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# DEBATES ON MUTILATION: BODILY PRESERVATION AND IDEOLOGY IN EARLY CHINA

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## *Abstract*

The main purpose of this article consists of examining the crucial significance of mutilation, as a punishment following a crime committed against the prevailing legal and moral order, in the study of early Chinese intellectual history. It aims to show that focusing on this hitherto disregarded topic is highly beneficial in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of some of the most relevant problems in this period since legally mutilated persons seem to embody better than any other category the currently accepted logic about the correlation between body and ethics or, to put it more negatively, between physical deformity and moral deviance. Indeed, as it will be demonstrated, amputees were excluded in early China not only from any kind of politically significant role but also from any important ritual and social functions. This article discusses then the philosophical, political, social, legal and religious implications of those individuals who lost limbs as a result of penal dismemberment.

In a celebrated fragment of the *Xunzi* 荀子, we are told that the physical constitution of some of the most distinguished and honoured sages of ancient times was undeniably weird and astonishing. According to this source, the legendary minister Yi Yin 伊尹 was hairless while Hong Yao 閼夭 was tremendously bearded, Yu 禹 was a hunchback, Tang 湯 was hemiplegic, Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 each had a double pupil, and even Confucius' countenance was bizarre. Surprisingly, and in contrast with these odd and misshapen sages, the wicked tyrants Jie 桀 and Zhou 紂 were physically flawless and even

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magnificent in their bodies.<sup>1</sup> For Xunzi, the obvious lesson to be drawn from this is that moral judgments should not in any case be based on physical appearance. Xunzi's arguments in a chapter devoted to refuting the assumptions about physiognomy that were so widespread in belief and practice in Warring States China should probably be understood as a resolute attempt to contest a highly prevalent prejudice according to which bodily distortion was a necessary symptom of moral deviance.

However, my main concern here is neither the unusual bodily features of exceptional sages and ministers nor the numerous people in the Zhou dynasty that would have had to live with the crippling effects of accidental injury and battle wounds, but rather those hapless individuals who lost limbs as a result of penal dismemberment.<sup>2</sup> Historical, political and philosophical records demonstrate that the mutilation of body parts was one of the most widespread forms of the penal punishment system in early China.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, among the various kinds of physical injury punitively inflicted in ancient China, I wish to give special attention to the amputation of feet. Amputation did not only epitomise physical abnormality but also denoted legal exclusion and, with that, moral defectiveness. People who were not able to preserve the integrity of their bodies were generally depicted as being legal offenders or morally suspicious individuals and were thus frequently debarred from "normal" society. There seems to be a direct correlation between people who were able to maintain the integrity of their bodies and those whose lives did not offend the moral and legal precepts in force.

If I have decided to concentrate my analysis exclusively on one particular form of bodily mutilation, it is because it seems to embody better than any other category the currently accepted logic of the correspondence between physical damage and moral depravity. As we shall see, feet played an extremely important role in the discourses of the time about preservation of the body as a means of achieving and expressing moral as well as ritual excellence.

1 WANG, 19 debates on mutilation 74, *juan* 5:47–48. On Confucius' atypical bodily shape, see JENSEN, 1995.

2 For a complementary and alternative analysis of the various attitudes displayed by people in ancient China towards crippled and deformed members of their society, see: CAI and SONG, 2003; and MILBURN, 2007.

3 See, e.g., YANG, 1990:1238 (Zhao Gong 昭公, 3<sup>rd</sup> year); CHEN, 2000, *juan* 13:271; and BAN, 1962, *juan* 23:1091. See also CHEN, 1993.

