

## I AM NOT A SAGE BUT AN ARCHER: CONFUCIUS ON AGENCY AND FREEDOM



**Rina Marie Camus**

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, General Education Centre  
[rinacamus@gmail.com](mailto:rinacamus@gmail.com)

Is *freedom* a Western concept? As a multifaceted human experience it seems fairly transcultural. Freedom is hardly a focus of philosophical discourses in China as it is in the West, and I suppose this partly accounts for the difficulty in tracking freedom and closely related notions of agency, choice, and autonomy in Chinese philosophy.

Over four decades ago Herbert Fingarette raised the controversial idea about the absence of freedom in Confucian ethics (Fingarette 1972). Although not intending to denigrate, Fingarette raised a polemic that has lingered to the present.<sup>1</sup> A. C. Graham noted the sour upshot of the issue when writing that “the claim that the concept of moral choice is foreign to Confucius has offended many readers.” Graham sought to smoothe the matter by clarifying that Confucius was “of course very much concerned with choice in the most general sense of the word, as settling after due consideration on a particular course of action.” However, his follow-up remark left the ball rolling:

It does seem to be the case that Confucius is not in the habit of posing alternatives at all. For him, you follow the Way if clear-sighted enough to see it and strong enough to persist in it, otherwise you simply fall away from it out of blindness or weakness. It is only later, with the rise of schools with competing principles, that we meet with such metaphors as crossroads (conspicuously absent in the *Analects*, in spite of many references to the Way, walking paths, tracks), or the weighing of alternatives as though on a balance. In particular, Confucius does not think in terms of choices between ends. (Graham 1989, p. 22)

Like Fingarette, Graham did not take this point of contrast between Chinese and Western conceptions to be any indication of the superiority of one tradition over another. If any, Graham regarded choice in the *Analects* as a “break with the regnant paradigms of modern Western philosophy,” explaining that Confucianism sees the matter “mainly in terms of a person’s election of the morally appraisable rather than in merely choosing between alternatives” (Graham, in Rosemont 1991, pp. 308, 310).<sup>2</sup>

In the aftermath of the controversy, scholars have scrambled to explicate the Confucian conception of freedom in various ways. After all, it seems strange for a moral tradition as profound and resilient as Confucianism to hold no thought of freedom. Joseph Chan argued that free will, a key notion in Western discourse, has a lexical equivalent in Chinese, *zhi* 志. For Chan,

Confucianism has a “will-conception” of autonomy as opposed to a contemporary “choice-conception” (Chan 2002). Kyung-Sig Hwang categorizes Confucian ethics as a form of “soft determinism” that makes the effort at self-cultivation compatible with accepting “fate” (天命) in matters beyond human control (Hwang 2013, p. 13). Drawing on contemporary feminist theories, Chenyang Li explains that Confucians see freedom as “choice of good” (擇善). Unlike a will-based conception of freedom, the Confucian view is more holistic, comparable to the notion of “liberation,” that is, the realization of life goals by developing competencies that enable one to excel in a challenging environment (Li 2014).

These are some examples of conceptualizing Confucian freedom which take their cue from Western discourses. They contribute to understanding by employing concepts and frameworks that are more familiar or better spelled out. I shall take a different route. There are avenues for exploring freedom in Confucianism that are opened by its primary sources, approaches that can lead to homegrown perspectives about the theme. One way is to identify a relevant metaphor. There may be no crossroads or weighing-scale metaphors in Confucius, as Graham observed, but there *is* a metaphor in early Confucian literature that displays moral agency: the archer. In modeling an agency, the metaphor can yield valuable insights about how freedom operates in Confucian morality.

In this article, I examine the significance of the archer metaphor for reaching Confucian perspectives on agency and freedom. I begin with a summary discussion of metaphors. Then, given the importance of context-recovery for grasping the resonances of a metaphor, I will survey practices and beliefs surrounding archery in Zhou society and references to ritual archery in the *Analects*. Ritual archers in the *Analects* are highly suggestive about Confucian moral agency and constitute a helpful background for the archer metaphor in the *Mencius*. The core section tackles two passages with the archer metaphor in *Mencius* 2A:7 and 5B:1. Both passages are known for dealing with concepts central to Confucian moral psychology. The relevance of these two passages to the theme of agency and freedom is what I undertake to demonstrate. In the final section, I discuss agency and freedom in light of the archer figure and attempt to define these in Confucian terms. Common usages of the words agency and freedom (i.e., having to do with purposeful activity and with self-determination, respectively) suffice as working notions. The idea is to let archer imagery speak for itself before articulating what is distinctive about Confucian views on the human capacity to knowingly and actively instigate events.

### *Literary Metaphors: Exemplification and Context-sensitivity*

The topic of metaphors in Chinese texts brings to mind Edward Slingerland, who advocates unpacking metaphors instead of “translat(ing) Chinese

arguments into rational propositions that could be modeled by formal logic" (Slingerland 2011, p. 3). This sounds like a good option, at least for navigating agency and freedom given that there are no ready lexical equivalents while there *are* metaphors that illustrate what the two words are about. An example is the term weighing (權), whose figurative use in Mencius and Xunzi denotes the deliberations of an agent before formulating a judgment (cf. Graham 1989, p. 22; Kim 2014, pp. 14, 16).<sup>3</sup> Mencius' agricultural metaphors, for example sprouts (端) (2A:6) and flowing water (湍水) (6A:2) analogies, also contribute to the theme by indicating sources of moral agency from within the acting subject (cf. Nivison 1996, pp. 85, 99–100; Brindley 2010, pp. 64–68). The archer figure, in turn, has received little attention. As a representation of the moral agent, it can give a more complete picture of agency and freedom in Confucianism. In this section, I explain the metaphor theory that grounds my study in order to show how the metaphor can do the job of expressing robust concepts of freedom and agency. I follow literary metaphor theory, which, compared to cognitive linguistic approaches, offers a richer, more accessible account of the context-dependence of figurative imagery.<sup>4</sup> Attending to the resonances of a metaphor, which derive from the culture and milieu of its users, is a strategy that is crucial for my intent to arrive at homegrown perspectives. My discussion focuses on the perception of similarity and the mechanism of exemplification.

