FROM THE CASTRATED SUBJECT TO THE HUMAN WAY: A LACANIAN REINTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT CHINESE THOUGHT

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Introduction: The Psychoanalyst's Truncated Passion

Ancient Chinese thought, especially pre-Qin thought (before 221 BC), still greatly interests researchers outside the community of Sinologists for a variety of reasons, among which the most obvious is that it constitutes the civilizational root of contemporary Chinese culture, especially political culture.[1] In the last several years, with the rise of its economic power and geopolitical influence, China has attracted the ardent research interest of the global academic community. This new focus of attention is no less conspicuous than the one which emerged half a century ago, when western scholars and intellectuals were profoundly fascinated by Mao's China. Many of those, in order to gain a deeper understanding of China and Maoism, also extended their researches to ancient Chinese thought. Though a psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan too was fascinated by ancient Chinese thought. But unlike others, his attraction was limited to its historically more venerable components. There is an anecdote recounted by Elisabeth Roudinesco in her acclaimed biographical work on Lacan: when meeting two officials from the Chinese embassy at an arranged dinner in 1972, a time when the campaign against Confucius was raging in China, the French psychoanalyst praised Confucianism at the table and said it was one of the world's greatest philosophies

1. Daniel A. Bell (2015) and Dingxin Zhao (2015) have offered representative works in this regard.

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(Roudinesco, 1997, p. 353). Evidently, Lacan's interest was not drawn by Red China, with all its ramifications for France in 1968, but by the ancient components of Chinese thought and language, and this interest is attested even prior to the first years of the Seminar (Cheng, 1991).[2] From 1969, at Lacan's suggestion, the Chinese-born French Sinologist François Cheng met with him on a weekly basis with the sole purpose of studying Chinese classics. They spent at least four hours per meeting conducting a close reading of several key texts, including *Daodejing* and *Mencius* (Cheng, 1982; 1991; 2002, pp. 54–5, 58; Roudinesco, 1997, p. 351).[3]

Cheng ended this partnership in 1973 in order to finish his own book on Chinese poetry. The psychoanalyst felt rather desperate and said to Cheng: 'But what's going to become of me?' (Cheng, 1991; Roudinesco, 1997, p. 352). After Lacan died in 1981, Cheng recounted on several occasions in vivid detail the psychoanalyst's unusual passion for ancient Chinese thought, especially his assiduous study in a character-by-character (even the strokes of the characters) style, with himself serving as the main consultant. Cheng also noted that he himself was the main beneficiary of this co-study, and that it is nonetheless unknown to him what Lacan gained from it (Cheng, 1982; 2002, p. 54). Fortunately, we can detect some traces of Lacan's gains in Seminar XVIII, where he engaged extensively with *Mencius*, and demonstrated his unique reading of the text. However, discussion on or reference to classical Chinese texts became scarce, if not totally absent, in Lacan's works from 1973 until his death.[4] The psychoanalyst's interest in ancient Chinese thought seemed cut short after parting company with Cheng, and later became unknown to many of his faithful followers. Slavoj Žižek compiled an influential book titled *Lacan: The Silent Partners*, in which many hidden intellectual encounters and intersections – in the form of 'Lacan with (x)' (a form initiated by Lacan himself in his seminal analysis of 'Kant with Sade') – were uncovered or re-established (Žižek, 2006). Sadly, the psychoanalyst's 'Chinese partners' received no mention there. To this day Lacan's engagement with ancient Chinese philosophy has rarely been explored in Anglophone academia.[5]

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2. Lacan learned Chinese at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris during the Occupation (Flecher, 2016).

3. Cheng (1991) noted that it was Lacan who chose the texts.

4. According to Guy Flecher, Lacan did not write Chinese in public after 9 February 1972; also, from that day on, his references to Chinese texts were significantly reduced and concerned only an invitation to read François Cheng's book on Chinese poetry (Flecher, 2009).

5. Apropos the French-speaking world, Flecher (2013) noted that 'apart from an article by Mayette Viltard, two articles by acupuncturist Francis Rouam and, of course, in all the work of Michel Guibal, no serious reference has ever been found on Lacan and the Chinese world published before 2000'.

Since the 1990s, with Lacanian standard bearers such as Žižek coming to academic prominence, the intellectual influence of Lacan's works has exceeded psychoanalytical circles, and been widely disseminated in the broader cultural and intellectual field, including in political philosophy, social theory, media studies, cultural studies, literary and film studies, women's and gender studies, international relations and legal studies, among many others. Lacanian insights have also been employed to analyse contemporary Chinese thought and culture (Wu, 2014, 2020). In this essay, I contend that Lacan's psychoanalytic thought offers us a unique lens through which to reinterpret ancient Chinese thought, even to the extent of shattering its received image. There are thus good intellectual reasons for taking up the unpursued encounter between Lacanian psychoanalysis and Chinese thought. In what follows, I will start with Lacan's engagement with *Mencius*, and then move into deeper waters by revisiting two unsettled disputes embedded at the core of ancient Chinese thought.

Lacan with Mencius (I): The Confucian Master on the Couch

On 17 February 1971 Lacan opened his seminar by writing on the blackboard 16 Chinese characters (Lacan, 2007a, p. 55):

孟子曰天下之言性也則故而已矣故者

This line, continued by another four characters 以利為本[6], is a well-known passage from *Mencius*. The typical English translation runs: 'Mencius said [孟子曰]: 'Those in the world who speak about human nature only consider its original state and take its original state to be fundamentally self-interested' (Bloom, 2009, p. 91). This translation renders the character 言 as a verb, as 'speaking'. However, Lacan pointed out that this character itself can also be regarded as a noun, meaning 'language' (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 57–8). Based on Lacan's observation of this polysemy, 天下之言性也 can be rendered either as '[people] in the world speak of nature', or as 'languages in the world constitute [human] nature'.[7] The French psychoanalyst apparently adopted the latter interpretation: 'Insofar as it is in the world, that is under heaven, language is what makes *xing*, nature. Indeed, this nature is not, at least in Mencius, just any nature; it is precisely the nature of the speaking being' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 58). 性 (*xing*, nature) in *Mencius* is therefore not the prelinguistic (human) Nature with capital N, but linguistically constituted. 'The signifier runs everywhere in *xing*', said Lacan. '"Human nature" is filled with signifiers, in the exact same way as the sky is filled with a constellation of stars' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 51). Understood in this way, *xing* is none other than *discourses on human nature*.

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6. Lacan also wrote and discussed these four characters in the same lecture.

7. Lacan translated 天下 (*tianxia*) as 'in the world'. Meanwhile he was also fully aware of its literal meaning: 'under heaven' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 57).

This unorthodox reading of 天下之言性也 offered by Lacan is entirely unprecedented. In defending his reading, the psychoanalyst declared: 'This is why it is interesting to deal with a sentence of the written language, you see that you could cut the things differently' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 58). But in the eyes of many Chinese scholars and Sinologists, this act of 'cutting things differently' is a grammatical violation, and the interpretation based on this act is thus illegitimate. 'This interpretation of Lacan's,' wrote two Chinese scholars who have trained in Lacanian psychoanalysis, 'does not match Chinese scholars' traditional understanding; moreover, it disrespects the grammatical structure of the Chinese language by violently taking characters out of their context' (Yan & Jiang, 2016, p. 68). The Lacanian psychoanalyst Ferdinand Scherrer, while acknowledging that Lacan's interpretation has provoked 'disapproval or indignation' among Sinologists, further noted:

> In spite of everything, I did not find a translation concerning the sentence in question that would in any way go in the direction of Lacan. I was also unable to notice any significant differences between the different French and English versions of the translation. Lacan seems to be carrying out feats of strength, leaps, even an interpretation in which he draws Mencius to his side. (Scherrer, 2010)

Let us put aside whether or not Lacan purposefully 'drew Mencius to his side', and come back to this question in the next section. It is unambiguous that Lacan's unique interpretation of 天下之言性也 is highly controversial, to say the least. The question worth raising here is, however: should we simply dismiss it as a typical case of misreading? My answer is: *Not necessarily.* A special interpretative pathway can be established if one assumes the position of a (Lacanian) psychoanalyst instead of a Sinologist.