## Physical and Moral Integrity: the Virtues of Cautious Walking

The idea of conserving the integrity of the body as a means of guaranteeing and manifesting an individual's moral virtue seems to be enshrined in the ideological nucleus of a good part of the currents of thought of the Warring States period. One of the most radical proponents of this belief was Yang Zhu 楊朱 with his insistence on "keeping one's life intact" (*quan sheng* 全生), which was simplified and caricatured by Mengzi 孟子 as the idea that "if he had been able to bring benefits to the whole world by pulling out a single hair, he would not have done so" (拔一毛而利天下，不為也). Yet, his words seem to betray a contradiction in this firm equation between physical conservation and moral rectitude so that they could be interpreted from a different viewpoint whereby this possible contradiction between good custody of the body and moral pulchritude could not only be avoided but it may even harbour within it a vocation that looks rather like solidarity.<sup>4</sup> As Graham puts it, the crux of Yang Zhu ideology is "keeping one's nature intact, protecting one's genuineness, and not tying the body by involvement with other 'things'."<sup>5</sup> However, the Yangist preservation of the body/self (*shen* 身) could implicitly evoke family attachments and, in consequence, instead of interpreting his statements as a kind of radically egoistic principle of "Keep yourself alive at all costs!" one could also read them as endorsing a way of preserving what one has inherited from one's parents and ancestors.<sup>6</sup> From this unconventional standpoint, Yang Zhu seems to be saying that there is nothing of greater value, nothing more important than one's body understood as the repository of family and even ancestral well-being. One should keep one's body intact and not allow the pursuit of wealth, power or status to put one's parents' legacy at risk.

Indeed, protecting the integrity of the body is also one of the core concepts and one of the main concerns in Confucian ideology. In this sense, the "Jiyi" 祭義 chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 offers an illustrative anecdote concerning the music master Zichun (yuezheng Zichun 樂正子春), an obscure disciple of Zengzi 曾子 who was famous for his inflexible sense of ritual propriety. He not

4 Cf. YANG, 1976, *juan* 7:230; JIAO, 1974, *juan* 13:539 ("Jin xin shang" 盡心上). For some suggesting remarks on the Yangist conception of bodily preservation see, e.g., LEWIS, 2006:18–19. On the philological and philosophical issues concerning Yang Zhu, see, e.g., ANDREINI, 2000.

5 GRAHAM, 1989:221.

6 EMERSON, 1996.



only believed that a son's own body could not be considered as a personal possession (*si you* 私有), but that it was the actual physical embodiment of his parents. Bodily self-preservation was regarded as an important element of filial piety and moral achievement.

To return to the particular case of feet, the following fragment clearly demonstrates the relevance of their physical integrity in Confucian moral ideology:

樂正子春下堂而傷其足，數月不出，猶有憂色。門弟子曰：「夫子之足瘳矣，數月不出，猶有憂色，何也？」樂正子春曰：「善如爾之問也！善如爾之問也！吾聞諸曾子，曾子聞諸夫子曰：『天之所生，地之所養，無人為大。』父母全而生之，子全而歸之，可謂孝矣。不虧其體，不辱其身，可謂全矣。故君子頃步而弗敢忘孝也。」

Zichun injured one of his feet while he was coming down from the principle chamber of his house. He therefore locked himself away for several months. After that, he still looked gloomy so one of his disciples asked him: "Your foot is already cured. But even after locking yourself away for several months you still seem to be depressed. Why is that?" Zichun answered: "Oh! Great question! Great question! Once I heard from Zengzi the following statement from the Master [i.e. Confucius]: 'Among all the beings Heaven produces and Earth nourishes, man is the greatest.' Parents give birth to his body in a perfect state of integrity; to return it in the same perfect state of integrity is what is called being filial. If he does not lose the integrity of his limbs and does not dishonour himself, we can claim that he keeps his integrity. Therefore, the superior man does not take a single step without taking filial piety into consideration."<sup>7</sup>

As already noted, this fragment of the *Liji* stresses the crucial role of physical integrity for being a proper son or, in other words, for practising one of the highest moral virtues and observing what was one of the main organizing principles in ancient Chinese society: filial piety (*xiao* 孝).<sup>8</sup> Even though the damage of his foot was caused by a simple domestic and even trivial accident, Zichun considers it a dramatically important event. The achievement of moral excellence, of true humanity (*ren* 仁), starts with loving one's parents. Since the first social environment in which one finds oneself is family, therefore it is perfectly natural to consider that in order to become a benevolent or suitable human being, one must first learn to be proper with one's parents. As a result, it

7 SUN, 1989:1228. All translations in this paper are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

8 Cf. SCHWARTZ, 1985:16–39. It is virtually impossible to survey here all the studies dealing with this crucial moral concept. Nevertheless, in my opinion, some of the best works on this specific topic are those of LI, 1974; KANG, 1992; KNAPP, 1995; HOLZMAN, 1998; and IKEDA, 2004.