Scholars of literary metaphor follow the lead of Aristotle in taking metaphors to be "the contemplation of semblance between things," which motivates a "transference of names" between things that are alike.<sup>5</sup> The expression "*bloom* of youth," for instance, posits a similarity between young people and fresh flowers and applies a word associated with flowers to describe the attractiveness and vitality of the former. The construal of similarity between things thus paves the way for lending appellations. The matter explains the lexical function of metaphors, that is, their ability to expand the standard resources of a language by stretching the application of terms (Sticht 1979, pp. 474–478; Stern 2000, pp. 190–192, 319). Metaphors thus allow us to speak about themes without using specific terminology. For example, the quintessential ideogram *dao* 道, meaning road, is sometimes a surrogate word for morality in Chinese texts and gives the sense of a doctrine, behavior, or person having the right course in accord with revered antiquity.

Interestingly, metaphoric utterances are hardly mere statements of similarity. They do more than state that two objects are alike but actually make assertions about their themes. For example, when Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* muses that "all the world's a stage," he does not simply mean that "the world *is like* a stage" but asserts through the metaphor that the world, *like a stage*, *is* a place where different people come together, each with a role and allotted time. The expressed similarity in a metaphoric statement "A is (like) B" is thus a gateway to what an image is meant to convey about a subject. The matter has bearing on the cognitive content of metaphors. Analytic denigrators

of metaphor are put off by the difficulty of paraphrasing metaphors into literal speech, the standard form of expressing knowledge. Whether or not metaphoric utterances can be paraphrased, however—and it is easy to acknowledge that they are at least partially translatable to propositional terms (cf. Reimer 1996, p. 19)—they are “truth-valued, express propositions, and can be used to make assertions” (Stern 2000, p. 24). In practice, we make inferences from metaphors and can evaluate the adequacy of analogies they present to us. Being optimistic about humanity, we may reject Hobbes’ view that “man is wolf to man” and prefer instead the idea that “all men are brothers” (*Analects* 12.5).

Notice from the examples that metaphors work by exemplifying features that the speaker would have us attend to. Metaphors are effective in the measure that the aspect of likeness is exemplified by the term used metaphorically (Ortony 1979, p. 93; Stern 2000, pp. 112, 153). Exemplification is key to understanding how metaphors disclose the speaker’s view about a theme. It also brings out the importance of context for understanding metaphors. Exemplified features are matters that come to mind when an image is invoked: properties that are salient, typical, normal, or customary about a thing. Intriguingly, what a thing exemplifies need not coincide with bare facts or dictionary meaning (Searle 1979, pp. 79–80, 84). Exemplified features are determined by a shared experience and habit of perception, neatly expressed by a scholar of metaphor as a “socially shared way of thinking” and what is “publicly accessible” to users of a metaphor (Stern 2000, pp. 107, 121, 131–132). The sun, for instance, inspires a whole lot of figurative speech, from Plato’s allegory of “Being” to Romeo’s “Juliet is the sun” to Annie’s “the sun will come out tomorrow.” These examples cast aside the fact that the sun is a hot ball of gas and appeal instead to our experience of it as an object high above us, a source of light and warmth that marks the beginning of a new day.

Compared to the sun, archery is a phenomenon with more culture-specific features. In China it was not only a sport but a form of ritual practice. With metaphors such as archery, one would have to scour through the socio-historical context in order to catch hold of its significance. Herein lies the context-sensitivity of metaphors. Images invoked in metaphoric speech call to mind a vast network of thoughts and associations: perceptions and beliefs, memories and practices that a culture attaches to an image.<sup>6</sup> While it is impossible to reconstruct the point of view of past traditions, I intend nonetheless to make use of clues in the text and what can be recovered from history when reading passages with the metaphor.

Finally, metaphors generate perspectives of their subjects. When a speaker alleges a similarity between A and B, he invites us to view B from the angle of similarity with A. The idea of perspective likewise touches on the cognitive content of metaphors and helps explain the usefulness of archer imagery for understanding Confucian freedom and agency. A perspective is a structured, summary view of a subject. A metaphor presents

analogous features of its subject in a consolidated and holistic manner mirroring the way that features of the phenomenon used metaphorically are related to each other. *Seeing* moral agents as archers allows us to make inferences from the alleged similarity. Following the thread of the analogy will help us see characteristics of agency and draw implications about freedom from a Confucian perspective. Given that image choice and manner of use depend on the speaker, perspectives generated by metaphors point us to the speaker's beliefs and reveal what is salient for him about the subject (Moran 1989, p. 110; Black 1979, p. 29).

My discussion leaves out much that is of interest concerning metaphors, but it suffices to explain the potential of the archer metaphor for disclosing how agency and freedom play out in the Confucian view of morality.<sup>7</sup>

### *Confucius the Archer and Gentlemen Archers in the Analects*

We are not accustomed to thinking of philosophers bearing weapons—for instance, Socrates as hoplite warrior, or Confucius as archer.<sup>8</sup> If these facts about them caught our attention when reading early texts, we probably did not give them import for their roles in intellectual history. To their followers, however, their manner of wielding weapons showed forth their character and gave weight to their teachings.

Confucius used his instrument under circumstances very different from Socrates. He “did not use nets when fishing, nor shoot nestling birds” (*Analects* 7.27). We can glean from this that Confucius was a competent archer given that bird-hunting requires shooting proficiency. More telling still was Confucius' use of the bow in ritual ceremonies.