Beginning with Sigmund Freud, the primary task of the psychoanalyst is to uncover the *unconscious content* by analysing the analysand's discourse. Psychoanalysis originated as a specific practice characteristically defined by 'the bringing out of the latent meaning of given material' (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 227). Lacan, borrowing from the Saussurian account of the linguistic sign (as composed of the signifier and the signified), took a further step beyond the Freudian analysis of slips of the tongue. Lacan argued that signifiers have no intrinsic or fixed connection to signifieds; therefore, their connection is not only *arbitrary* as suggested by Saussure, but also fundamentally *unstable*, operating in a form described by Lacan as the 'sliding' of the signifier over the signified. Contrary to the real referent, the signified for Saussure is a psychological entity; Lacan further added that it is a mere effect of the play of signifiers, an effect of the process of signification produced by metaphor. Therefore, the signifier has logical primacy over the signified, and is first of all a meaningless element in a closed differential system, rupturing ('barring') signification. The mere existence of the signifier thus introduces an *autonomous* realm called by Lacan 'the symbolic'. In the symbolic realm of sliding signifiers, the production of meaning is episodic, enabled by what Lacan calls 'quilting points'.

It is, for Lacan, precisely the effects of the signifier on the subject in the process of signification that constitute the unconscious, and in turn solicit psychoanalytic ('symptomatic') reading.[8] This reading aims at symbolizing *latent meaning* and/or realizing *disruptive non-meaning* within the analysand's speech. The psychoanalytic reading is possible precisely because signification is imaginary, intersecting both with meaning (the symbolic) and non-meaning (the nonsensical, unsymbolizable real). For Lacan, the analysand's speech is usually 'underdeveloped', meaning that it can be located somewhere between the two extreme poles of speech: that is, between 'full speech' (a speech of full meaning) and 'empty speech' (a speech consisting only in signification). A Lacanian analyst pays special attention to the *metaphoric* and *metonymic* movements of signifiers in the analysand's discourse: the former is vertical and substitutive, a movement where something new in meaning (the signified) is produced, whereas the latter is horizontal and combinatorial, where the permanent sliding of the signifier takes place.

Herein one can locate the progress Lacan made in terms of analytic method: with the same purpose of uncovering the unconscious content, Freudian analysts require the analysand to talk in the style of *free association*, while Lacanian analysts simply focus on *free-sliding* signifiers in the analysand's discourse, regardless of its enunciating style. To put it differently, while Freudian analysis targets primarily 'slips' of the tongue, Lacanian analysis places its focus on the 'slippery' movement of signification itself.

Lacan was particularly curious about the form of the unconscious structured by the Chinese language, believing that the characters could tell him something about the 'Chinese unconscious' (Serrano, 1997, p. 94). He was deeply fascinated by Chinese characters as written pictographic symbols, arguing that the form of pictogram and ideogram enables Chinese people to 'imagine with logic', and that it is an effective way to 'manipulate writing' to produce new ideas (Lacan, 2007a, p. 86).[9] In particular, Chinese characters are rich in engendering 'rebuses', which 'translate what Freud calls thoughts of the unconscious'. This feature of Chinese language, in Lacan's view, powerfully demonstrates his theses that 'the unconscious is structured like a language', and that meaning 'rests precisely on nonsense' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 89). In elucidating the primacy of the signifier over

8. It is Louis Althusser who actually coined the term 'symptomatic reading', and he coined it with clear reference to Lacan. As a self-proclaimed Marxist philosopher, Althusser nonetheless believed that Marx himself did not fully comprehend the significance of his own work, and was able to express it only obliquely and tentatively. The latent content of Marx's texts can be revealed only by a careful and sensitive 'symptomatic reading' (Althusser, 2015).

9. Lacan was also interested in the phonetic elements of the Chinese language, commenting (1992, p. 167) that it differs from Indo-European languages in that 'all the signifying units are monosyllabic'. He also commented (2007a, p. 88) that the tones of Chinese language are 'one of the ways to prove the primacy of speech'.

the signified, Lacan (1981, p. 151) cited ancient Chinese astronomy in particular as being 'based on the play of the signifiers'. While maintaining that Chinese astronomy 'is certainly a science' and that 'the Chinese had a perfectly efficient system' to supplement the western frame of reference, Lacan noted, with implicit reference to the equivocation of *gua* 卦 (divinatory symbols), that 'it is true that, up to a certain point, all the reality of the heavens may be inscribed in nothing more than a vast constellation of signifiers' (Lacan, 1981, pp. 151–2). This 'vast constellation of signifiers' radically opens up the space for (psycho)analytical interpretation. Chinese written symbols epitomized by *gua* therefore embody the inherent ambiguity of all discourses, and demonstrate the efficiency of equivocation in analytic interpretation.

From François Cheng's testimony one can further locate two unique aspects of Chinese characters which attracted Lacan: (1) each character is a stable, independent unit, which is able to maintain its signifying capacity in a lengthy signifying chain and therefore is capable of faithfully recording discourse; (2) at the same time, through free combinations and (un)conscious arrangements, each character has the power to break out of the signifying chain like a 'dark fire', generating the effect of a 'hole' in the chain; this power is repeatedly demonstrated in various classical Chinese poems, prose works and intellectual texts.[10] For Lacan, characters in their totality form a system which makes discourse possible while each character is nonetheless able to maintain a distance towards this system. What especially fascinates Lacan is that a single character (which could be interpreted independently) can be combined with an infinite number of other characters to form entirely different 'words'. Lacan used the character 意 (meaning 'meaning') and related 'words' such as 意欲 (desire), 意向 (intention), 意象 (imago), 意會 (sense by insight), 意義 (significance), 意境 (artistic conception) as his example to illustrate the point that 意 (meaning) itself structurally possesses inexhaustible meanings, while at the same time functioning quite efficiently and competently in enabling meaningful discourses and communications within the total system of characters (Cheng, 2002, p. 63). Lacan moreover openly acknowledged that Chinese characters helped him a lot to 'generalize the function of the signifier' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 47). Benefiting from his study of Chinese language, Lacan suggested that analysts should focus on the formal features and properties of the analysand's speech (the signifiers), and not be hijacked by an imaginary understanding of its ostensible content (the signified).

Based on their linguistic features, Chinese discourses are therefore exemplary for demonstrating the legitimacy of psychoanalytic reading. In this precise sense, what a Sinologist might regard as illegitimate interpretation, a psychoanalyst

10. For rich discussions on Lacan's engagement with Chinese poetry, see Porge (2002) and Price (2009).

(especially a Lacanian analyst) might see as access to the repressed message. Based on his study of Chinese language, Lacan criticized the logical-positivist reading of *Mencius* represented by I. A. Richards. Lacan argued that in this reading,

> a certain number of philosophical statements are devalued on principle, owing to the fact that they don't offer any tangible result pertaining to the search for meaning. In other words, as soon as a philosophical text is found to be meaningless in *flagrante delicto*, it is for this very reason placed offside.

The fatal problem with the logical-positivist process of reading, diagnosed by Lacan, is that it 'prohibits us from any articulation of the meaning of that which cannot be grasped'. Such reading, contrary to psychoanalytic reading, prunes that which does not make sense off the sentence by assuming that the nonsensical 'cannot be essential in the development of a discourse' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 59). Lacan's own idiosyncratic reading of *Mencius* demonstrates vividly the difference between psychoanalytic and logico-positivist readings.

Therefore, to interpret the character 言 within the sequence 天下之言性也 as 'language' might make Sinologists uncomfortable and uneasy, especially when they work in the logical-positivist tradition. However, this uncomfortable reading can still function, if we put Mencius on a virtual couch, as an effective analytical move aiming at excavating what is structurally embedded, but nonetheless latent ('underdeveloped') in the discourse of the Confucian master. Although there is no way to make a discourse *fully developed* (turn it into a 'full discourse' which does not entail any slippery movement of signification), it is the task of psychoanalysts to facilitate *possible developments* of the analysand's discourse by reading out its repressed content.