might be said that filial piety is the fountainhead of morality.<sup>9</sup> Filial piety requires a man to preserve his body in good condition because he owes this body to his parents since, as asserted in the *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記: “one’s body is the embodiment of one’s parents’ own bodies” (身者親之體也).<sup>10</sup> If a man owes his whole existence to his parents, he has no private possessions at his disposal and he is not allowed to be destructive towards or even negligent of his body. Accordingly, as Zichun states, a man’s filial piety and moral excellence depend on his being able to safeguard the integrity of his body and, in particular, to preserve his feet in a perfect state by means of extreme caution as to where he steps (*qing bu* 頃步), or how he walks through life. The crucial role assigned to feet by Zichun is justified in the opinion uttered by Confucius and transmitted by Zengzi. Indeed, in a passage from the *Analects*, we find Zengzi arguing a similar point of view in powerful terms:

曾子有疾，召門弟子曰：「啟予足！啟予手！《詩》云：『戰戰兢兢，如臨深淵，如履薄冰。』而今而後，吾知免夫！小子！」

Zengzi was seriously ill. He summoned his students to him and said: “Look at my feet! Look at my hands! The *Book of Songs* says, ‘Fearful! Vacillating! As if facing a deep abyss, as if walking across thin ice.’ It is only from this moment hence that I know I have avoided desecration, my young pupils.”<sup>11</sup>

In this bathetic scene, with his disciples gathered around his deathbed, the moribund Zengzi shows them his feet and hands as a last symbol of an irreproachably prudent and perfectly virtuous life. The words uttered by Zengzi are particularly significant since, according to the Confucian doctrine, any testimony deriving from confrontation with imminent death would carry deep existential and pedagogical weight.<sup>12</sup> The immaculate condition of Zengzi’s extremities seems to certify his pristine moral behaviour. Again, a necessary overlapping between body and ethics, a direct correlation between people who are able to maintain the integrity of their body and those whose lives are in harmony with the moral and legal precepts in force, can be found in this striking

9 LI, 1997.

10 WANG, 1983:82–83.

11 *Lunyu* 8/3.

12 The words of a dying man are described precisely by Zengzi as morally and aesthetically “splendid” or “worthy” (*shan* 善): “Zengzi was seriously ill. When Meng Jingzi visited him, this is what Zengzi said: ‘Sad is the cry of a dying bird, but worthy are the words uttered by a dying man’” (*Lunyu* 8/4).

section of the *Analects*. Zengzi's argument concerning this profound correspondence between physical self-protection and moral perfection is reinforced by means of the quotation of a stanza from the *Book of Songs*, one of the most authoritative and respected written sources for early Confucianism, in which we find a description of the guiding principles of prudent conduct. According to the citation from the *Book of Songs* (Mao no. 195), our conduct in life should be comparable with the extremely cautious behaviour of someone who is facing a deep abyss or walking across thin ice. The archaic form of the graph *lin* 臨 (“facing”) is composed by a person with a big eye bending over and looking closely at some objects, in other words, paying great attention to the surroundings. On the other hand, the term *lǚ/li* 履, which I shall analyse in detail below, essentially denotes “stepping” or “walking”.<sup>13</sup> As in the preceding passage from the *Liji*, an appropriate and cautious step is far from being morally insignificant.

### Treading on the Tiger's Tail

With regard to the combined theme of amputation and correct walking, it may be appropriate to refer to another anecdote, recorded both in the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 and the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, concerning a curious being called Kui 夔. In the euhemerised histories of the Zhou dynasty, Kui is the Music Master of the great sages and rulers Shun and (sometimes) Yao, who were two of the most important political and moral exemplars for Confucius. However, in other scattered written sources we can find that it/he was also said to be a bizarre mythological creature with only one foot.<sup>14</sup> The anecdote is constructed around a reinterpretation of the term *zu* 足, which in archaic Chinese could mean both “foot” and “to be enough”. The *Hanfeizi* reproduces the dialogue between the Duke Ai of Lu and Confucius as follows:

哀公問於孔子曰：「吾聞夔一足，信乎？」曰：「夔，人也，何故一足？彼其無他異，而獨通於聲。堯曰：『夔一而足矣』，使為樂正。故君子曰：『夔有一，足』非一足也。」

13 DUAN, 1981:288 and 2, respectively.

14 One of the best studies on Kui as a music master is: GRANET, 1994:505–515. See also PRZYLUKSI, 1932–1933; EBERHARD, 1968:57–58; and CHING, 1997:17.

