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Dogs and Cats: Lessons from Learning Chinese

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Dogs and Cats: Lessons from Learning Chinese

Julie Lee Wei

London, England

Many years ago, when I was fifteen, I ran away from home. The Chinese language was the cause. My family lived in Kowloon, across the harbor from Hong Kong, in a house on Norfolk Road in Kowloontong, an exclusive neighborhood of large houses, often two-story mansions that were walled and gated. My mother had been upbraiding me for failing to memorize my Chinese. I had graduated from high school at fourteen with the highest grades (Senior Cambridge School Certificate—Grade I, with matriculation to the University of London), and I had never done much memorizing—I didn't see the point of it (a view since modified). My difficulties with Mother over memorizing—not only Chinese, but also English—had been going on for some time. That night, after more severe scolding, I was angry and told Mother I was not going to stand it any longer, I was going to leave. I walked into the garden, which was enclosed by tall walls, then out the tall iron gates. Then I walked down Norfolk Road to the main road, a very wide avenue lined with expensive homes, deserted at that hour. I walked to a place I knew, the French Hospital run by European Catholic nuns. It was nearly midnight when I got there. I told the nun at the reception desk I'd run away from home. The sister asked why. I said, "Because my mother wants me to learn Chinese." "What! You ran away because your mother wants you to learn Chinese!" She took me to the nun in charge. I was met with the same lack of sympathy. They evidently didn't think that was a good reason to run away from home. They gave me a clean bed in a clean room, and I lay in bed thinking I would never go home again. I wondered how I would make a living. All I knew was a bit of English, math, and some other high school subjects. I didn't even know how to type or cook. I wondered if I would have to be a maid. But still I had no desire to go home. I had always lived in fear of my mother. Father was usually away, and he was then working in Taiwan. He was a remote figure even when at home, and so did not count. I might have to be a maid, but at least, I thought to myself, I would be free, and free from fear.

Next morning, a nun came to see me. She told me I was a naughty girl. She took me to the office, and there was my mother waiting. The nuns had telephoned her during the night.

When she saw me, tears came to her eyes, and she reached for my hand. I felt embarrassed and abashed. I was not used to her holding my hand. Like my three sisters, I had been taken care of by a wet nurse in infancy, then by maids and a governess. Mother always seemed an impersonal figure to me, someone associated with discipline and punishment and not with tenderness. I was the second oldest child, and the oldest after my older sister died. There had been baby after baby, eventually seven children, and Mother always seemed preoccupied with a baby in another room. The nun gave me a few words of scolding, to the effect that I shouldn't cause my mother trouble and that I should be a good girl. Then my mother took me home.

Soon after that, we—my mother and six children—moved to Taiwan to join Father. The small island of Taiwan was the last refuge of the defeated Nationalist government under Chiang Kai-shek. While I was finishing high school in Singapore, our family had fled from China to Kowloon, on the eve of the Communist takeover. This was the second flight we had made to British Kowloon. Some years before, during the Sino-Japanese War, our family had fled from Shanghai to Kowloon to escape the Japanese.

Now that we were in Taiwan, it was more urgent than ever that I learn Chinese, because I had to go to university—and now it would be National Taiwan University, a Chinese university where courses were in Chinese. I had never been to a Chinese school. Though Chinese, I had always gone to English-language schools, kindergarten and first grade in a Catholic school in Kowloon, then convent school in Calcutta and Kalimpong, India, then convent school in Singapore. I could speak a little Chinese, but I could not carry on an adult conversation, and I couldn't read—I could recognize perhaps 50 characters, if that many. As for my spoken Chinese, I should mention that through all my four years at Taiwan University, I was a source of much merriment on account of the malapropisms I uttered. Once, for example, instead of saying *sheng chan*, "produce," I said *xiao chan*, "miscarriage," meaning a miscarriage in pregnancy. All the girls in my dorm room burst out laughing. At home, my mother once asked me, "*You mei you tou you?*" I replied, "*Mei you tou you*," which means "I don't have hair oil." I thought she was asking me if I had bought any hair oil. She scolded me, and we got into an argument, she insisting she had told me *tou you*, and I insisting I didn't know anything about *tou you*. Eventually we realized that she meant *tou you*, "mail a letter." The two are homonyms. Words like hair oil I had learned as a child.