In his theorization of 'underdevelopment', Lacan engaged in Mencius's quarrel with another Confucian figure, Gaozi. When asked to comment on the latter's thesis that 'what you do not find on the side of speech (*yan* 言), do not seek for it on the side of heart (*xin* 心)', Mencius's reply was: 'It is wrong to say that.' (Lacan's translation, 2007a, p. 36; see also Bloom, 2009, p. 30). Lacan followed Mencius's stance and rephrased the disagreement between Gaozi and Mencius in terms of 'the distinction between what is articulated, what is of the discourse, and what is of the heart, namely the essential.' Lacan suggested that even when one puts everything in 'the foreground of the speech', there is always 'an underdeveloped logic' (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 36–7). It is precisely the aim of psychoanalysis to detect the particular underdeveloped logic of the analysand's discourse. A speech is structurally 'underdeveloped', compared to the speaker's 'heart', the agency interpreted by Lacan as 'pure desire'. Lacan stressed that the 'heart' itself cannot be directly detected through analytic work; what can be detected instead, at the end of analysis, is what he calls 'surplus enjoyment' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 49; Scherrer, 2010). By linking psychoanalytic treatment of underdeveloped discourses (which means practically all discourses) to the Mencian treatment of *yan* (speech, language), Lacan effectively *made the ancient*

Confucian master Lacanian, and himself Mencian. In this sense, one can even rephrase Lacan's idiosyncratic reading of *Mencius* as the Mencian reading of *Mencius*, with the aim of seeking out the underdeveloped (unconscious) side of his discourse. Lacan entitled Seminar XVIII, which heavily engages with *Mencius*, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* – 'On a discourse that might not be a semblance'. For him, all discourses are semblances but we can nonetheless assume that there might be such discourse which is not a semblance. In Lacan's terms, this discourse is the 'full discourse', and in Mencius's terms, it is the discourse of the heart.

Lacan's fascination with classical Chinese texts depends, therefore, to a large extent, on the fact that these texts are ideal for demonstrating the art of psychoanalytic (re)reading. François Cheng described Lacan's 'astonishing ability to interrogate texts' in the following way:

> He approaches each text with infinite patience, paying attention to each detail. At unexpected moments, where things seem to go without saying, he suddenly asks a question which at first glance may seem absurd, and which opens, as if by malice, underground and unsuspected layers. Thus, moving forward with it in the text, one has the impression that the ground is in danger of giving way at any time under your feet. You can no longer cling to something really stable, except precisely to the essential. (Cheng, 1991)

Evidently, Lacan approached classical Chinese texts not as a *trained Sinologist* who has been loaded with established interpretations, but as a *trained psychoanalyst*. Furthermore, the first three characters Lacan wrote on the blackboard, 孟子曰 (Mencius said), are *psychoanalytically* crucial. For a Confucian practitioner, Mencius was a 'master' (*fuzi* 夫子), even the 'second saint' (*yasheng* 亞聖).[11] For a Sinologist, Mencius was a leading figure of pre-Qin Confucianism. However, for Lacan, what was *said* by Mencius can (and should) also be analytically interpreted with an awareness of the irreducible gap between the subject of the enunciation (the 'I' who speaks, the individual doing the speaking) and the subject of the enunciated (the grammatical 'I' of the statement). The enunciated statement is the conscious dimension of speech, whereas the enunciation itself is unconscious, with the 'I' as the shifter presenting only an illusory unity. The structure of Mencius's enunciated discourse (i.e. what comes after 孟子曰) is predetermined by the master's (unconscious) choosing of the characters and assembling them into a particular combination. Psychoanalytic reading does not 'read' content *into* the discourse, but interprets the structurally embedded but nonetheless repressed content *out of* it. Lacan's unprecedented interpretation of 天下之言性也 therefore should not simply be taken as a misreading.

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11. The common translation for 聖 and 聖人 is 'sage'. But Lacan preferred 'saint' (see Lacan, 2007a, p. 36).

Lacan with Mencius (II): Who Stole My Jouissance?

Let us now attend to the question we put aside earlier: whether or not Lacan deliberately 'drew Mencius to his side'. To be fair, by rendering 天下之言性也 as 'languages in the world constitute [human] nature', Lacan certainly gained intellectual support from *Mencius*. In the seminar of 20 January 1971, Lacan admitted that 'perhaps I'm only Lacanian because I did some Chinese back in the day', and that the origins of Chinese thought are 'on a par with what I am saying'. When introducing the name of Mencius Lacan further made an unambiguous statement that 'I present him to you as someone, who in what he said, probably knew some of the things that we don't know when we're saying the same thing' (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 36, 53). Thus, Guy Flecher was not wrong when he noted (2008) that Lacan found 'in reading Mencius an echo of his own formulations', and (2016) that 'we can see how he finds in his readings [of classical Chinese texts] enough to support his theoretical advances. […] The Chinese world and in particular the singularity of the Chinese writing, have vivified his thought and brought him arguments to support some of his hypotheses.' Flecher left the 'some-of-his-hypotheses' unelaborated. The thesis I offer on this matter is: what Lacan's idiosyncratic reading of 天下之言性也 buttresses most substantially, is none other than his own idea that human subjects are 'castrated' by language.

Inherited from Freud, the term 'castration' was further linked by Lacan with linguistic symbolization. Lacan argues that it is through the operation of symbolic castration that one becomes the speaking being, that is, the 'normal' human subject. The human subject does not just *use* language, but fundamentally *emerges from* it. Language, in this precise sense, enables at the same time 'the emergence of the subject' and the 'disappearance' of the subject (Lacan, 1981, pp. 221, 218). In the exact same way as treating *xing* 性 as the signifier for the castrated '(human) nature' in his reading of *Mencius*, Lacan regards 'phallus' as the signifier of castration (instead of the organ): for Lacan, it is through symbolic castration that one becomes a normal (that is, 'phallic') subject, endowed with 'human nature'. Through his psychoanalytic reading of *Mencius*, the ancient Confucian master became for Lacan an intellectual ally, a 'silent partner' in Žižek's terms. Now the question is: to what extent is this Lacan-with-Mencius a legitimate thesis, if we put aside Lacan's own idiosyncratic interpretation of 天下之言性也? The question can be rephrased in a simpler way: did he illegitimately 'draw Mencius to his side'? In order to tackle this question, it is necessary for us to attend to more of what Mencius *said*, that is, those passages in *Mencius* that were not discussed by Lacan himself.

Putting my thesis forward first: one can indeed detect in *Mencius* a similar account of what Lacan calls symbolic castration. It is clear that for Mencius there are two modalities of human subjects: (1) ordinary men or little men (*xiaoren* 小人), those we meet in our daily life; and (2) exemplary men (*junzi* 君子) or great men (*daren* 大人) who are rare in our daily life but set

an *ethico-ontological* example of how to be *fully* human (*chengren* 成人). The difference between the two modalities of subjectivity, according to Mencius, resides predominantly in the act of preserving the heart (*cunxin* 存心): 'Mencius said, "That whereby the exemplary man differs from others is that he preserves his heart"' (Bloom, 2009, p. 92, translation modified). At this juncture, a psychoanalyst would ask: what did Mencius mean when he said *xin* (heart)? Did he refer to the physical organ that pumps the blood? In the previous section we mentioned that Lacan interpreted *xin* in Mencius's discourse as the agency of pure desire. It is worth quoting here another famous discourse of the Confucian master: 'Mencius said, "The great man is one who does not lose the naked infant's heart"' (Bloom, 2009, p. 88, translation modified). For Mencius, *xin* refers to the naked infant's heart, the original core of human subjectivity which is nonetheless not processed by most grown-up men (except great men). The naked infant (*chizi* 赤子) represents the stage of humanity that has not yet been contaminated by language. It is thus indeed a stage of *pure* humanity. Commenting on the subjectivity of the heart, 'Mencius said, "What people are able to do without having learned it is an expression of original, good ability. What they know without having to think about it is an expression of original, good knowledge"' (Bloom, 2009, p. 147). In other words, whatever the heart (of the naked infant) knows, it knows without having to think about it (不慮而知); and whatever it does, it does without having learned it (不學而能). We might add in the Lacanian register that whatever it desires, it does it without the mediation of language. Such innate or 'a priori' knowledge/ability(/desire), for Mencius, is ontologically original and morally good. The common translation of *xin* is 'mind' (e.g. Bloom, 2009). My suggestion of translating it as 'heart', instead, does not simply echo Lacan's translation, but also references Blaise Pascal's dictum: 'The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing of' (Pascal, 1995, p. 158). Such 'heart' is lacking in most men ('normal', 'rational', 'mindful' men) in our daily life. For Mencius, the heart is lacking in most grown-up men, and can only be found in naked infants, or is preserved only in great men. The highest virtue in the Confucian doctrine, *ren* 仁 (humaneness), is defined in *Mencius* as the (demonstration of possessing the) heart:

> Mencius said, 'Humaneness is the human heart. Rightness is the human path. To quit the path and not follow it, to abandon this heart and not know enough to seek it, is indeed lamentable. If a man has chickens and dogs that become lost, he knows enough to seek them. But when he has lost his heart, he does not know enough to seek it. The way of learning is none other than this: to seek for the lost heart.' (Bloom, 2009, p. 128)

Mencius made it explicit in this discourse of his that there are two modalities of subjectivity, and whether the heart (the human heart, the naked infant's heart) is preserved or lost is the determining element differentiating the two. The way of learning (學問之道) is thus defined by Mencius as being in search of the lost heart, that is, to move away from being 'castrated' (to use the Lacanian term) and

towards becoming fully human. This specific view of learning serves as the foundation for another famous claim of Mencius's, notably that all human beings are capable of becoming great men like Yao 堯 and Shun 舜, the two most celebrated ancient saint-kings (see Bloom, 2009, p. 133). Everyone has this *potential*, precisely because the only thing one needs to do to actualize it is to retrieve one's lost heart. And to actualize this potential becomes, for Mencius, the ethical dimension of human life. According to Mencius, upon that actualization one gains the greatest joy (樂莫大焉): 'Mencius said, "All the ten thousand things are complete in me. There is no greater joy than to find, on self-examination, that I am fully congruent to myself"' (Bloom, 2009, p. 144, translation modified).