Confucius did not presume to be a sage but declared himself a “teacher and lover of antiquity” (cf. *Analects* 2.1–2; 2.11). In light of Zhou tradition, Confucius would have used the bow when instructing followers about the ancients. As a ruist, he would have seen to the proper celebration of ceremonies. The bow was an important instrument in a number of Zhou rituals and customs. Rulers and aristocrats of the first dynasties were evidently hunting enthusiasts until Mencius' day.<sup>9</sup> Archery relics in Bronze Age sites attest that the bow was a prestige weapon. The fact is also corroborated by frequent references to archers in transmitted literature. The *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 depicts aristocrats as chariot-bound archers who, in some stories, are presented as models for their gallant use of the bow and behavior in battle.<sup>10</sup>

Confucius acknowledged the need to be equipped for war but obviously did not take warfare to be his area of expertise (*Analects* 12.7; 13.29–30; 16.2). Instead, he made it his affair to revive the legacy of the ancients. From abundant allusions to archery in the *Shijing* 詩經, two ceremonial events stand out: ritual shooting contests and solemn sacrifices to ancestors. A handful of poems supply us with graphic details about the first.<sup>11</sup> Organized for the entertainment of royal guests, a sumptuous banquet was



served while an orchestra played and prompted archers in their movements. Clearly, ritual archery was “not merely about (hitting) the target” (*Analects* 3.16) since participants also proved themselves in bearing, conduct, and ritual mastery. Deferential bows and sharing of wine are mentioned in *Analects* 3.7 as details of protocol. The *Yili*’s 儀禮 elaborate description of shooting contests corroborates this and indicates, too, that self-checking was typical of archers: they checked their postures for alignment with the target and zealously observed “a standard shooting stance” supposedly inherited from the ancients (Selby 2000, pp. 63–64).<sup>12</sup> An expert on Chinese archery, Stephen Selby links the practice of adjusting one’s feet to the proper stance with the character *zheng* 正.

As for the second event, the *Shijing* alludes to a solemn ceremony in which a select group of young men accompanied the sovereign in honoring ancestors with a dance imitating their deeds in battle. Edward Shaughnessy is convinced that the *Zhou Odes* were chanted during the performance and describes the ritual as a “martial song-and-dance suite” with movements symbolizing the conquest of Zhou (Shaughnessy 1997, pp. 165–169, 178, 180). Richard Rutt expresses a similar view in stating that “archery was practiced with stylized stance and gestures, a kind of chivalric choreography described in the *Book of Odes*” (Rutt 2002, pp. 13, 21, 354). He adds the interesting detail that these sacrifices had ritualists in place of priests to prompt participants in the sequence.

It is plausible that Confucius wielded the bow under such forms of ritual. We know from the *Analects* that he was enthralled by the Succession Dance (韶) and regarded the Martial Dance (武) as beautiful and worth propagating (*Analects* 3.14, 25; 11.11; 15.10). Meanwhile, passages 3.7 and 3.16—to be discussed shortly—indicate that some form of Zhou custom involving the bow was known to Confucius and his contemporaries.

Speaking about archery in early China, a belief that was prevalent by the Warring States period was that an archer’s *de* 德, or virtue, could be observed from shooting (射箭觀德).<sup>13</sup> *De* originally denoted a quality of able rulers in the early classics but came to mean more in the *Analects*. While Confucius believed that moral dispositions could be observed externally,<sup>14</sup> there is no explicit mention of shooting skill as a manifestation of *de*. Neither does the thought obtain from passages about archery in the *Analects*, particularly 3.7 and 3.16, both to be discussed shortly. Instead, Legge’s conservative remark about these passages seems sufficient: the ancients “made archery a discipline for virtue” (Legge 1971, p. 160). The thought is consistent with what Mencius claims about education in antiquity, namely that archery was an important component of education in the first dynasties, and “its purpose was to enlighten about human relations” (皆所以明人倫) (3A:3).

These shed light on the special appeal that archery had on early Confucians. We can settle on the assumption that archery was closely associated with the ancients, with rituals, and with learning. These

associations resonate strongly in passages about ritual archery in the *Analects*.

Two passages in the *Analects* refer to ritual archery. Some translators treat these passages as metaphorical (e.g., Waley 1989; Slingerland 2003), although it is possible that they were plain statements commending aspects of the ritual. Whether literal or figurative, both passages have metaphoric character in presenting archers as models of exemplary conduct. There is a clear analogy between ritual archery and self-cultivation.

The first passage describes how archers behave toward each other in a shooting match:

子曰：君子無所爭，必也射乎！揖讓而升，下而飲，其爭也君子。<sup>15</sup> There is nothing that gentlemen compete over; if at all, it is in archery. They bow when ascending (the shooting platform) and upon descending drink (together)—such competition is truly of gentlemen. (3.7)

These lines specifically mention saluting and sharing drink, ritual norms that evidently put competition in check and promoted camaraderie. The gestures show concrete ways that archery might have served as a training ground for nourishing relations.

The theme of the passage is the competition of gentlemen, or *junzi* 君子. It is worth pondering the fittingness of ritual archery as a paradigm for how gentlemen compete. How is a student or scholar (士) of the Way *like* an athlete expending energy and striving to get ahead of others? The comparison between the two is rich in that the more we think about it the more similarities surface. First, archery epitomizes benign rivalry. In a non-contact sport, getting the upper hand does not entail inflicting injury on fellow players. So, in moral striving, cultivating oneself does not involve harming others. Rather, the more one cultivates oneself the more it is an advantage for others. Passage 3.7 can be brought into relation with a host of passages in the *Analects* that describe the *junzi* as self-effacing. Ritual gestures of bowing and sharing wine exemplify the *junzi's* commitment to be *ren* 仁.<sup>16</sup>

Another characteristic of archery analogous to moral striving is how success in non-contact sports rests more palpably on the effort of individual players. Since they do not curtail each other's movements and external conditions are the same for all, each player bears more fully the brunt of the outcome. Performance depends on each one's ritual mastery and shooting skill, which, in turn, depend on one's earnestness in training. Ritual archery thus underscores the responsibility of students for progress in the Way. In moral striving, the greatest obstacle is neither a more powerful opponent nor adverse circumstances but a "self" that does not want enough, stops half-way, or is lured by ends not consonant with the Way (cf. *Analects* 4.6, 6.12, 7.30, 9.31). The image of ritual archers in competition is thus a neat paradigm for the *junzi's* effort and dedication to self-cultivation. Note that as

a ritual archery was not only *analogous* to self-cultivation but was *itself* a form of self-cultivation.

Hence, two parallel struggles take place in ritual archery: the physical feat of hitting the target and the struggle to cultivate the self. The second passage from the *Analects* decidedly gives weight to the second:

子曰：射不主皮，為力不同科，古之道也。The master said, Archery is not primarily about the target, since strengths vary. That was the Way of the Ancients.