I spoke Chinese up to the age of seven, when we moved to India, after which my Chinese was gradually replaced by English. Although neither my father nor my mother spoke English, they put us in English schools and discouraged us from speaking Chinese at home, because they were eager for us to learn English. (I have an American sister-in-law who had a similar experience. To her regret she never learned more than a few phrases of Yiddish, because her parents, Jews from the Ukraine, forbade her to speak Yiddish at home.) But when we got to Taiwan, my mother intensified her efforts to teach me Chinese.

What had happened was that, in my parents' youth, China had become a veritable informal colony of the Western powers, especially of Great Britain. They had lived in great cities like Hankou, Nanjing, Beijing, and Shanghai, and everywhere they saw the mighty tentacles of the West. They felt that English was the wave of the future and that if we children didn't know English we'd be trampled underfoot by those who did. They felt that we could in addition learn Chinese easily at home at any time.

The problem was, we didn't learn Chinese at home. My parents' assumption that we could pick it up easily didn't prove correct at all, especially because for a number of years we sisters were not allowed to speak Chinese among ourselves at home. My sisters and I had the vocabulary of a six- or seven-year-old, and not a precocious seven-year-old at that. I think we were not only not advanced in Chinese, but actually backward, because our parents were such remote figures. They hardly talked to us. The servants, who mostly functioned as babysitters, were not motivated to teach us. Even our governess, as I recall, didn't talk much to us. She never read storybooks to us. She mostly supervised us in such activities as threading beads or shaping plasticine, or reading very simple primers, which said things like "The sun rises, the cock crows," "Brush our teeth, wash our face." I have observed after having children of my own and from watching other mothers with small children, that there is a big difference between a babysitter and a mother who is highly motivated to teach her very young child.

Now let me describe the method in which my mother taught me Chinese. Then I will give a few thoughts on why I think it didn't work with me and what I think does work. I cannot say the problem was all my mother's fault—it was certainly partly my own youthful arrogance. My mother, of course, had the best of intentions, and she wanted me to have the highest education. She was a person of great personal discipline, of conviction and commitment. She believed in pain and suffering—as do some of the great religions. One of her favorite maxims was:

Da shi qing

Ma shi ai

"Beating is affection, scolding is love," said with reference to raising a child. This is about the same as saying, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Another favorite maxim was:

Chi de ku zhong ku

Fang wei ren shang ren

Which can be translated as:

Only he who can eat the bitter of the bitter

Can become the man above men.

Which is to say that you can't become a superior person unless you can endure pain and suffering.

My mother decided to teach me Chinese the way she herself had learned Chinese, which was also the way my father had learned Chinese, and the way Chinese had been taught and learned for centuries if not millennia. She started with the *Three Character Classic* (*San Zi Jing*), a long poem containing philosophy, moral teaching, history, geography, and general knowledge, intended as a primer for a child, and often taught to a three-year-old. She would explain it line by line, a number of lines a day, and then I would have to memorize what she taught. I was not allowed to take notes, not allowed to put down the pronunciation or meanings of characters—and almost every character was then new to me. The whole poem, many pages long, was really in classical Chinese. The first lines, as I then understood it, went:

Man's beginning

Ren zhi chu

Nature originally good

Xing ben shan

Nature (xiang) similar

Xing xiang jin

Habits (xiang) different

Xi xiang yuan

Perchance not instruct

Gou bu jiao

Nature then deflect

Xing nai qian

Way of instruction

Jiao zhi dao

Expensive (yi) specialized

Guei yi zhuan

This is a literal translation, which I give to illustrate the elliptical nature of classical Chinese. The last line is a mistranslation, but that was the best I could do at the time. The words in parenthesis are Chinese connecting words I memorized without understanding. The poem is not conversational Chinese, therefore not the Chinese I had some familiarity with. There were archaic words and archaic grammatical constructions. I recited the whole long poem by sheer rote memory, since I was not allowed to take notes on sound or meaning. What made Chinese particularly strange to me was that I didn't understand the grammar. For instance, the *xiang* in the third line means "to each other," which I didn't know then. I misunderstood the last line because I didn't understand that *guei* meant "to have value, to be important" here—all I knew was that *guei* meant expensive. To me *zhuan* meant "specialized," whereas it actually means "dedicated," in this context. The last line actually means "Dedication is of the highest importance." I also didn't understand *yi* in the last line. I just memorized the line with a vague notion of what it meant. I managed to memorize the whole poem, however, because there were lines I did understand, and there were rhymes to help.