The subject has access to the greatest joy when he is not lacking. Doesn't this Mencian enjoyment approximate the Lacanian *jouissance*? One can clearly detect Lacan-with-Mencius here. As a clinical psychoanalyst, Lacan was obsessed with 'the division of the subject – when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as "fading", as disappearance' (Lacan, 1981, p. 218). Language produces the 'symbolic' subject while killing the 'real' subject. 'Symbols in fact envelop the life of man with a network so total that […] they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny' (Lacan, 2006, p. 231). Determining the shape of our life contours as early as at the moment of our birth, symbolic castration functions as the very operation through which we are able to have a 'life' (instead of 'mere living'). On the opposite side of this 'normal', symbolically castrated subject nonetheless stands – *typologically* but not necessarily *actually* – an ontologically different modality of subjectivity: the real subject, or the subject of *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is that which we (are forced to) give up when getting the gift of symbols; that is, it is precisely that which is being castrated. The centre of the subject is thus outside of himself, 'ek-centric', and 'extimate'. We are no longer 'congruent' to ourselves, but have undergone the operation of castration. We become neurotic, lacking (and thus desiring) subjects. We become, in Mencius's term, little men.

For Lacan, to be a speaking being one has to pay a price, which is, to give up some *jouissance*. That is to say, at a certain point, one falls into the state of 'subjective destitution' (Lacan, 1995, p. 8). For Mencius, one is at a certain point no longer *chizi* (the naked infant), and this is entirely unrelated to ageing: one stops being *chizi* when one gives (or is asked to give) up the joy of possessing the heart. The lost heart, along with the joy of having it, is the Mencian 'subjective destitution'. Because of this loss, the *xing* (human nature) in *Mencius* 'is something that is wrong, that is underdeveloped' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 52). Lacan equated *xin* (the heart) with pure desire aiming at full *jouissance*, that which can only be detected in a fully developed discourse (i.e. 'full speech'). The detection of *jouissance* in full speech, though constituting the aim of psychoanalytic practice, is itself structurally impossible (for both the analyst aiming to detect it, and the analysand aiming to speak fully). What might be expected at the end of analysis is

the detection of a certain partial *jouissance* functioning as 'surplus enjoyment' (*plus-de-jouir*).

According to Lacan's rearticulation of the 'pleasure principle', symbolic castration offers another type of enjoyment, one generated by the symbolic 'law of desire': 'Castration means that *jouissance* has to be refused in order to be attained on the inverse scale of the Law of desire' (Lacan, 2006, p. 700). One of the key insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis is that as speaking beings we are *taught* to desire. Our desire is 'the desire of the Other' (Lacan, 1981, p. 235), engendered and regulated by a symbolic (metonymic) law, which actually commands us to 'enjoy as little as possible'. The type of enjoyment emerging from our endless pursuit of 'metonymic' objects of desire functions therefore as a renunciation of *jouissance*. In the symbolic realm, *jouissance* is reduced to a certain elusive 'surplus', which nonetheless constitutes the *cause* of our metonymic desire. One certainly cannot find such a sophisticated discussion of desire (with its metonymic movement) and enjoyment (with its double registers) in *Mencius*. However, when Mencius praised 'doing without having learned it' and 'knowing without having to think about it', he was urging people to go beyond the 'pleasure principle', beyond the symbolic law of desire. For Mencius the name for this 'pleasure principle' is *li* 利, which has dominated people's daily life, denied them access to 'the greatest joy', and turned them into morally despicable 'little men'.

In discussing *Mencius*, Lacan pointed out that the literal meaning of *li* is 'gain, interest, profit'. He then developed a more sophisticated interpretation by associating this Confucian-Mencian concept with the Marxist concept of 'surplus value' (i.e. capitalist profit), and claimed that 'if there is a meaning that can be given retroactively to *li*, that's what it is' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 60). For Lacan, while the desire for *li* persists, functioning as the very defining feature of *xing*, the object of such desire is nonetheless metonymic and constantly changing (which means it is exchangeable in a chain of symbolic equivalence). To put it differently, *li* is the 'cause' of desire. It is precisely in this sense that Lacan equated *li* with the elusive 'surplus enjoyment', the excess of enjoyment which has no 'use value'. In his idiosyncratic reading of 故者以利為本, Lacan translated the character 故 as 'cause' (instead of 'original state'). According to Lacan's interpretation of the passage he wrote on the blackboard, what Mencius said (孟子曰) was that 'languages in the world constitute [human] nature (天下之言性也), and consequently its cause (則故而已矣), which is based on surplus enjoyment (故者以利為本)'. What is remarkable in this discourse of Mencius's, for Lacan, is that 'starting from this word, which is nature […] what will matter is to arrive at the cause, insofar as this cause is *li*'. Lacan further added:

> It is here that I finally allow myself to acknowledge that as far as the effects of the discourse are concerned, for everything that is under heaven, what comes out of it is nothing other than the function of the cause, insofar as it is the surplus enjoyment. (Lacan, 2007a, p. 60)

If we accept Lacan's interpretation, Mencius has indeed developed a Lacanian account of desire and enjoyment.[12] Maybe that's what Lacan had in mind when he said that Mencius's discourse 'is on a par with what I am saying' (Lacan, 2007a, p. 36). Whether one is willing to accept this highly Lacanian Mencius, it is nonetheless safe to say that the ancient Confucian master developed a Lacanian account of the castrated subject, even if one disregards Lacan's idiosyncratic reading of 天下之言性也.

Mencius further offered a picture of the struggles between two modalities of subjectivity (naked infants – little men – great men).[13] The Lacanian description of these struggles would be the 'dialectic of the subject', as he asserted in Seminar XI: 'There is no subject without, somewhere, *aphanisis* of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established' (Lacan, 1981, p. 221). The '*aphanisis* of the subject' engenders dialectically the subjective effort to overcome it. This opens, for both Lacan and Mencius, the *ethical* dimension of human life. The subjective *aphanisis* (disappearance) for Lacan is deeply related to *jouissance*, and for Mencius the heart (both functioning as the extimate core of the subject). Once this core is lost/castrated, its 'residue' functions as the cause of subjective desire. Here is the inception of Lacanian ethics which commands us not to give up on our desire. It also inaugurates the *way* through which the human subject attains moral goodness in Mencian ethics.

Let us quote a passage from Lacan's seminar on ethics (Seminar VII): 'There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire – given that desire is understood here, as we have defined it elsewhere, as the metonymy of our being' (Lacan, 1992, p. 321). This price paid for access to the metonymic desire (contrary to pure desire), is *jouissance*, and it is postulated by Lacan as the supreme good. It parallels Mencius's postulation of the naked infant's heart (the price paid for growing up) as the supreme good. Therefore, the following conclusions seem legitimate. First, there is a highly Lacanian-flavoured account of castration in *Mencius*. Second, based on that account, the Confucian master has in addition established a formula which comes very close to what Lacan phrases as the 'dialectic of the subject', propelled simultaneously by language (constituting the subjectivity of *xing*[nature] as the agency of the desire for *li*) and *jouissance* (constituting the subjectivity of *xin*[heart] as the agency of pure desire). And third, this dialectic opens up the dimension of ethics for Mencius as well as for Lacan.