Here, Confucius holds up non-emphasis on the target as a characteristic of ancient archery that is worth emulating. He does not say that shooting is not important but merely approves “*not* making it the chief concern” (不主皮).<sup>17</sup> The motive given for de-emphasizing hitting the target is disparity of strength (力). Ritual classics supply us with details that explain the matter. Archery was fought in pairs consisting of young and elderly archers. Junior archers presumably fared better in shooting while senior ones thrived in ritual mastery. Not making scores on the target the chief criterion in archery appears to be a norm for the benefit of elders—yet another instance of ritual deference along with bowing and sharing wine.

It is easy to see how archers “who do not make the target their chief concern” (3.16) has implications consonant with “non-contending” archers (3.7). Both passages shift attention from target-hitting and focus instead on other-regarding details of ritual behavior. The passages do not directly deal with agency, but their depiction of *junzi* as ritual archers is highly suggestive of the Confucian view of agency. Ritual archers in 3.6 and 3.17 display the dispositions and behavior of a moral agent. Just as the hallmark of archers is self-effacing behavior, the gentleman is one who exerts himself to become *ren*. The two passages thus suggest the following points about Confucian agency: first, that it is honed through ritual practice, represented by archery; second, its overarching goal is *ren*, symbolized by the gallantry of archers; third, cultivating *ren* demands effort and determination analogous to that of competing athletes.

In *Individualism in Early China* Erica Brindley outlines agency in a manner that is at once inclusive and potent, albeit different from current, popular conceptions in the West. Brindley describes agency as “power, authority, and potential associated with and attributed to individuals,” and sees it as embracing both passive (or conforming) and active forms of exercising influence (Brindley 2010, pp. xxiv–xxv). Brindley does not discuss the *Analects* but mentions it in passing as a text that “focuses deeply on the cultivation of individual moral autonomy” (Brindley 2010, p. 1). My discussion of the two passages about ritual archery in the *Analects* supports Brindley’s view. There is more on her claims in the concluding section. For now, we can establish that archers in observance of ancient rituals are real



players and determinants of their performance. In the moral realm, this translates to agents who follow the Way with intent and effort through engagement in self-cultivation.

### *The Archer Metaphor in the Mencius*

Compared to the *Analects*, archer imagery in the *Mencius* is more frequent and developed. In some passages the archer is a legendary champion by the name of Yi 羿 (4B:24, 6A:20, 7A:41), in others an abstract figure. I focus on two passages where the archer is clearly a figurative representation of the moral agent, or *junzi*. To preempt, Mencius pictures archers in the act of shooting. This seemingly contrasts with the *Analects*, where archers exchange friendly gestures and do not make the target the main concern.

*Mencius* 2A:7 quotes Confucius about *ren* being what is beautiful in a neighborhood and thus should be the chief consideration in choice of dwelling (cf. *Analects* 4.1). Mencius continues that *ren* is the highest conferment by Heaven and is itself a secure dwelling. At this point, Mencius invokes the image of an archer:

仁者如射，射者正己而後發。發而不中，不怨勝己者，反求諸己而已矣。The person who is *ren* is like an archer: the archer aligns himself before discharging (arrows). If he does not hit the mark, he does not resent those who outdo him but checks himself (for what needs adjusting).<sup>18</sup>

By comparing the archer to a person who is *ren* the archer is set up as a model for moral agency. Having an established goal is typical of archers. Analogously, the moral person orients himself toward *ren* and makes it his utmost objective. Examples from passage 2A:7 are choice of “trade” (術), where to take up “residence” (處), and what to regard as “shameful” (恥): these are matters to be decided in view of *ren*. It is worth noting the following: while *Analects* passages raise ritual aspects of archery as *ren* behavior, 2A:7 uses the act of shooting to display the agent’s commitment to *ren*. *Ren* is the aim that the agent establishes for himself, and he “aligns himself” (正己) and adjusts his posture in order to “hit” (中) it.<sup>19</sup>

An important detail about the moral agent depicted in 2A:7 is that he is not flawless in his attempts. Instead, he is well disposed to correct mistakes. In this, too, archers exemplify moral agency. It was habitual for archers to check themselves knowing that success depended on their own form and skill. The archer who “turns toward himself” (反求諸己) after missing the target thus highlights self-responsibility. The thought is present in the *Analects*, where examining oneself is a method of cultivation.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, the *Zhongyong* 中庸 associates self-examination with the customary gesture of archers as Mencius does: “as happens in archery so it is with the gentleman; when he misses the center he turns around to inspect himself” (射有似乎君子，失諸正鵠，反求諸其身) (no. 15).

The shooting archer of 2A:7 is loaded with implications about the Confucian view of morality as it exemplifies features analogous to agency and freedom. It displays a strong sense of self, autonomy, and responsibility. These, incidentally, are key elements of agency and individualism in Western discourse (Brindley 2010, pp. xxiv–xxvi). The character *ji*, translated as “self,” recurs in the passage and is clearly an active subject who cognizes a target, controls his instruments, and is aware of being the cause of the outcome. A robust conception of self is exhibited through the imagery, one who is the “center of power, of consciousness, of action, and of epistemic privilege” (Ames et al., 1998, p. x). The second half of the passage also notes that missing the mark can only be due to oneself so that one rectifies rather than blames others. These words clearly suggest a kind of autonomy that is based on features of one’s own effort and is the basis of agency.<sup>21</sup> They further highlight responsibility as a salient feature of agency.

The other passage from the *Mencius*, 5B:1, is about sages (聖), that is, persons who acted morally in office or in relinquishing office. Mencius names four, the last one being Confucius. Other sages named held high posts, so that, compared to their deeds, those of Confucius seem private and trivial, for example washing rice when departing from Qi and delaying departure from his homeland. This does not hinder Mencius from taking Confucius to be the highest sage, and he uses a combination of metaphors to describe Confucius as moral exemplar par excellence. As in a concert where different instruments sound at appropriate moments, producing harmonious music from start to finish, Confucius acted in a timely manner (時) according to propriety (禮). To this musical metaphor, Mencius adds another one inspired by archery:

始條理者，智之事也；終條理者，聖之事也。智，譬則巧也；聖，譬則力也。由射於百步之外也，其至，爾力也；其中，非爾力也。Commencing is a matter of wisdom, concluding is a matter of sageliness. Wisdom is like skill, sageliness is like force. Just as in shooting from a distance of a hundred paces or more, to reach (the target) is a matter of strength, but to hit it is not (accomplished by sheer) force.