My mother could not always make things clear to me because she didn't speak English. Not understanding the English language, she also didn't recognize the nature of my difficulties, because to her everything seemed very easy, and when I kept asking her questions she thought I was being intransigent. She couldn't explain the grammar because she had never learned any Chinese grammar in school. For a long time it was widely believed that only European languages had grammar, that Chinese had no grammar. So my mother couldn't tell me that *yi* was a preposition here. She'd just say it was a *xu zi*, an "empty word," a word with no meaning, and that I was not to worry about it—it just comes with practice. *Xu zi* is the traditional Chinese term for grammatical particles. Of course, now I know that although words such as *yi*, like English *with*, *to*, *or*, *than*, *respective*, and so forth, don't denote or represent anything, they do have functions: they are words indicating relationships. But my mother was not able to explain, and at that time I did not have the concept of relational words.

After this long poem, I was taught the *Analects*, dialogues between Confucius and his disciples, a work written mostly in the fifth century B.C. Here I really broke down. Still, I memorized quite a few chapters, perhaps ten, before we gave up. The main difficulty for me was the "empty words," and here there were more of them, those unrecognized prepositions, conjunctions, and grammatical particles, and they seemed to be everywhere. Partly it was my own fault: I wanted to understand, to understand every character and to understand what the empty words were doing there. Sometimes one shouldn't want to understand. One shouldn't want to understand God, for instance. One should just accept—and love. My problem was that I couldn't accept and couldn't love without first understanding what I was accepting and loving. I had a resistance that threw a wrench in the whole works. I'd ask my mother, "But what does it mean?" What do "empty words" such as *zhi*, *hu*, *ye*, *zhe*, *yi*, *yan*, or combinations of particles like *yi yi*, *yi yan*, *ye zhe yi*, and so forth, mean? Why were certain particles in certain places? My mother didn't know, and I was totally missing the point by asking. You don't ask, you just accept and memorize. One day it'll just flow out of you naturally. You'll be able to use all those empty words yourself without knowing what they are doing there in those sentences.

Besides the empty words, there were many other words and phrases I also didn't understand. My mother said this didn't matter. Children memorized these writings when they were three, four, or five and understood hardly anything, and then when they grew up they suddenly understood—not the empty words, but the sentences, and that's what mattered—it all just came to them. I just had to have faith. The understanding will come later. That is the way it has always worked.

You might say: "Well, you could have figured out the prepositions and conjunctions yourself." Much, much later I did, but it took a long time, because Chinese grammar is different from English grammar, and this was the first non-European grammar I had come in contact with. But there were other reasons too, which I will explain later.

Let us look at one example, the particle *zhe*, as an illustration of how Chinese grammar differs from English grammar. This particle comes at the end of words, phrases, and clauses. Of course, it is easy for me to say that now in hindsight, but in those days I didn't realize that the words before *zhe* were a noun-phrase or a noun-clause. I eventually figured out that *zhe* was a noun indicator, or nominalizer, and that it applied to words, phrases, and clauses. It is like the English suffix *-er* or *-or* in *painter*, *dancer*, *author*, except that English does not put *-er*, *-or*, at

the end of phrases or clauses, only at the end of words. English indicates noun-phrases and noun-clauses with indicator words such as *that*, *who*, *which*, *the*. Take a sentence from the *Analects* that I had memorized: *Qi wei ren ye xiao ti er hao fan shang zhe xian yi*, which word for word literally is "He be person (ye) filial brotherly and love transgress superior (zhe) few (yi)," which means "Rare is the man who is filial and brotherly and yet loves to transgress against his superiors." The bracketed words are connecting, relational terms that I didn't understand. What is *zhe* doing there? Well, it is a noun indicator, a nominalizer, here a noun-clause indicator. Here *zhe* indicates that the clause "He be person (ye) filial brotherly and love transgress superior" is a noun clause, in English the clause "the man who is filial and brotherly and yet loves to transgress against his superiors." One could say that *zhe* here corresponds to English *the* ("*the* man who..."), except that the English *the* is placed in front of the noun-clause, while Chinese *zhe* is placed at the end of the noun-clause.