In the Chinese language, there is a refined euphemism for *yange* 閹割 (castration) – *jingshen* 淨身, meaning literally cleansing the body. The beauty of

12. Towards the end of the seminar of 6 July 1960, Lacan quoted Mencius to consolidate his formulation of the 'law of desire' (Lacan, 1992, p. 325), thus granting him a key role in the articulation of the theory.

13. In Mencius's discourse, *chizi* (naked infants) and *daren* (great men) act in the exact same *way*, which is, act in accordance with their heart.

this metaphor (in both the ordinary and the Lacanian sense) is that it fully covers the violent character of the operation. Through the operation of 'cleansing the body', one is able to live as a 'normal' member in the human world (in Confucian terminology, *tianxia* 天下, the order under heaven; in Lacanian terminology, the symbolic order), manifesting one's 'human nature' (*xing*). This idiosyncratic metaphor reveals the same 'Chinese unconscious' that Lacan aimed to uncover when he engaged with 天下之言性也 and offered his unprecedented reading. Another metaphorical operation in the Chinese language worth mentioning here is that there are several characters in Chinese for the pronoun 'I': *wo* 我, *an* 俺, *wu* 吾 and *yü* 余. Contemporary Chinese people seldom use *yü*, which is nonetheless the very pronoun that premodern Confucian official-scholars used most frequently. Is it merely a coincidence that the literal meaning of *yü* is residue or surplus, that which is left? This metaphorical substitution (using 'residue' for 'I') is indeed psychoanalytically intriguing. It is even more psychoanalytically intriguing that in dynastic China, with Confucianism as its official ideology, those politically powerful (the subject of the unconscious enunciation) were drawn to use 'residue' to refer to themselves (the subject of the consciously enunciated). This longstanding but nonetheless bizarre cultural custom in dynastic China is no longer hard to apprehend if one adopts the Lacanian interpretative approach towards seminal Confucian texts: the defining element of those official-scholars' ego-ideal – 君子/大人/大丈夫 (great man) – is precisely the *residue* of castration, which functions effectively as the surplus enjoyment (*objet petit a*) of their metonymic desire. The very act of enunciating *yü* (as 'I') is therefore a demonstration of both the illusion of subjective unity and a certain part of the Chinese unconscious.

Mencius with or against Xunzi?

Based on the above detailed analysis of the Lacan-with-Mencius thesis, let us, in what follows, further extend our analytic focus onto the two most influential and thus much discussed disputes in ancient Chinese thought: the Mencius–Xunzi dispute, and the Confucianism–Daoism dispute.

Xunzi, the next major pre-Qin Confucian figure after Mencius, who was approximately 60 years younger than Mencius, has been presented in the Confucian school (especially by neo-Confucian scholars since the Song dynasty) as a major challenger of the 'second saint'. The difference between the two masters is primarily presented as the disagreement over the ethico-ontological status of the original human subject: while Mencius holds it as being intrinsically good, Xunzi maintains that it is intrinsically self-interested and thus evil (e.g. Shun, 2000, p. 222). This rendering of the Mencius–Xunzi dispute, which is supported by substantial textual evidence, can certainly not be faulted. There is even a chapter in *Xunzi* directly entitled 性惡 ([human] nature is evil), in which Mencius is unambiguously the primary target of criticism. My thesis here is, however: were we to put both figures on the virtual couch, the two masters might

realize after the analytic session that they have solid agreement on the very issue they have been fiercely disputing. It would be so because in *Xunzi* there is an equally well-developed account of what Lacan calls symbolic castration. That is to say, though unlike *Mencius*, *Xunzi* was not discussed or mentioned by Lacan in his seminars or written works, one can nonetheless contend that Lacan-with-Xunzi is a legitimate thesis, in fact, with exactly the same amount of legitimacy as the Lacan-with-Mencius thesis. One cannot resist here the temptation to rephrase it in a Žižekian tone: *with* Lacan in a mediating role as their 'silent partner', these two quarrelling Confucian masters were able to realize their secret (bed)fellowship.

Let us begin with the following passage from *Xunzi*:

> Names have no intrinsic appropriateness. They are bound to something by agreement in order to name it. Once the agreement is set and has become custom, then they are called appropriate, and what differs from the agreed usage is called inappropriate. Names have no intrinsic object. They are bound to some reality by agreement in order to name that object. Once the agreement is set and has become custom, then they are called names of objects. (Hutton, 2014, p. 239, translation modified)

It takes Lacan's unorthodox psychoanalytic reading to excavate Mencius's (unconscious) view on language's constitutive power. Xunzi's view is much clearer: for him, names are devoid of an intrinsic or ontologically fixed nature; they are, to put it in Saussurian–Lacanian terms, 'signifiers' without 'signifieds'. The 'appropriateness' of names comes from ancient agreements which formed customs; that is to say, it is determined by what has been told and retold. The civilized world in which people live is, for Xunzi, a linguistically constituted world built upon customs and rites. One cannot help but connect Xunzi's view on names with Lacan's view on Chinese characters (being free-sliding signifiers and at the same time forming a well-functioning signifying system), and mourn the non-encounter between Lacan and *Xunzi*.

Also, in a quite explicit way, Xunzi formulated two modalities of subjectivity – the 'division between *xing* 性 [nature] and *wei* 偽 [un-nature, artificiality]' as he put it:

> Those things in people which cannot be learned and cannot be worked at are called 'nature.' Those things in people which they become capable of through learning and which they achieve through working at them are called 'un-nature.' This is the division between nature and un-nature. (Hutton, 2014, p. 239, translation modified)

The antagonism between the two modalities is presented in *Xunzi* as the subjectivity of (human) nature versus that of artificiality. The subjectivity of *xing* (nature) in *Xunzi* ontologically ('onto' here understood as 'That-being' instead of 'What-being') amounts to the subjectivity of the *xin* (heart) in *Mencius*, given that both are defined by being uncastrated and resisting linguistic symbolization, and that both are capable of knowing that which cannot be learnt. If we follow Lacan's interpretation of Mencius (*xing* is constituted by language), then the difference between Mencius and Xunzi becomes purely

nominal and notional: Xunzi uses the character 性 (*xing*, nature) to signify uncastrated subjectivity, whereas Mencius uses the character 心 (*xin*, heart) to do this job and assigns 性 to signify castrated subjectivity.

What substantively differentiates Xunzi from Mencius lies on the ethical (instead of the ontological) front: while Mencius views the uncastrated subjectivity as ontologically original and morally good, Xunzi views it as ontologically original and morally evil. Based on his view that human nature is morally evil because it is fundamentally self-interested, Xunzi regards the agreements and customs established by ancient saint-kings as the root for morality. In other words, it is the ancient saint-kings' (pre-existing) agreements instead of the naked infant's (ek-sisting) heart that constitutes the foundation of morality. The purpose of learning, for Xunzi, is not to seek for the lost heart but to learn from ancient saint-kings and Confucian masters the unnaturally/artificially established customs and rites. Through one's arduous practices of *xiwei* 習偽 (learning what is artificial) one becomes an exemplary man and eventually saint (great man).

We have seen in the above analysis that, despite the dispute between Mencius and Xunzi, one can gain from a Lacanian revisit of their rivalry the following new insight: these two most influential pre-Qin disciples of Confucius share a deep agreement on the two modalities of subjectivity, taken as a product of the castrative operation of language. Furthermore, based on his thesis of symbolic castration ('human nature' is therefore not an innate substance), Lacan sees the good and the evil not as an opposition between two poles, but as an 'internal knot' between opposite terms: it is as if they share the same face, but in the form of a Moebius strip (see Flecher, 2016). If we follow Lacan's view, the quarrel between the two ancient Confucian masters can indeed be reconciled on its ontological as well as ethical fronts.

To Speak or Not to Speak, That's the Question

Let us now turn to another dispute. Confucianism and Daoism are the two major branches of ancient Chinese thought. They have been highly antagonistic since the time of their founding masters – Confucius and Laozi. One can find fierce attacks on Confucius the great master and his disciples in seminal Daoist works such as *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. Meanwhile, equally fierce counter-attacks on Daoism and Daoist figures can be found in *Mencius* and *Xunzi*. The difference between favouring action/activity and favouring non-action/non-activity, is conventionally regarded as the major disagreement between the two schools (e.g. Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 38). However, by revisiting the dispute via Lacan, one can arrive at a possible reconciliation between Confucianism and Daoism over the very issue of action versus non-action, despite the persistent antagonism between the two schools throughout China's intellectual and civilizational history. Once again, it might be necessary to put Lacan the psychoanalyst in the room, in order for Confucius and Laozi, the two greatest thinkers of ancient Chinese civilization,

to realize their affinity beneath the quarrelling discourses coming out of their mouths.