Archer imagery in the lines above reveals more about Confucian moral agency by introducing two terms not seen in previous passages: wisdom (智) and sageliness (聖). When we consider what these terms denote in the text, 5B:1 can be seen to have implications close to other metaphoric passages we have seen.

Passage 5B:1 names wisdom and sageliness as qualities of a moral person analogous to the skill (巧) and strength (力) of a shooter. Wisdom is in the commencement of a pursuit and is comparable to accuracy (中). Now wisdom in the light of Confucian discourse is the state of mind of one who has cognized the primacy of *ren* and established it as his objective.<sup>22</sup> A wise person in this way is like an archer whose gaze is fixed on a target and is

strategically poised, ready to discharge arrows at opportune moments. Following the analogy, something else is needed to hit the mark besides skill. That element, which stands for sageliness, is the strength with which archers draw and release bows. The act appears simple in the hands of a trained archer. In reality, however, drawing ancient bows was a feat, and tests of shooting skill in China classified archers according to drawing capacity (Wilkinson 2013, p. 332). Returning to the passage, the proverbial skill and strength of archers highlighted in 5B:1 generates a picture of agents who are committed to and doggedly pursue what is moral, the same idea that, according to my discussion, underlies other passages with the archer metaphor.

Our examination of passage 5B:1 would not be complete without mentioning its relation to a central passage in *Mencius* 2A:2. Easily one of the lengthiest items in the book, 2A:2 intersects with 5B:1 at several points. Like 5B:1, 2A:2 discusses moral exemplars: ancient worthies (e.g., Bo Yi and Yi Yin, both mentioned in 5B:1), disciples of Confucius, and, of course, Confucius himself. Just as in 5B:1, Confucius is exalted for having all the good qualities of his followers. In Mencius' bold regard, Confucius was "unsurpassed by anyone who had ever lived" (自生民以來，未有盛於孔子也). Further, 2A:2 tackles wisdom and sageliness. Passage 2A:2 can shed more light on 5B:1.

The dialogue of 2A:2 is motivated by the question about achieving an "unperturbed heart-mind" (不動心), an ideal that has the sense of being firmly rooted in moral living rather than stoic detachment. At the prompting of an interlocutor, Mencius cites different ways in which specific persons achieved unperturbed heart-mind, one by "cultivating courage" (養勇), another by "cultivating *qi*" (氣). At this juncture, Mencius recalls how Zengzi learned from Confucius to cultivate a superior form of courage (大勇) by "examining himself to ensure that all within him was aright" (自反而不縮). By examining oneself one could "preserve what was important," literally "hold on to the arrangement" (守約). Mencius' interlocutor persists in the dialogue and inquires how he came to have an unperturbed heart-mind. Mencius' reply seems to me a sophisticated rewording of what Zengzi learned from Confucius. He says, "grasp your *zhi* firmly and do no violence to *qi*" (持其志，無暴其氣). There is much that can be said about the key words of the statement, *zhi* and *qi* being loaded notions in Mencian moral psychology. I limit myself here to showing their relation to 5B:1.

It is clear from Mencius' use of *zhi* that the term designates directing the heart-mind, specifically toward moral pursuits. *Zhi* is a term of broad semantics extending beyond potential equivalents in English. In early Confucian literature, *zhi* was closely associated with the heart-mind, and the relationship was envisioned in terms of archery: the heart-mind is the shooter while *zhi* means a fixed focus or steady aiming at a target (cf. Shun 2004, p. 186; Shun 2014, p. 264).<sup>23</sup> Hence the idea of "fixing one's *zhi*

upon *ren*" (志於仁) or upon the Way (志於道), found in both texts.<sup>24</sup> A well-known expression from Mencius bears the same sentiment, to "focus heart-mind and exert *zhi*" (專心至志) (6A:9), which occurs in a passage that uses archery to illustrate wherein depraved characters fail. Meanwhile, *qi* comes across as the energy or motor for just about any operation, whether organic process or conscious human endeavor. According to 5B:1, moral progress requires not only firm purpose but also robust *qi*. As Mencius explains, *qi* is nourished "by being upright" (以直養) and as long as it is not harmed "supports a person's pursuit of righteousness and the Way" (配義與道). He further notes that analogous to the gradual growth of plants, the development of *qi* cannot be forced but comes with the constant working of good. In light of this, Confucius' claim of being one who merely "learned and taught without tiring" confirms for Mencius that he had reached the mark of wisdom and sageliness. Constant learning and the indefatigable instruction of others showed undivided and steady commitment to *ren* and proved that he was what he dared not be called: a sage (cf. 2A:2).

With these considerations, we can now take stock of the archer imagery presaged in the *Analects* and spelled out in the *Mencius*. With the help of 2A:2, we see how wisdom and sageliness in 5B:1 construe the moral agent as one with an established trajectory and able to persist in such a course, a view intimated in other passages with archer persona. It confirms the centrality of *ren* as the underlying objective of moral agency. Passage 2A:2 also mentions self-examination as the way to nourish the courage of being able to look squarely at oneself without feeling abashed. The thought finds support in 2A:7, where archers know to check themselves after shooting.

### *Agency and Freedom à la Confucius*

Having seen the resonances of archer imagery in early Confucian literature, we need not be daunted either by the lack of word-for-word equivalents or by the absence of images that the West customarily associates with agency and freedom. The metaphor evidently offers a good vantage point for understanding Confucian views on the moral experience conveyed by these two words and deserves to be counted among the metaphors of early China "that depict humans as cultivators of their own inherent agencies" (Brindley 2010, p. 63). Early Confucian literature employs the archer figure—his conduct, attributes, and motions—to express thoughts about the human capacity to instigate thoughts, deeds, and endeavors ultimately to determine one's own character and lifestyle. I do not presume to derive a full account of Confucian agency and freedom from the metaphor but believe that it offers clear insights on the subject. In this final section, I probe deeper into Confucian views on agency and freedom guided by the metaphor. I recapitulate what metaphoric passages disclose about moral agency before suggesting how to articulate agency and freedom in Confucian terms.