The *Analects* was much more difficult to memorize than the *Three Character Classic* because the sentences are longer and more involved. I had a vague notion of what they meant. There were new words I had difficulty remembering. Whenever I automatically scribbled a notation on pronunciation or meaning, I would be rebuked by Mother. "Do not write down anything! If you write things down, you won't use your memory! You'll be dependent on notes!" she would say. "If a three-year-old can remember, you can remember!" After a lesson, I would go back and say, "How is this word pronounced again? I've forgotten." I would go back again and again to ask about the sound or the meaning of this or that character, and then Mother would get very angry and say: "You can't remember because you're not trying to remember, you're too full of prejudices! You have to be *xu xin*! You're just like your father! He can't learn anything because he's not *xu xin*!" The irony of it was that my father had far, far more Chinese classics memorized than my mother, but he had trouble memorizing English words that he had copied out in a notebook. *Xu xin* ("empty mind") is to empty one's mind of resistance and prejudice, to be empty and humble. This reminds me of a top mathematician, a young number theorist, whom I met when I was later a science writer at the University of Michigan. He had spent more than an hour giving me the complete proof of two theorems in theoretical math without looking at any notes and then, when I remarked he must have a great memory, because he had it all memorized, told me: "No, no, I've got a very poor memory, I can't memorize anything." When I pointed out that he had just spent more than an hour giving me two mathematical proofs from memory, he

said: "Oh, that—I didn't have to memorize that. That's just like telling a story." What this says is that it is easy to remember when there is meaning and all hangs together. When you don't understand the prepositions, conjunctions, and other indicators such as prefixes, suffixes, and particles that decide how words are related—how they hang together—then you can only understand the sentence or paragraph vaguely, if at all, and memorizing becomes a problem.

My school education had prepared me to go to Oxford or Cambridge, like the other Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, and Caucasian girls in Singapore who scored well in the Cambridge School Certificate Examination and whose family had money. With the Communist takeover of the Chinese Mainland in 1949, our family had become poor, and going to university in England or even in Hong Kong was now out of the question for me. I became a student at National Taiwan University, where tuition was free, admitted through affirmative action. Taiwan University, which used Chinese as the language of instruction (except for some courses in the Foreign Languages Department), was the most difficult university in Taiwan to get into. The students came not just from Taiwan itself, but also from some of the most cultured families from all over China who had fled the Mainland. One had to go through a competitive examination. There were quotas, however, for minorities (such as Mongolians, Tibetans, and Uighurs), and for overseas students like myself. I did not take an exam. I went to registration with my mother, who filled in the forms for me, since I couldn't read them. I wanted to go into mathematics or physics, but she enrolled me in English because she thought I would have the least trouble there.

At the first class in Freshman Chinese, a requirement for all freshmen, the professor wrote on the blackboard two Chinese characters: *Zi shu*, "Self account [self profile]." Everyone in the class, about seventy boys and girls, quickly bent down their heads and started writing their biographies. Only I stared ahead. I recognized the first character *zi*, "self," but didn't know the second one, *shu*, "account." So I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I wouldn't have been able to write an autobiography in Chinese anyway. The professor, a tall portly man dressed in a long dusty-blue Manchu-style cotton gown, walked over to me to find out what the problem was. After that I was put in a remedial Chinese class. I joined about eight Taiwanese boys who had studied in Japanese schools during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan and still couldn't catch up on their Chinese. We were like outcasts and dunces, in a remote classroom near farm fields on the far edge of campus. The classroom was in a low row of "temporary classrooms" that were mostly deserted. The remedial class professor was a small and frail native-Taiwanese professor

who, I thought, must have felt as if he too were banished—assigned to a lower order of "native," retarded, students, to teach a course that hardly befitted the status of a real university professor. I had the impression that he rose above this predicament by deciding to teach his favorite subject after all. This was Song and Yuan dynasties *qu*, a kind of poetic drama dating to between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, which he read aloud happily in a thin voice, for all purposes ignoring us. We followed along with our mimeographed copies of the text. No one asked questions. The text was still far too difficult for us, absurd material for us, and I noticed all the boys staring ahead glumly. I learned hardly anything in the class, and nobody cared.