Let us first revisit Confucius. As we discussed earlier, the characters used respectively in *Mencius* and in *Xunzi* to signify the ontological resistance to linguistic symbolization are 心 (heart) and 性 (nature). The counterpart in Confucius's discourse is 天 (heaven). A conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zigong is recorded in the *Analects*:

> The master said, 'I think I will leave off speaking.' 'If you do not speak,' Zigong replied, 'how will we your followers find the proper way?' The master responded, 'Does heaven speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it. Does heaven speak?' (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 208)

Though one can hardly find a well-developed account of language's castrative power in the discourses of Confucius (compared with what can be excavated from *Mencius* and *Xunzi*), the founding master of Confucianism nonetheless clearly expressed his preparedness to give up speech, following *tian* 天 (heaven) which makes things run in accordance with its way without speaking. Confucius indicated that, in order to find the proper way, one should not listen to people's discourses, but follow the way of the wordless heaven. Zigong mentioned, in another passage in the *Analects*, that 'We can get to hear about the Master's cultural refinements, but do not hear him discourse on subjects such as [human] nature and the way of heaven' (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 98, translation modified). It is testimony to the fact that the great master faithfully *followed the heavenly way by leaving off speaking about the heavenly way.* Two theses can be established: (1) in the *Analects* two modalities of subjectivity are initiated, based on whether or not the heavenly way is followed; and (2) Confucius made a 'dialectical move' (in the Lacanian sense), in terms of subjective modality, when he decided to leave off speaking. If treating Confucianism's founding figure as an analysand, a Lacanian analyst might consider ending the analytic session upon hearing the above-quoted words – by insisting on giving up speech the analysand is not showing some 'autistic' symptom, or being silent for strategic purposes, but working precisely at overcoming what Lacan would call subjective destitution.[14]

Lacan himself never openly discussed Confucius in his seminars or written works. However, François Cheng reported that Lacan studied a few fragments in the *Analects*, and liked the following Confucian discourse which the psychoanalyst believed influenced Mencius:

> The master said, 'Do I possess knowledge? No, I do not. A peasant put a question to me and my mind was a complete blank. I kept hammering at the two sides of the question until I got to the bottom of it.' (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 128; Lau, 1979, p. 97)

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14. As Dylan Evans (1996, pp. 54–5) explicates, 'the end of analysis involves a change in the subjective position of the analysand (the analysand's "subjective destitution"). […] At the end of the analysis, the analyst is reduced to a mere surplus.'

It is rather obvious that Confucius's denial of possessing knowledge echoes Lacan's own critique of 'the subject supposed to know': 'It is clear that of the supposed knowledge he knows nothing' (Lacan, 1995, p. 6). Lacan, as one of the most influential psychoanalysts/teachers of his time, is nonetheless aware of the split between his person and the knowledge attributed to him. When engaging with Mencius's discourse, which Lacan regarded as 'on a par' with his own discourse, the French psychoanalyst said openly that the Confucian master 'protected' him because he did not know what he was saying in his own discourse (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 36, 44). In addition, Cheng reported that in reading that passage from the *Analects*, Lacan praised Confucius for being a proper teacher. Such a teacher is referred to by Lacan as the 'real subject': someone who is able to uplift all subjects facing him, and enables them to make changes in accordance with the way (Cheng, 2002, p. 59).

In the last decade of his teaching, along with his growing interest in Chinese characters, schemata and knots, Lacan placed a greater emphasis in his seminars on the real. According to Lacan, unlike Indo-European languages, Chinese characters enable the shift away from appearance to what Lacan calls 'ek-sistence', that which exists *outside* the symbolic order. Calligraphy, in Lacan's eyes, is one of the 'superior activities', whose purity is unattainable by any westerner, and from which *jouissance* is not excluded but rather retained in the position of 'residue' (Roudinesco, 1997, pp. 354–5).[15] After Cheng stopped their co-study of Chinese classics, Lacan quickly shifted his eastward passion to the matheme and the Borromean knot, two modes of formalization that he believed are much more efficient than any type of discourse in capturing 'the grimace of the real'. According to Lacan, these formalizations can reduce to nothing the uncertainty of all ordinary speech, and are therefore able to *transmit that which is not said*. Lacan in his final years 'devoted himself so passionately to the geometry of knots, braids, tori, and bits of string,' comments Roudinesco, 'that he himself finally dissolved into the silent stupor of a Nietzschean aphasia.' She further notes that after 1971 Lacan increasingly shifted his teaching mode from saying to showing, 'as "monstration" took over from discourse, Lacan came to use proportionally fewer and fewer words', and 'sank deeper and deeper into silence'. She records several occasions in his seminars when the psychoanalyst suddenly plunged himself into total silence, 'unable to speak' (Roudinesco, 1997, pp. 359, 363, 366, 383, 392, 397, 399).[16]

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15. Following Lacan's view on Chinese language, the Chengdu-based psychoanalyst Huo Datong claims that 'the unconscious is structured like Chinese characters'. See Huo (2003; 2000, pp. 41–3).

16. Roudinesco (1997, p. 403) records Maude Mannoni's observation that, in his final year, 'Lacan had become completely silent, but the impact of his legend was such that suggestible people heard him speak through his silence.' Jacques-Alain Miller wrote of Lacan's silence: 'What was he silent about? About what was good for him not necessarily for the other, surely not

What if such silences and 'blanks' in Lacan's later teaching are not manifestations of the 'stupor of a Nietzschean aphasia', but rather the results of the act of leaving off speaking, as did the later Confucius? We can actually locate such an act in Lacan's own theory: in his theorization of the discourse of the psychoanalyst (as one among four discourses), the analyst occupies the silent and empty place of the *object petit a*, the cause of desire and the source of emergence of the analysand's speech. Lacan observed in Seminar XVII: 'What I prefer […] is *a discourse without speech*' (Lacan, 2007b, p. 12, emphasis in original). If we regard the later Lacan as a theorist of the real, and take his acts in a serious manner (instead of regarding him as having 'revived in his own life the Freudian myth of a pact with the devil'[17]), we can indeed develop a Lacan-with-Confucius thesis, which in turn can help us approach the ancient Chinese master via a new pathway. Let us have a test run on this new pathway.

One of the most famous of Confucius's self-depictions from the *Analects* is: 七十而從心所欲不逾矩. The translation runs: 'By seventy I could follow the heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries' (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 77, translation modified). Confucius did not explicate how he was able to do this in his final years. Through a Lacanian lens we can reach an explanation: the desire of the heart ('pure desire') does not follow the symbolic-metonymic law of desire; it can be encapsulated only in what Lacan calls 'full speech', which is itself a structural impossibility. Confucius's decision to leave off speaking makes Lacan regard him as a real subject, which is a subject of *jouissance*, who unfolds actions driven entirely by *xin* (the heart), the extimate agency resisting language and symbolization. Did not the later Confucius, by following his heart's desire, become a model for Lacanian ethics which commands psychoanalysts to 'act in conformity with the desire that is in you' (Lacan, 1992, p. 314)? As mentioned earlier, Confucius also claimed that his action emulates *tian* (heaven). Lacan interprets *tian* in Confucianism as 'a sufficiently developed discourse', and further underlined that all the speaking beings living under heaven (*tianxia*) are 'underdeveloped in relation to this discourse'. It is so because the nature (*xing*) of the human subject is linguistically constituted; in comparison to *tian*, 'this *xing* is something that is wrong, that is underdeveloped' (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 51–2). Confucius's claim that 'heaven does not speak' is on a par with Lacan's thesis that heaven speaks in the form of full discourse. For a human subject, speaking in this way (the heavenly way) is ontologically impossible but ethically commanded. Lacan demonstrated how one should act in this ethico-ontological setting in the opening lines of *Television*: 'I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way, to say it all. Saying it all is materially impossible: words fail.

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for the others.' According to Miller, Lacan's silence was a strategic move, a cunning technique to protect himself from 'the Other's ire and persecution' (Miller, 2012, p. 49).

17. This is a comment made by Roudinesco (1997, p. 359), who describes the pursuits of the later Lacan as being 'in search of the absolute', which results in 'psychoanalysis reduced to zero'.

Yet it is through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real' (Lacan, 1990, p. 3). For Lacan, to speak the truth (about the desire that is in you), is *the* ethical duty for speaking beings.

