographic tradition – and which the authors of the *Shiji* could make use of for their purposes would be a plausible idea, but unfortunately is open to speculation.

All in all, the present work is certainly a very welcome new translation that will hopefully encourage many general readers to read the *Lunyu* anew, a translation largely liberated from a religious terminology which is not compatible with the content of early Chinese texts and too easily leads to misunderstandings. As for the difficult questions if the text of the *Lunyu* in the form we have it today has been arranged by one or more hands and if it was compiled about 140 BCE or later, during either the first century BCE or the first century CE, it seems that no final word is spoken as yet, which may all the more give rise to many further heated debates among *Lunyu*-specialists.

DOROTHEE SCHAAB-HANKE  
Universität Bamberg

<sup>28</sup> See Cheng Shude 1990, p. 462, Yang Shuda 1986, p. 162, Huang Huaixin 2008, pp. 601f.

<sup>29</sup> *Shiji* 47. As Christiane Haupt has shown in her Ph.D. dissertation: “Und der Meister sprach: Die Darstellung des Konfuzius in Texten der Zhanguo- und Frühen Han-Zeit” (München: LMU, 2006, p. 165), the “Kongzi shijia” chapter has more than 140 parallels alone with the *Lunyu*, as with several other early sources found in this chapter. However, in my view there is no reason to conclude from this that the passages from which the biography of Confucius was put together were originally arranged in a different order.

<sup>30</sup> HVE, p. 62: “Sehr wahrscheinlich ist, dass die Kompilatoren des Textes die Konfuzius-Biographie des Sima Qian kannten, oder aber schon ältere Vorlagen, auf denen diese basierte.”