In the dorm we were twelve girls to a room, two girls to a desk, with no privacy. Everyone could see that I was trying very hard to study the chapters from the *Analects* that my mother had taught me, even though I hardly knew basic conversation. Most of them had only studied a little of the *Analects* in high school, and it was considered difficult for them because now the stress was on modern Chinese, not on the classics. One girl told me they all felt very sorry for me, for what my mother was doing to me. I didn't know what to say, both because I felt loyal to my mother and because I felt I was much to blame for not being *xu xin*.

I also had to take a number of other Chinese courses. One was called History of Chinese Literature (two semesters), for which the kind professor at the end of the term gave me a complimentary 60 (out of 100), the passing mark. I couldn't understand anything. I borrowed the notebook of the boy behind me to copy his notes. There were no textbooks. After copying out his notes I would try to figure out what they meant, and I would go to my father for help. After explaining a few sentences to me several times, he ran out of patience. "What! You can't even understand this! *Zemme! Zhe ye bu dong!*" he exclaimed and threw the notebook across the room. I never went back to him for help, and I'm sure he soon forgot the incident.

Now you might say that I could have bought myself a Chinese-English dictionary or some English books on Chinese. I did not know they existed! I did not know that the *Analects* was translated—I did not know that there were such things as translations. Also, I was given no pocket money (except for necessities such as bus fare), so I never browsed in bookshops. When I earned money from tutoring, I gave Mother all my earnings. This was part of living a very sheltered, docile life. Furthermore, everyone was very poor then, because the Mainland had just fallen to the Communists, and so, with few exceptions, we were all studying from classroom notes, not books; professors almost never asked us to look at books. I did go to the small English

department library, a relic from the days of the Japanese occupation when the university was called Imperial University, to check out books on my own. But these were all on English literature and not required for my courses. In the whole of my four years at Taiwan University, I owned only four books, a very small book of Spanish conversation, a small book on German grammar, a German dictionary, and a *History of English Literature* (procured for us by the American visiting professor). I felt guilty for asking my parents for the money to buy them, because they were so poor that they sometimes even borrowed money from the cook to buy food.

"Four years, and you still don't know Chinese!" my mother exclaimed in exasperation when I graduated from the Foreign Languages Department of Taiwan University. She had thought that I would pick up Chinese easily by living in the dorm. I had taken some German and Spanish in addition to the courses in English and Chinese. The only reason I was able to graduate at all was because I had received a complimentary score of 60 for all my Chinese courses. Those dear Chinese professors were compassionate souls! To compound my difficulties, I actually had very little time to study Chinese, because almost all my spare time was spent in tutoring English to earn money for the family. I still spoke halting Chinese. Now nineteen, I could not read Chinese newspapers or magazines—I still couldn't read Chinese.

I had made up my mind I was going to learn Chinese. I felt that if millions of Chinese could learn it, I could. I wanted very much to stay in Taiwan to learn Chinese but my mother expected me to go to the United States, like so many others. It was the trend for young people to go abroad. Taiwan was poor and backward then, and it seemed to offer little in the way of jobs or a future. If I went to America, I might also be able to earn money to send home. I was then the oldest child (my older sister had died in Singapore).

The minute I got on the old, creaky, rat-infested boat on which I sailed to America, the S.S. Haifei, a small freighter carrying a heavy load of metal in its holds, I began poring over the *Analects* and some Chinese magazines, while my roommate and some of the livelier young passengers played bridge and talked and laughed on the deck. The freighter carried about fifteen passengers, most going to America on a student visa. Though I had a small pocket-size Chinese-Chinese dictionary I made little progress because I understood neither the grammar nor the system of romanization in the dictionary, which had strange-looking spellings such as *jjoongg*.

We were on the seas during October, November, and December, a time of winter storms in the Pacific Ocean. Sometimes the waves rose taller than the ship, and the captain feared that a

gigantic wave might hit the boat in the middle and break it in two. A few years later I chanced upon a small item of news in the *New York Times*, which said that a sister ship of the same Chinese company, a freighter called the S.S. Hai---, had indeed broken in two in a storm in the Pacific.

After a journey of fifty-six days on the S.S. Haifei, we finally reached the west coast of the United States. I continued to work at Chinese, although I really had no time for it now because I was enrolled as a full-time graduate student in English, as required by the U.S. Immigration Office, and I would be deported if I flunked or if I enrolled less than full-time. I was also working full-time (illegally) as a cleaner, dishwasher, waitress, etc., to pay tuition, support myself, and send money home. I soon discovered Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary and learned, from the introduction, the Chinese *bopomofo* phonetic system of transcribing Chinese as well as the Wade-Giles system of romanization.