At the end of Seminar VII Lacan briefly introduced Mencius and the 'law of heavenly desire': 'After having made the statements that you would be wrong to consider optimistic about the goodness of man, [Mencius] explains very well that what we are most ignorant about is the laws that come to us from heaven' (Lacan, 1992, p. 325). Lacan further connected (pure) desire with the Confucian-Mencian concept of heaven, which opens up the space for ethical acts, that is, the space *under heaven* (*tianxia*). It is obvious that what Confucius called the heart's desire is tantamount to what Lacan borrowed from Mencius: the heavenly desire. Lacan summarized the ethics of psychoanalysis in the following question: 'Have you acted in conformity with the desire that is in you?' (Lacan, 1992, p. 314). This ethics is at the same time Lacanian and Confucian-Mencian. A decade later Lacan resumed this topic and commented apropos the goodness of man: a man falls into 'the good type' when he 'does very curious little juggling tricks and exchanges between *xing* 性 and *ming* 命' . Lacan interpreted *ming* as the decree of heaven, which is not as controversial as his interpretation of *xing* as linguistically constituted (Lacan, 2007a, pp. 51–2). It is worth noting that the combined word *xingming* 性命 means 'life'. This feature of Chinese language could be (psycho) analytically interpreted to show that, in 'the Chinese unconscious', human life has two registers (*xing* and *ming*), and the *human* part of human life (contrary to animalistic life, mere living) is manifested in the very struggle to make *xing* conform with *ming*. To speak 'full discourse' (which means, to speak the whole truth about one's desire with all unconscious contents included) in Chinese, would be tantamount to live a *life* in full congruity between *xing* and *ming*. Through this (psycho)analytic rendering, we can also achieve a deeper understanding of the later Confucius's decision to leave off speaking in pursuing a life in conformity with heaven. This 'symptomatic' decision is *ethical*. For both Lacan and Confucius, to speak or not to speak, that is an ethical question.

The Way That Splits Itself into Two

Let us now turn to Laozi, the (supposed) author of *Daodejing* and the founding master of Daoism. Does Laozi, as depicted for more than two thousand years, truly stand in opposition to Confucius?

Laozi directly employed the character 道 (the way, instead of the way of something) to signify the ontological resistance to linguistic symbolization. In chapter 25 of *Daodejing* the author wrote apropos the way:

> There was some process that formed spontaneously, emerging before heaven and earth. Silent and empty, standing alone as all that is, it does not suffer alteration. All pervading, it does not pause. It can be thought of as the mother of heaven and earth. I do not yet know its name. If I were to style it, I would call it the way. […] Humans emulate earth.

> Earth emulates heaven. Heaven emulates the way. And the way emulates what is spontaneously so. (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 99, translation modified)

Laozi made it clear that *dao* 道 is simply an arbitrarily selected signifier standing in for that which is silent, empty but nonetheless original, lasting and pervading. Heaven, being supreme in Confucianism and emulated by exemplary men and great men, is posited in the Daoist 'sequence of emulation' as emulating the way, which itself emulates what is spontaneously so (*ziran* 自然). This passage from *Daodejing* should also be read together with the opening passage of the text:

> The way that can be enunciated is not really the way. The name that can be named is not really the name. The nameless is the fetal beginning of all things while that which is named is their mother. Thus, being devoid of desires is how one observes the mysteries of all things, while having desires is how one observes their boundaries. These two – the nameless and what is named – emerged from the same source yet are referred to differently. Together they are called obscure. The obscurest of the obscure, they are the swinging gateway of the manifold mysteries. (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 77, translation modified)

In a much more sophisticated manner than Confucius's, the great Daoist master nonetheless reached the same thesis on the ontological primacy of what is spontaneously so ('spontaneous' meaning without any mediation of language) over the linguistically constituted human world. Laozi especially connected the operation of nomination with the rise of human desires: the ontologico-structural Two (the nameless and what is named) generates two subjective modalities (having desires or not). The subject devoid of desires is able to 'observe the mysteries of all things', that which is embedded in things but unarticulated (and impossible to articulate). The subject who has desires is able to observe the boundaries of all (linguistically constituted) 'things'. It is not hard to detect deep echoes between Laozi's and Lacan's theorizations of subjectivity and desire.

With Lacan serving as intermediary, it is safe to say that, though using slightly different but interrelated (even interchangeable) characters and notions, the founding fathers of both Confucianism and Daoism came up with similar accounts of that which resists symbolization. As anyone who has surfed in Lacanian waters would know, that is exactly what Lacan defined as his obscurest notion – the real (Lacan, 1988, p. 66). By their ontological status of subsisting without mediation of language, both 天 in Confucius's discourse and 道 in Laozi's discourse, to put it in Lacanian parlance, 'ek-sist' in the register of the real, rather than 'existing' in the register of the symbolic. The characters 天, 道 and 心 as well, are employed in ancient Chinese texts to signify precisely what Lacan calls the 'lack' in the Other, engendering the 'hole effect' in the totalizing symbolic network. Those characters are, in this sense, simply *metaphoric-metonymic* signifiers employed by ancient Chinese thinkers, sometimes even arbitrarily – metaphoric in the sense of being substitutive, and metonymic in the

sense of being combinatorial.[18] Lacan commented in a conversation with his friend Cheng that what made the Chinese language fascinating to him, among other things, is that metaphor and metonymy are not opposed there; instead, they 'result from one another' and 'mutually engender each other'; 'the more there is metaphor, the richer the metonymy' (Cheng, 1991; Serrano, 1997, p. 44).

Lacan himself, as reported by Cheng, while acknowledging that there are disagreements between Confucianism and Daoism, was more interested in the hidden similarities between the two schools (Cheng, 2002, p. 58). Cheng also reported that what Lacan was eagerly looking for during those years he spent working intensively on classical Chinese texts with him, is how the Chinese way, entangled by that which has a name and that which doesn't have a name, comes to be articulated. Cheng revealed that Lacan was fascinated by the character 道, which is used to signify both *voie* (way) and *voix* (voice). While reading the opening passage of *Daodejing*, the psychoanalyst noted, 'it is wonderful!' (Cheng, 2002, p. 55). He then wrote down the following little schema:

$$\text{道 the Dao} < \begin{matrix}\text{doing – nameless – not having desire} \\ \text{speaking – the name – having desire}\end{matrix}$$

Lacan used this schema to encapsulate two registers of 道, and commented that Daoism testifies 'to the first efforts to formulate the relationships of our being with what we are endowed with, namely the language' (Cheng, 1991; Flecher, 2016). Lacan's schema also clearly shows that (human) desires are products of language – speaking beings are desiring subjects; the symbolic-metonymic law of desire enables one signifier ('name') to represent the subject for another signifier.

Furthermore, Lacan's schema reflects the fundamental affinity between Confucius and Laozi. It manifests in a highly condensed style the underlying *ethico-ontological structure* deeply shared by the founding masters of the two schools. These two registers of the way in Daoism, encapsulated by the schema, correspond respectively to the way of heaven and the way of humans in Confucianism. Nomination (symbolization) is the very operation that splits the way, and thence dialectically generates the (human) effort to make the way congruent with itself. This effort fundamentally defined both Daoist and Confucianist accounts of subjective modalities, as well as their accounts of ethics.

At this juncture, let us return to Mencius's view of human nature and morality: language splits the human subject into two modalities – the subject of *xing* (nature) and that of *xin* (heart) – and makes the latter a virtuality that exists ('ek-sists') in the former as pure potential. Hence, for Mencius everyone *virtually* is a Yao or Shun. Evil is then defined by the failure to act on this virtuality (in Mencius's own words, to retrieve the lost heart). Mencius said in another

18. What repeatedly appears in *Daodejing* is not just 道 and 天, but also the combined word 天道 (see chapters 9, 47 and 79).

well-quoted passage that 'congruity (*cheng* 誠) is the way of heaven, and to think about being congruent [with oneself] is the way of humans' (Bloom, 2009, p. 80, translation modified).[19] The first half of the thesis constitutes the Confucian–Mencian ontology, and the second half ethics – what defines the human way is the ethical act of realizing the subject's own virtuality, which is to be congruent with itself. Confucius demonstrated the human way par excellence – his action is based on non(linguistically constituted)knowledge, and unfolded by pursuing congruity with the wordless heaven. Laozi also expressed a similar ethico-ontological view through his formula on the 'sequence of emulation'. For Laozi, *shengren* (the saint, the subject fully embodying the way, the ideal figure in both Daoism and Confucianism) demonstrates the emulative model for the human way, by his efforts of 'developing things but not initiating them 處無為之事' and 'carrying on teaching without the medium of language 行不言之教' (Ames & Hall, 2003, p. 80, translation modified). Does not 'teaching without the medium of language', a famous phrase from *Daodejing*, also perfectly describe the teaching method Confucius valued the most in his final years? It might also not take a skilled psychoanalyst to reveal that Confucius had the exact same model of 'the saint' (as his ego-ideal) in mind, when he spoke about his preparedness to shift his teaching method from *yanchuan* 言傳 (teaching through discourse) to the teaching-without-language mode.