Duke Ai interrogated Confucius, saying: ‘I heard that Kui had only one foot. Is that true?’ Confucius answered: ‘Kui was a human being. Why should he then have only one foot? He was not an extraordinary being but just a very gifted musician. Hence, Yao declared ‘With a [person as talented as] Kui it is enough’ and appointed him as the music master. Therefore, noble men often state, ‘To have one [person] such as Kui, it is enough’, and not ‘to have one foot’.<sup>15</sup>

For all its apocryphal status, this dialogue between the Duke of Lu and Confucius offers some extremely interesting elements for our discussion. Traditionally, this anecdote has been read merely as an amusing episode of linguistic misunderstanding. Nevertheless, more comprehensive analysis shows that the philosophical dimension of this short dialogue bears much more fruit. One of the possible interpretations deals with the historical problem of Kui. From the first sentence uttered by the Duke Ai of Lu, it would seem that he is actually thinking of the mythological Kui, a prodigious creature with only one foot that, according to some textual sources, was also the inventor of the war drums and master of the storms.<sup>16</sup> There are some discrepancies about the specific nature of this beast: some sources claim that Kui is a monster of the mountains, while other texts and scholars argue that he is an aquatic being linked to dragons and water snakes.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, almost all of these sources agree that the most characteristic feature of Kui is that he has only one leg.<sup>18</sup>

15 CHEN, 2001, *juan* 33:731. As already noted, a different version of this same anecdote is also found in *Lüshi chungiu*: CHEN, 1998:1536. This is not the only analogous anecdote credited to Confucius since various ancient written sources depict him as giving a new historical explanation of lore and curiosities. In this sense, a fragment from the *Shizi* 尸子 preserved in the Tang encyclopaedia *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 records the following conversation between Confucius and his disciple Zigong: “Zigong said, ‘Should we trust the idea that in the past the Yellow Emperor had four faces [*si mian* 四面]?’ Confucius answered: ‘The Yellow Emperor took four people who were in accord with him and sent them to govern the four directions [*si fang* 四方]. [...] This is why they say ‘four faces’.” Quotation from CSIKSZENTMIHALYI, 2005:226.

16 YUAN, 1980:361. See also STERCKX, 2000.

17 The *Guoyu* 國語 records a passage where Confucius describes *kui* as a prodigy from the “woods and stones” (i.e. the mountains): SHANGHAI SHIFAN DAXUE GUJI ZHENGLIZU, 1978, *juan* 5:201 (“Lu yu xia” 魯語下). As for the association of Kui with dragons, snakes and other aquatic creatures, see GRANET, 1994:312.

18 The earliest Chinese lexicon dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 compiled by Xu Shen 許慎 (c. 55–149 C.E.), gives the following definition of the term *kui*: a kind of dragon with horns and arms, provided with a human face but with only one leg: DUAN, 1981:233. In the same sense, two excerpts from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 also associate the term *kui* with a bizarre being having only one leg: GUO, 1989, *juan* 17:592 and *juan* 19:652.

Confucius claims, however, that Kui is not a mythical creature but just a human being (*ren* 人, literally “a biped”) whose remarkable aesthetic qualities and moral virtues were immediately recognised by the great sage and ruler Shun. Confucius’ statements seem to be derived from some earlier textual sources that also supported this historical depiction of Kui. Probably the earliest and most relevant written reference is to be found in the *Shangshu* 尚書, one of Confucius’ favourite sources: the “Shun dian” 舜典 and the “Yi Ji” 益稷 chapters speak of music master Kui sounding the chimes that caused birds and beasts to frolic and gambol.<sup>19</sup> According to Confucius, Kui is above all an archetypal sage minister who, through the influence of music, that is, through the efficacy of culture, civilizes and dominates not only human beings but also all kinds of animals. In this sense, an extract from the *Liezi* 列子 again stresses the civilizing achievements of Kui, contrasting his cultured method (*yue* 樂, “music”) with the coercive or violent means (*li* 力, “physical strength”) preferred by the Yellow Emperor.<sup>20</sup>

This sheds more light on Confucius’ insistence on the historical version of the story: the music master and minister Kui represents the Confucian ideal of the primacy of the cultural/civil realm (*wen* 文) over the military sphere (*wu* 武) in order to govern and pacify the world. Yet the debate concerning the exact sense of the expression *yi zu* 一足 still remains unclear. Why is Confucius so reluctant to admit that Kui may only have had one leg? We could initially answer by arguing that the feature of having only one leg refers to the mythical description of Kui and therefore that it denies the “historical” reading upheld by Confucius. This still begs the question of why the historical version of Kui should be incompatible with this physical defect.