While still a graduate student, I married and eventually had three children. What with holding a job during my husband's graduate studies, taking care of the children, and then continuing after his graduation with other full-time jobs, I had little time for Chinese, although I continued to study it now and then. I still didn't understand the grammar of either classical or modern Chinese. After many years of independent study, I overcame that hindrance. Progress was slow because I was doing so many other things. Of course, there are certain obscure archaic particles I don't understand that are still only vaguely known even by linguists.

While my children were growing up I stopped communicating with my parents for more than ten years, because the relationship had become too difficult for me. I became reconciled with them only after my children had all left home. Then I reunited with my parents in California. My mother was very surprised that I was now able to read both modern and classical Chinese with no difficulty.

There is now a resurgence of the classics in children's education in Taiwan and Mainland China. The driving force behind it, as far as I can tell, is mothers. I read a magazine article about this resurgence in Taiwan, and I recently heard about a similar resurgence in Mainland China. Mothers want their children to know the classics as well as they were traditionally known, that is, up until my grandfather's generation. They also want their children to be able to write in the classical style, as in former generations. This means a regimen of at least eight to ten years of intensive memorization, or even more, depending on circumstances. The curriculum would

include the primers, *The Thousand Character Essay* (*Qian Zi Wen*), the *Three Character Classic*, the *Filial Piety Classic* (*Xiao Jing*), and for girls, also the *Girls' Classic* (*Nu Er Jing*). Then study moves on to the Confucian classics, the *Four Books* (*Analects*, *Mencius*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*) and the *Five Classics* (*Book of Odes*, *Book of History*, *Book of Changes*, *Book of Rites*, *Spring and Autumn Annals* and *Zo Commentaries*). Then come the Taoist classics, *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi*. Selections from the histories, *Shi Ji* and *Han Shu*, are also studied. All these classics were written between circa 800 B.C. and 300 A.D. Meanwhile poetry from the genres of *shi*, *ci*, *ge*, and *fu* are also memorized. Later, selections from the anthologies, *Wen Xuan* and *Gu Wen Guan Zhi*, are memorized.

The aim of this education is not only to be able to read the classics with ease but to write in the styles of these classics. The end product would be a person with the ability to write in the styles of the different genres of poetry as well as of prose. This was what my father and many literati of his generation were taught to do, though not all literati in that generation, because the imperial examination system was abolished shortly before the revolution of 1911, and my father's generation belonged to the transition period. That classical education is like classical Latin and Greek training in England and Europe in a bygone era, where a child was made to memorize, in Latin, large chunks of Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Julius Caesar, and Tacitus and other prose and poetry masters, and in Greek, large chunks of Homer, Thucydides, Plato, Sophocles, and so forth, and then trained to write classical Greek and Latin. John Stuart Mill, who started Greek at three, was reading or memorizing Xenophon, Herodotus, Diogenes Laertius, Lucian, and Plato at the age of eight.

Historically, in China as in the West, a classical education served two purposes, one moral and one professional or careerist. The classics in England and Europe, as in China, were seen as the repository of mankind's highest achievements, achievements in literature, historical writing, and philosophy. All literature, history, and philosophy pointed ultimately to moral teaching, to instruction on how to live a good life. The classics served therefore a religious purpose, namely to instruct and edify. The classics, as the distillation of the experience and wisdom of centuries, also served a professional and careerist purpose, which was to train the prince, the courtier, the governor, and the leader of men. In China these were the ruler and the government officials of the empire, and the classics were the basic texts for the imperial civil service examinations. The Chinese imperial examination degrees qualified their holders for

government positions, and these positions entailed emolument, honor, and prestige. The degrees, awarded on the basis of one's knowledge of the classics and ability to write in the classical style, were the principal avenues to power and wealth. In England, a classical education obtained in the universities prepared one for either a secular or a sacred profession, for service in the government, in corporations such as the East India Company, in academia, or in the church. The assumption in the West, as in China, was that leaders of men should be men of high culture and high morals.