Based on the above analyses enabled by Lacan's schema, the ostensible dispute between the two schools over action and non-action can readily be dissolved. The Daoist appeal to non-action (*wuwei* 無爲) is at the same time an appeal to action in conformity with the way. Laozi wrote in chapter 37 of *Daodejing*: 'The way in its eternity does nothing, yet nothing is not done' (Wu, 2016, p. 81). For Laozi, *non*-action is precisely tantamount to *whatever*-action (insofar as it unfolds the way) (*wubuwei* 無不爲). This is exactly what drove Confucius to leave off speaking, and to unfold his action in conformity with heaven: his action was simultaneously non-action (non-speaking). Using Lacanian terms, Confucius moved away from desire-induced actions to *jouissance*-induced actions.

It is fair to say that Lacan's schema of the (two registers of the) way reveals a repressed side of ancient Chinese thought: on this side, the founding teachers of the two antagonistic schools are firmly agreed over action/non-action, the very issue their disciples fiercely disputed.[20] In the horizon of western thought, Confucius's determination to give up speech and Laozi's longing for the obscurest of the obscure, would be viewed as nonsensical and utterly unphilosophical, lacking *logos*. Not for Lacan, however. Lacan the psychoanalyst/anti-philosopher

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19. A similar line is recorded in *Zhongyong*, one of the 'Four Books' in Confucianism. Its alleged author Zisi was Confucius's grandson and Mencius's teacher.

20. No wonder there have been rumours, circulated as early as in *Zhuangzi* in the form of *yuyan* (fables), concerning Confucius himself being a student of Laozi. The reliability of those stories was of course severely questioned and repudiated by Confucian scholars.

would, cross-culturally and counter-chronologically, be the perfect 'silent partner' of these two ancient Chinese masters by idiosyncratically suggesting in his own field that what might be expected at the end of analysis is the obscure *jouissance* of the symptom. This abyssal (and indeed residual) *jouissance* can be detected through a patient analysis of the analysand's discourse in tracing the metonymic movement of his/her desire.

Although through his psychoanalytic reading of Chinese classics Lacan potentially opened up an uncanny space ('a virtual couch') in which Laozi and Confucius can find between them affinity rather than antagonism, he nonetheless, compared to the two ancient Chinese masters, has more to offer apropos the way that splits itself into two. Most Confucian *and* Daoist scholars, with a few exceptions (which might include Laozi himself), believe that the congruity between the heavenly and human ways (or the two registers of the way) is possible, that the virtuality in the human subject (as speaking being) can be realized by *ethico-ontological efforts* (action in Confucianism and non-action/whatever-action in Daoism). However, Lacan would see such realization of subjective virtuality as *real*-ization, which is impossible in the symbolic world. That is to say, the human effort to retrieve the lost heart (or to act fully in accordance with the real law of heavenly desire), is structurally doomed to fail. 'The greatest joy' (full *jouissance*) only manifests itself in the form of a residue or surplus (surplus enjoyment). The total congruity between the heavenly and human ways is none other than what Lacan would call the fundamental fantasy.[21] This fantasy imaginarily patches up the ontological gap between the symbolic (law of humanly desire) and the real (law of heavenly desire). The latter cannot be directly addressed because once 'addressed' it is already in language (hence, not the real). That is exactly why Lacan was deeply fascinated by Lao's thesis that 'the way that can be enunciated is not really the way'. This means that the real way (or, the heavenly way) is unreachable for human subjects, even though it constitutes the latter's 'emulative' model. In the human world (*tianxia*, under heaven), the lost object (naked infant's heart, heavenly way, etc.), the very Thing we believe could make us 'whole' again after entering language, can only take the form of the elusive *objet petit a* (surplus enjoyment). The *underdevelopment* of human subjects (living under heaven) in comparison to heaven, is ontologically and structurally unfixable. There will be, even in the minimal sense, an irreducible gap, which structurally guarantees the impossibility of exhaustiveness/wholeness/congruity. Lacan regards the 'saint' as the *sinthome* (an archaic word for symptom whose pronunciation resembles *saint homme*), that which radically disrupts the subject's symbolic ego-ideal (e.g. 'saint' as the human figure embodying the heavenly way). It nonetheless provides the subject, according to Lacan, with an unanalysable *jouissance* and enables him/her to live in a modality beyond the pleasure principle. The French psychoanalyst

21. For a detailed discussion see Wu (2014).

further, in a style clearly echoing ancient Chinese thinkers, defines the task of analysis as subjective identification with the *sinthome*.

From a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, becoming a *shengren* (saint) can also be viewed as the sublimation of desire. As discussed earlier, as speaking and desiring beings, human beings desire in the metonymic mode, with the elusive *objet petit a* ('sublime object') as the cause of desire. In both Confucianism and Daoism which endorse the possibility of fully overcoming subjective destitution, the sublime 'sainthood' is not regarded as permanently elusive, but as a realizable virtuality embedded in the core of every human subject. Consequently, this sublime (-and-attainable) object, while amplifying the ethical call of not giving up one's desire, halts its metonymic movement. For Lacan, the metonymic movement of desire is the very mechanism which makes the capitalist economy thrive. That is why he equates the psychoanalytic concept of surplus enjoyment with the Marxist concept of surplus value. One cannot resist buying excessively because every satisfaction is always provisional: every time one purchases some commodity, one very quickly senses that it is not 'it'. However, in ancient Chinese thought one can only expect to receive the *full* amount of greatest joy, upon the realization of being congruent with oneself, but not the *residual* surplus enjoyment, which keeps desire's metonymic movement running. This is probably why China has developed a rich and powerful ethics, but not capitalism.

The Jouissance at the End of Analysis

Lacan's passion for ancient Chinese thought can be explained by demonstrating the significant amount of *intellectual support* he gained from reading *Daodejing*, *Mencius* and other Chinese classics in his own idiosyncratic style. Scherrer might not be wrong in noting that Mencius 'seems to be summoned by Lacan as an extra-territorial point of support, at a time when he himself has to face equally harsh polemical debates with the academic world' (Scherrer, 2010). One can even take Lacan's own claim at face value, that he would not have been able to become 'Lacanian' if he had not learned Chinese in his early years. There might be more unanalysable *jouissance* buttressing the psychoanalyst's eastward turn, but Lacan in his final years chose to leave off speaking about it.

The more ambitious thesis put forward in this article is that scholars working in the field of ancient Chinese thought can also benefit from a Lacanian psychoanalytic rereading of classical texts, as long as they put aside their rigid orthodox interpretations, and develop an understanding of what grounds the psychoanalytic method. This essay has demonstrated only a small example of such possible benefits by showing, through detailed analyses, (a) that underneath the ostensible rivalry between Mencius and Xunzi there is an unacknowledged (bed)fellowship; and (b) that the story about Confucianism and Daoism being irreducibly antagonistic has a repressed side, in which the founding masters share the exact same symbolic introjection as their ego-ideal (which is, 'the saint'), and rely 'unconsciously' on the same ethico-ontological structure to articulate their views.

There is more *jouissance* emerging out of this analysis, but it is time to leave off speaking.

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ABSTRACT

Lacan studied ancient Chinese classics assiduously, including *Daodejing* and *Mencius* during 1969–73 when his own thought was reaching maturity. Lacan's idiosyncratic interpretation of *Mencius* is often regarded as a simple misreading. This essay defends Lacan's reading of *Mencius* by treating it as a psychoanalytic reading. It further develops a reinterpretation of ancient Chinese thought by revisiting primarily two major disputes – Mencius versus Xunzi, Confucianism versus Daoism – through a Lacanian interpretative method. The research findings reveal the possible latent side of ancient Chinese thought that has substantially formed what Lacan called 'the Chinese unconscious'.

Keywords: the way, the heart, two modalities of subjectivity, castration, desire, *jouissance*, surplus, the Chinese unconscious