The *Analects* sets ritual archers as a paradigm for *junzi* and highlights self-effacing gestures. They illustrate how moral agency is empowered through earnest effort at self-cultivation geared toward other-regarding behavior. Mencius frames moral agency in terms of archers in the act of shooting. Aligning one's posture and checking oneself (2A:7) together with the act of discharging arrows that reach the target and are on the mark (5B:1) are archer attributes that exemplify moral agency. Wisdom, symbolized by shooting accuracy, is an indispensable quality of the agent and consists in cognizance of and alignment with *ren*. Meanwhile, sageliness, symbolized by shooting strength, is the capacity to live perseveringly in accord with *ren*. Mencius powerfully construes the moral agent as one able to establish an overarching direction. *Ren* is the aim on which attention and energy are focused, and checking oneself manifests responsibility and determination to stay on course.

I now consider how to articulate agency and freedom in Confucian ethics. I am specifically interested in these phenomena as experienced in moral living. In this respect, snoring and sleep-walking (acts of which we are agents) do not manifest moral agency because we do not bring them about of our own accord. A thin conception of agency that informs a prevalent approach in the West is the capacity to perform intentional acts.<sup>25</sup> This conception is squarely matched by the depiction of the moral agent as an archer with a target to which he directs body, instrument, and ammunition. In keeping with the imagery, and bearing in mind the close link between the heart-mind and *zhi*, agency in Confucian parlance can be expressed as the capacity for activity ensuing from the heart-mind. Agency in Western discourse tends to be viewed in terms of concrete acts or events performed by a knowing and willful agent. The Confucian perspective differs in that it contemplates agency in terms of a continuum of activity or way of living that is in line with an overarching goal. Confucian agency, in other words, is spelled out in long-term actuation, in the series of motives and actuation that spring from the orientation of the heart-mind.

The heart-mind in early Confucian literature is the locus of a broad range of specifically human abilities such as reflecting, judging, moral evaluations, deciding, and compassion.<sup>26</sup> Over and above these functions, the archer metaphor highlights the ability of the heart-mind to manage impulses and direct or focus energies toward specific or overarching pursuits. This crucial function of the heart-mind is expressed in the concept of *zhi* 志. Although not synonymous with agency, *zhi* is very much a part of the Confucian account of purposeful activity. In this regard, Joseph Chan is right to bring in the concept of *zhi* when explicating Confucian freedom. However, construing *zhi* as an analogue of Western free will does not do justice to the term; neither does it capture specifically the Confucian view about the human capacity for self-determination. To be sure, *zhi* denotes a phenomenon similar to free will and makes for a plausible translation in certain passages.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned, *zhi* is depicted in Confucian literature as



the direction or course of the heart-mind. In Western discourse, free will is thought of as having no direction of its own but following reason—if not desires, sentiments, or instincts, which are candidate arbiters of behavior in theories of action. In contrast, *zhi* is inextricably valenced. It is not construed as a parallel force to other faculties, superior or inferior. Instead, it is a power that ensues from the heart-mind and bears in its course and configuration that which the heart-mind cherishes. Further, free will is customarily thought of as being exercised in matters that are within an individual's control or possibilities. *Zhi* in contrast is not only channeled toward things within one's sphere of influence but also can extend to wishes and aspirations (cf. *Analects* 5.26). More importantly, *zhi* is not purely volitional but involves a plan or intention that one harbors. As such, it has a cognitive element and is a result of reflective activity (cf. [Shun 2014](#), p. 266).

It is a common observation that the Confucian view of individuals is inextricably relational: family, social, and even cosmic roles figure importantly in the constitution of the self. Given the nature of the aim of moral agency, *ren*, it could hardly be otherwise. Along these lines, Erica Brindley highlights interdependence and interconnectedness as characteristics of individual agency in early China, which she contrasts with isolated and radically autonomous notions of self ([Brindley 2010](#), pp. 129–130). At the same time, Brindley makes out a thick notion of agency when describing early Chinese autonomy as one that “grants individuals the freedom to make decisions for themselves and to shape the course of their own lives to the fullest degree that they can and should—all from within a complicated and rich system of interrelationships” ([Brindley 2010](#), p. xxvii). Brindley's words strike me as literal propositions that can be deduced about agency and freedom from the metaphor.

Agency and freedom come together in moral practice, and I have treated them conjointly for most of this article. I now focus on freedom. As stated, a thin conception of agency as the capacity for intentional acts can be expressed in Confucian terms as activity ensuing from the heart-mind. Now freedom is distinguished from simple agency as being a fuller or more perfect exercise of agency. To illustrate the point, handing over one's purse at gunpoint is an act of which one is truly the agent, but it is not a free act. Although the victim performs the deed consciously and applies her own power to deliver the item, the act is “not of her own choosing,” which is what freedom adds to agency. Acting as one chooses is a decidedly Western conception of freedom, one which tends to lay stress on the absence of external constraints that impede one from doing as one wished. The picture we have of freedom, or full agency, from the archer metaphor has a different emphasis.

Archer passages consistently focus on what goes on in the agent and appear less concerned with external constraints for exercising agency. On this note, Confucian ethics is not inclined to regard ritual norms (禮) and

social expectations from one's role as curtailments to self-determination. Returning to the passages, a good archer is wary about losing focus, not applying enough strength, and misalignment. In the affairs of the heart-mind, these translate to not putting sufficient attention and energy into the moral pursuit and letting faults go unchecked. In this sense, from the perspective of archer imagery, Confucian ethics is more concerned with internal constraints in exercising agency. Freedom is thus tantamount to having a vigorous and unobstructed heart-mind such that one is able to meet its aim. Conversely, lack of freedom would be a heart-mind lacking direction and motivational force, analogous to a shooter in poor shape.