But a classical education in China, as in the West, required an enormous expenditure of time and effort, both of which usually could only be afforded by the affluent. And with the rise of science and new fields of inquiry, the classical education had to make room for new disciplines. As we know, the classics in both China and the West now have become only a small part of the modern school curriculum, and in universities, only a small part of the wide range of professional specialties.

That Chinese mothers and fathers want to restore the Chinese classical training in the child's education suggests that they want to raise the cultural and moral level of their children and of society. It is a kind of fundamentalism, a cultural fundamentalism, occasioned by the cultural incursion of the West and the retreat of Chinese civilization and culture. A moral and cultural entropy has emerged in both China and the West. Old moral and cultural standards have been crumbling. Crimes and misdemeanors previously unthought of are now committed in schools by children in China as well as in the West.

In the West, children were taught to memorize verses and chapters from the Bible as part of their moral instruction, just as the Greek and Latin classics also served a moral purpose. So it is easy to understand why Chinese parents would want to restore the Chinese classics. Moral purpose was also the reason my mother insisted I start with the classics. The *Analects* was the most important religious text in Confucian China.

Theoretically, children can be trained successfully in the classics and in writing the classical language, if it is done properly. After all, that was how the Chinese literati were traditionally trained. Some psychologists now think that a child can be trained to extraordinary achievement, become a Mozart or a John Stuart Mill, let us say, if he or she has a parent as talented and as dedicated as Mozart's or Mill's fathers. They are of the opinion that ordinary

children can become child prodigies like Mozart, for instance, if they have a teacher like Leopold Mozart and if they start as early as Mozart.

If a child is trained from the age of three by a competent teacher whom he loves and trusts, he should be able to read classical Chinese without difficulty at eleven. A great-uncle of mine got the *xiucai* degree (roughly equivalent to a baccalaureate) at the precocious age of eleven. This was not common, but I believe it was not terribly rare either. I am acquainted with a scholar at the Hoover Institution at Stanford, Dr. Wu Yuan-li (Ph.D., Economics, University of London), now in his late eighties, who could read the Chinese classics without difficulty at eleven. I asked him how he was educated. He said he had a tutor at home in Beijing who would give him lessons a few hours each day. They sat at a long table in a study. Every afternoon he would do his homework at this table while his mother worked at the other end doing her accounts and correspondence, just to be sure he was doing his homework. From the age of five to eleven he was tutored at home; after that he went to a regular modern school. (His father was Wu Tingfang, a statesman and financier of the early republic.) He said his tutor would explain the text and he would memorize the lesson. Was grammar explained? "No," he said. "Chinese doesn't have any grammar, does it?" He was surprised to hear that it does. Did he find classical Chinese difficult? "No, I never felt any difficulty. It all seemed very natural."

Neither my father nor my mother felt any difficulty learning classical Chinese. They had tutors at home. They didn't take notes. We now know that it is much easier for the small child to memorize than for an older person. In my case, I was not only older: I questioned. It is natural for an older person to question.

It is also important for there to be love and trust between pupil and teacher. Many children, even if they have excellent memories, cannot learn, I believe, because they do not share this relationship with the teacher. Furthermore, though it is easy for a small child to remember without understanding, it is very hard for the older child or adult to memorize without understanding a text.

Here I am reminded of an article I once read about a pet trainer. I was living in Ann Arbor, Michigan, then, and the pet trainer came to town to give a lecture, after which she was interviewed. She said that she had trained all kinds of pets, including birds, and many kinds of dogs, with success, but she could never train a cat to do anything. When asked why, her answer was: "The cat questions."

It seems to me that little children are, under normal circumstances, like dogs, loving and eager to please. They can be taught easily. The Chinese have a saying about the loving, unquestioning nature of dogs and children:

Zi bu xian mu chou

Gou bu xian zhu qiong

Child never thinks Mother too homely,

Dog never thinks Master too poor.

When children reach their teens, however, they start to question, and then they become harder to teach material that has to be memorized. Dog becomes Cat. So the prime time to teach children to memorize is when they are, in a manner of speaking, still dogs, unquestioning and responsive. When they reach their teens they become less obliging. A Chinese mother who had four children in their teens said to me when my children were little: "If you want to teach your children anything, be sure to do it by the time they are ten. After that they're not going to listen." At the time I thought she was overly pessimistic, but I'm beginning more and more to see her point.