Wang Chong 王充 (27 – ca. 100 C.E.) provides some stimulating additional clues. He also rejects the mythological description of Kui and subscribes to the reasoning of the historical narrative, affirming that the idea of Shun appointing an amputated music master and minister is completely absurd: for him, it would be impossible to assign such an important official task to a

19 WANG, 1979:18 and 21.

20 YANG, 1976, juan 2:84. In a passage from the “Yueji” 樂記 chapter of the *Liji* we are told that in ancient times Yao created a special type of cithara (*qin* 琴) in order to intone popular songs while Kui was the first one to use musical instruments in order to grant administrative rewards (traditionally associated with the civil realm of government) to the feudal lords: SUN, 1989:995.

disgraced (or “polluted”) being.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it seems that in ancient China crippled, amputated or physically handicapped people were completely excluded from any kind of socially significant role or from any important ritual and religious functions.<sup>22</sup> Severe physical deformities made it impossible to participate in the rites of ancestral cults and, as a result, the families of those who suffered from them ran the risk of disappearing because of not being able to guarantee the continuity of the lineage or to win the favour of their ancestors.<sup>23</sup> Hence, amputation implied a tragedy that could sometimes be even more painful than

- 21 WANG, 1974, *juan* 16:40 (“Shu Xu” 書虛). The “Qu li” 曲禮 section of the *Liji* states: “the rites do not go down to the common people; the punishments do not go up to the social elite [*dai fu* 大夫]. And a punished, mutilated man should not stand next to the ruler.” SUN, 1989:80–81. According to Robin Yates, the last prescription is required because the mutilated, unwhole man would pollute the pure ruler or superior man (*junzi* 君子): see YATES, 1997.
- 22 Physical defects of feet probably caused ritual and religious incapacity in ancient China: see, for example, YANG, 1990:1298 (Zhao Gong 昭公, 7<sup>th</sup> year). According to several textual sources, amputated men were in charge of keeping the city gates. See, for example, CHEN, 2000, *juan* 31:632 and *juan* 33:722; SUN, 1987:791 (“Qiu guan si he” 秋官司寇). However, we can also understand this occupation as a kind of additional penalty since in the “Ji tong” 祭統 section of the *Liji* it is stated that “in ancient times, punished people were not forced to keep the gates”. SUN, 1989:1248. The recently recovered “Rong cheng shi” 容成氏 manuscript from the Shanghai Museum bamboo slips also depicts an ideal world of the past where “the dumb and the deaf handled torches, the blind played psaltery, the lame kept the gates, the dwarfs produced arrows, those with chest distensions were maintaining the dwellings, hunchbacks kept counts, those with tumours extracted salt by boiling, those with warts were fishing in the marshes; and persons who were abandoned [by their relatives] did not perish.” See MA, 2002:94–95 and 251–252. Indeed, it is plausible to interpret these two fragments about a more optimistic past when amputees were not obliged to keep the city gates or where marginalized people had some kind of decent employment as an indirect condemnation of the opposite practice at the time of writing. According to Hulsewé, the victims who survived penal amputation had to perform hard labor as a category of slaves called *cheng dan* 城旦. See HULSEWÉ, 1985:121.
- 23 Besides the damage to the ancestral body and the failure to act in a filial way, dismemberment could also imply another complimentary difficulty, namely the impossibility to leave one’s own imprints (*ji* 跡) for one’s descendants. Related to this, mention should also be made of the aspect of fertility involved in the injury of the feet since, according to some written sources, the ancestor-lady of the Zhou, Jiang Yuan 姜嫄, conceived Hou Ji 后稷 after stepping into the footstep of a giant: see, in: RUAN, 1996, 1:528 (*Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, Mao no. 245); YANG, 1976, *juan* 1:16; SIMA, 1959, *juan* 4:111 (“Zhou ben ji” 周本紀). For a detailed account on this issue, see also KARLGREN, 1948:215ff.; cf. GRANET, 1953; and WEN, 1982, vol. 1:73–77.



death.<sup>24</sup> Thus, if Kui really was a mutilated man, he would never become a sage minister or be appointed music master. Again, we find an unambiguous overlap between aesthetic prejudices and social discrimination: aesthetics are neither socially nor ethically trivial.