Freedom in Confucian ethics is thus more about inner freedom—that is, harnessing inherent potentials for moral progress. Mencius regarded Confucius as the archetype of moral agency, and what Confucius experienced in later years could well express the ideal of freedom. Taking the path that started with fixing *zhi* upon learning, Confucius found himself able to “follow the heart-mind's desires without transgression” (*Analects* 2.4). It strikes me that attaining “fixity of heart” (不動心), the topic of the passage about *zhi* and *qi* in the *Mencius*, conveys the same sort of freedom. Both expressions envision a state of life where thoughts, desires, and activities follow through the heart-mind's aspiration. On this note, the term for freedom in modern Chinese—*ziyou* 自由, literally “originating from oneself”<sup>28</sup>—may be regarded as an appropriate expression by posterity for the ideal of living in accord with one's heart-mind.

Choice is a corollary of freedom, and conceptualizing it in Confucian discourse has been a knotty affair. Determining between different possibilities (i.e., between this or that, or between acting or not acting) is part and parcel of exercising freedom, and this holds true, too, for interior freedom. In concrete terms, setting *ren* or something else as a goal, deciding upon the course of action that is in line with one's aim, and correcting or ignoring a fault are possibilities open to the moral agent. Graham defended a form of choice *sui generis* in Confucianism, one which involves judgment about a course of action (i.e., whether or not it is good or right) in place of weighing alternatives (Graham, in [Rosemont 1991](#), p. 310). When we come to think of it, *ren* encompasses all that is moral to direct one's powers to and is thus construed as *the* goal for human agents. Seen this way, nothing could really count as an alternative to *ren* since what it stands for is at once too obvious and too heavy to weigh against anything. In this respect, Graham raised a valid point in saying that choice in a Confucian framework is not so much about selecting between alternatives as about deciding on the proper course of action.

Graham describes the kind of choice that he perceives in Confucianism as a “contemplation of one's situation, and the examples of sages in similar situations, until inclination spontaneously settles in a certain direction” ([Graham 1989](#), p. 27). Graham states matters in such a way as to make

allowances for the aesthetic stance of the likes of Fingarette and Rosemont, who, fascinated with Chinese ritual tradition, lay stress on spontaneity. Likewise, Edward Slingerland marks spontaneity as a trademark of “the skilled archer,” a symbol of perfected ritual action (Slingerland 2000, p. 302). Spontaneity may indeed be a quality of Confucian agency, and our metaphor supports the idea by matching this quality with either the ritual mastery or shooting agility of archers. Attending to the same imagery, however, we would have to point out that while the Confucian agent experiences facility in his activity, such spontaneity is not without reflective cognizance of an aim and active commitment to a way. Focusing oneself upon a long-term goal and the practice of self-examination alert us to the conscious, vigorous striving of the *junzi*. Spontaneity and reflectivity come together in Confucian agency analogous to the way that skill and focused attention go into the performance of a seasoned archer. In David Nivison’s words, “the moral acting of perfected individuals remains act, and does not become reflex. They do it freely, not automatically, and remain moral agents” (Nivison 1996, p. 85).

In the foregoing, I defined Confucian agency as activity ensuing from the heart-mind and freedom as the overcoming of tendencies that impede the activity of the heart-mind. These are some insights about purposeful activity and self-determination that the archer metaphor makes patent and accessible through figurative analogy and the lending of words. Attending to metaphors that are relevant to themes we wish to pursue can thus aid reading of early texts and skirt dead ends to which linguistic differences may sometimes lead.

## Notes

Acknowledgements: I worked on this article while visiting the University of California at Berkeley in the Spring of 2016. I benefited greatly from Professor Kwong-loi Shun’s mentoring. I am indebted to him and to a generous reviewer for valuable suggestions.

- 1 – In *Philosophy East and West* alone a series of articles were published around the issue: “Autonomy, Civil Liberties, and Confucianism” (Chan 2002); “Fingarette on Moral Agency in the *Analects*” (Reilly 2012); “Moral Luck, Self-Cultivation, and Responsibility: The Confucian Conception of Free Will and Determinism” (Hwang 2013); “Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility in Ancient Chinese Confucianism” (Kim 2013); and “The Confucian Conception of Freedom” (Li 2014).
- 2 – Myeong-seok Kim observes a tendency especially in this issue toward lexical fallacy, i.e., taking lack of “lexical equivalents of . . . ‘choice,’ ‘responsibility,’ and ‘ends’” to mean lack of “insight into the realities that these terms designate” (Kim 2013, p. 19). Graham was aware of

this, calling it a “[popular and pointless] game of demonstrating that some important concept of ours is missing in Chinese thought” (Graham 1989, p. 396).

- 3 – My focus on the archer metaphor does not allow me to discuss Xunzi, certainly an important Confucian philosopher.
- 4 – I was corrected by Slingerland for mischaracterizing his treatment of metaphors; see his response to Camus 2017 in [Slingerland 2017](#). As seen in his publications from 2005 onward, Slingerland is able to attend more to culture-specific nuances in image use by refining Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual-metaphor approach with Fauconnier and Turner’s blending theory.
- 5 – Underlying ideas about metaphor in Aristotle, cf. *Topics* 6.2.140a10–11; *Poetics* 21.1457b6–8, 22.1459a5–8; *Rhetoric* 3.2.1405a35.
- 6 – For a helpful article about how background information enters into the significance of images, i.e., as “meaning that is not included in what is said,” see [Camp 2006](#).
- 7 – I discuss literary metaphors more extensively elsewhere; see [Camus 2017](#).
- 8 – Cf. Plato’s *Symposium* 220d–221c; Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.12.1–4.
- 9 – Cf. *Mencius* 3B:9; 1A:3; 1B:1–2, 4.
- 10 – On Mencius’ fascination with legendary archers, see 4B:24, 6A:20, 7A:41.
- 11 – See the *Shijing*, “Xing Wei” 行葦, no. 215; “Sang Hu” 桑扈, no. 220; and, “Bin Zhi Chu Yan” 賓之初筵, no. 246.
- 12 – A detailed account of the sequence and protocols of ritual archery can be found in the *Yili* section “Village Archery Ritual” (鄉射禮).
- 13 – Consult *Liji* 禮記, section on “The Meaning of Archery Ritual” (射義).
- 14 – Concretely, from speech, deeds, exhibited motives, and attitude in rituals, cf. *Analects* 1.11; 2.10; 3.26; 5.9.
- 15 – I translate passages from the *Analects* and the *Mencius* as literally as possible in order to make details from the original context more patent.
- 16 – Passages showing how *ren* consists in other-regarding behavior are legion; 4.15, 14.42, and 15.24 are good examples.
- 17 – The phrase 主皮 is open to different translations. I render it in line with a verbal usage of 主 in the *Analects* where the character has the sense of giving importance to something; see 1.8, 12.25.
- 18 – The phrase 正己 is often translated as “rectifying oneself.” I translate it literally as “aligning oneself” to reflect the archery jargon used in the text.