I think my mother made little progress in teaching me Chinese because I was much older than the traditional age for beginners, because I was not allowed to take notes, and also because I did not have enough love and trust. I had passed the age of dog-hood and entered the age of cat-hood, so to speak. I believe that if children are to be taught a classical curriculum, it must be undertaken with care. The traditional Chinese method of educating stressed obedience and discouraged asking questions. Because the classics are difficult to learn without a good teacher, the danger to children is the same danger, the same potential evil, as in the past. There is the danger of cruelty to children through the use of coercion and punishment. Not all teachers can teach without instilling fear; not all can make the child feel as if learning the classics is a natural thing. We know that many men in the past struggled to obtain the *xiuca*i degree until they were old men, even though there were boys who could get the degree at eleven. This could have been due to many reasons—not starting early enough, not having sufficient time to study due to financial circumstances, not having a good teacher.

There are other dangers that are outside the scope of this essay. I will mention only one in passing, and that is the danger of repressing the minds of the young by exacting obedience and not encouraging questions. The emphasis on obedience, memorization, and veneration of the

ancients carries with it the danger of producing minds too docile or too dogmatic. I think that this is a danger of fundamentalism in any culture, when people accept the belief that all the answers are in the words of the ancients, to be found in ancient texts.

I hope mothers and others who teach children classical Chinese will have a good understanding of Chinese grammar, and that they will teach children both the *bopomofo* system of transcription and the *pinyin* system of romanization, and of course allow note-taking when the child is old enough. These are powerful keys to making Chinese, modern or classical, easier to learn. If Chinese is made easier—I'm tempted to say made easy—there will be far less need of coercion and punishment. As to punishment, I believe that if pain and suffering are the price of high achievement, they should be embraced voluntarily and not imposed externally.

Classical Chinese can be taught to a child as young as three, but this should be done very gradually, without inflicting pain or fear. A good teacher is a prerequisite. I am assuming that the child at three already can speak Chinese, and that it is the mother tongue, the learning of which should be continued. It is theoretically possible for a child to reach the *xiucaí* level of composition at eleven, but today children also have regular schooling and other subjects to study.

Although many children can be refractory when they reach their teens, most are a combination of the passive and the active, of the trusting, loving, dependent nature of the dog and the cool independence of the cat. It is up to the parent or other teacher to nurture both sides and to do so without instilling fear; then a trusting loving relationship can last into adulthood and even throughout life, without detriment to independence. Some of the most famous cases on record of successful tutoring were based on love and trust that lasted into adulthood. I think of Mozart, J. S. Mill, and Carl Czerny. Their work as well the story of their lives belongs not only to Germany, Austria, or England, but also to the world. All of them had a relationship of love and trust with their respective teachers, Leopold Mozart, James Mill, and Beethoven. It is interesting that Mozart and J. S. Mill both became cats, so to speak—became independent of their fathers—only when they reached twenty years of age. Mozart, who started composing at the age of five, struck out on his own career at twenty, an emotional and intellectual independence that caused his father great, some say pathological, distress. Mill at twenty, according to his *Autobiography*, had an emotional and intellectual crisis that lasted three years, during which he had to reject many of the beliefs inculcated by his father. Beethoven, a child prodigy whose father had made him play the piano for noblemen when he was small, refused to see child

prodigies brought to play the piano for him. He did make a few exceptions, among them Carl Czerny, whom he took as a pupil. Czerny also became a composer, writing five symphonies, all of them now neglected and forgotten, which suggests that it may take more than tutoring to become a Mozart. Czerny did, however, become an outstanding pianist and teacher, whose pupils included Liszt and other celebrated pianists. He also composed more than a thousand works, most of them now forgotten, it is true, but nevertheless showing a level of creativity and productivity that few of us ever attain.

As to my own experiences with my children, I can add that I did tutor my son in classical Chinese. I am of course no Leopold Mozart, only a typical mother, and my son is an ordinary child, an American child whose parents are both Chinese. I taught him from the age of seven to ten to memorize classical Chinese. I didn't go beyond that because he had other activities, and Chinese was only a second language. He knew English and could always read the Western classics for edification and enjoyment. He never found classical Chinese difficult. If he wanted to learn more, he had a good foundation for doing so. It was quite up to him. He did not have to run away from home.

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