- 19 – Note that 中 has a varied meaning. In the archery context it denotes target-hitting, center, or accuracy. In other places it could designate focus, equilibrium, or balance, for instance in the *Zhongyong* as noted in Ames and Hall 2001, p. 86. More possibilities exist.
- 20 – For Confucius, the only real faults are those not amended: 過而不改, 是謂過矣 (15.30). Mencius says something similar when defending the Duke of Zhou in 2B:18.
- 21 – I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out these implications of 2A7.
- 22 – The close relation between *ren* and knowledge or wisdom is evident in both sets of text. Cf. *Analects* 6.22, and *Mencius* 3A:5; 2A:2, 6, 7; 4A:1, 4; 4B:26.
- 23 – Note an expression in the *Shangshu* 尚書 where archers exemplify having *zhi*: 若射之有志.
- 24 – Cf. *Analects* 4.4, 4.9, 7.6; *Mencius* 4A:9; 6B:28, 29; 7A:24.
- 25 – Gauged from entries about “Agency” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. I am aware that what I generically refer to as Western discourse is not all what can be found in the long and diversified traditions of the West.
- 26 – Cf. *Analects* 2.4, 17.22, 20.1; *Mencius* 1A:3 and 7, 2A:6.
- 27 – As when Confucius remarked that “a large army may sooner be robbed of its commander than a common person of his *zhi*” (9.26). The thought may well be behind Mencius’ idea that *zhi* is “commander (帥) of *qi*,” 2A:2.
- 28 – Chenyang Li observes that *ziyou* appears in early texts and can be intimated in a similar phrase, *youji* 由己, in the *Analects*; see Li 2014, p. 907.

## References

- Ames, Roger T., and David L. Hall. 2001. *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Ames, Roger T., with Thomas P. Kasulis, and Wimal Dissanayake, eds. 1998. *Self as Image in Asian Theory and Practice*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Black, Max. 1979. “More about Metaphor.” See Ortony 1979, pp. 19–43.
- Brindley, Erica F. 2010. *Individualism in Early China: Human Agency and the Self in Thought and Politics*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.



- Camp, Elizabeth. 2006. "Contextualism, Metaphor, and What is Said." *Mind and Language* 21, no. 3:280–309.
- Camus, Rina Marie. 2017. "Comparison by Metaphor: Archery in Confucius and Aristotle." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 16, no. 2:165–185.
- Chan, Joseph. 2002. "Moral Autonomy, Civil Liberties, and Confucianism." *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 3:281–310.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Graham, A. C. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Arguments in Early China*. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Hwang, Kyung-Sig. 2013. "Moral Luck, Self-Cultivation, and Responsibility: The Confucian Conception of Free Will and Determinism." *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 1:4–16.
- Kim, Myeong-seok. 2013. "Choice, Freedom, and Responsibility in Ancient Chinese Confucianism." *Philosophy East and West* 63, no. 1:17–38.
- . 2014. "Is There No Distinction between Reason and Emotion in Mengzi?" *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 1:49–81.
- Legge, James. 1971. *Confucian Analects, the Great Learning and the Doctrine of the Mean*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Li, Chenyang. 2014. "The Confucian Conception of Freedom." *Philosophy East and West* 64, no. 4:902–919.
- Moran, Richard. 1989. "Seeing and Believing: Metaphor, Image, and Force." *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1:87–112.
- Nivison, David, 1996. *The Ways of Confucianism: Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*. Edited with introduction by Bryan W. Van Norden. Peru, IL: Carus Publishing Company.
- Ortony, Andrew, ed. 1979. *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reilly, Richard. 2012. "Fingarette on Moral Agency in the *Analects*." *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 4:529–544.
- Reimer, Marga. 1996. "The Problem of Dead Metaphors." *Philosophical Studies* 82, no. 1:13–25.
- Rosemont, Henry, Jr. 1991. *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Rutt, Richard, trans. with introd. 2002. *The Book of Changes (Zhou Yi): A Bronze Age Document*. New York: Routledge.

- Searle, John R. 1979. *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Selby, Stephen. 2000. *Chinese Archery*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Shaughnessy, Edward. 1997. *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Shun, Kwong-loi. 2004. "Conception of the Person in Early China." In *Confucian Ethics: A Comparative Study of Self, Autonomy, and Community*, edited by Kwong-loi Shun and David B. Wong. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2014. "Early Confucian Moral Psychology." In *Dao Companion to Classical Confucian Philosophy*, edited by Vincent Shen. New York and London: Springer.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2000. "Effortless Action: The Chinese Spiritual Ideal of Wu-Wei." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, no. 2:293–328.
- Slingerland, Edward. trans. 2003. *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Slingerland, Edward. 2011. "Metaphor and Meaning in Early China." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10, no. 1: 1–30.
- . 2017. "Metaphor, Blending, and Cultural Variation: Reply to Camus." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 16, no. 3:431–435.
- Stern, Joseph. 2000. *Metaphor in Context*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sticht, Thomas. 1979. "Educational Uses of Metaphor." In Ortony 1979, pp. 621–632.
- Waley, Arthur, trans. and annot. 1989. *The Analects of Confucius*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Wilkinson, Endymion, ed. 2013. *Chinese History: A New Manual*. Cambridge (MA) and London: Harvard University Asia Center.