Indeed, there is an essential link between Kui, considered as an idealised master of music and dance, and the very origins of Confucianism as an integrated social and intellectual group. Robert Eno has already pointed out that early Confucianism (*ru jia* 儒家) could be defined as a largely social phenomenon, primarily involving the gathering together of men to chant ancient texts, sing ancient songs and play ancient music rather than as a “philosophical” school.<sup>25</sup> Recent research has demonstrated that it is possible to trace some interesting linguistic connections between them. According to the *Shuowen jiezi* lexicon, for example, the term *ru* 儒 should be associated with the term *rou* 柔 “soft” which, during the early Zhou period, was commonly written with a graph that evolved into the character *nao* 獯/猻. Again according to the *Shuowen jiezi*, this last character refers to a beast that has the shape of an ape. Moreover, in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, Kui 夔, graphically linked with the term *nao*, may be represented as an apelike creature or a shaman wearing a mask. It also seems to have been considered an ape-masked dancer (*nao*).<sup>26</sup>

Thus, if the dispute about the real nature of Kui is so significant for Confucius, it is to some extent because the euhemerised version of this narrative

24 In this sense, Marcel Granet states: “Le corps (comme l’âme), nourri par les communions familiales, est une parcelle d’une substance qui est propriété indivise de la parenté; chacun ne possède son corps qu’à titre précaire: c’est un dépôt que le mandataire, à son terme, devra restituer intégralement à la masse. D’où l’importance des mutilations dans le droit pénal public ou privé. Manger le fiel d’un ennemi ou mettre son corps en saumure, couper en quartiers un rebelle ou le réduire en cendre, couper l’oreille d’un vaincu, amputer un rival, châtrer un criminel, c’est avant tout atteindre celui dont on se venge dans son honneur domestique: c’est réduire le fonds de substance qui appartient à une famille. Pour elle, comme pour l’individu, la mutilation est chose plus grave que la mort.” GRANET, 1989:118.

25 ENO, 1990:33. From a similar perspective, Shirakawa Shizuka 白川静 considers that the origin of the term *ru* 儒 was derived from the symbol of a “shaman praying for rain” and he locates the birth of Confucianism among the social groups which performed these kinds of liturgies. SHIRAKAWA, 1972:79–81.

26 ENO, 1990:192–197. According to Akatsuka Kiyoshi 赤塚忠, the archaic graphic form for *nao* depicts the shape of a monkey associated to a pre-dynastic lineage spirit: AKATSUKA, 1977:295–301. For a comprehensive survey on the different theories concerning the original meaning of the term *ru*, from traditional to modern and contemporary approaches, see ZUFFEREY, 2003:21–139.



concerns one of the leading symbols of the power of music and dance, which, together with the performance of ritual action (*li* 禮), were the means of guaranteeing the social order.<sup>27</sup>

But what does this ritual action really mean? As indicated by the ancient dictionary traditionally credited to Xu Shen, the meaning of the character *li* 禮 is as follows: “To step on (*lü/li* 履). [The process] through which men serve gods and attain fortune. It consists of the elements *shi* 示 and *feng* 豐.”<sup>28</sup> However, the arguments on the correlation between the terms *li* 禮 and *lü/li* 履 are not exclusively based on the *Shuowen jiezi* definition, which could be read as a mere phonetic explanation, but also on other pre-Han philosophical literature. For example, Xunzi also defines ritual action through the notion of *lü/li* 履: “Ritual is [the path] along which men step.”<sup>29</sup> In any case, the definition provided by the *Shuowen jiezi* explains the religious dimension of ritual, not only because of the explicit explanation pertaining to the offerings made to the gods but also because the two radicals that make up the character *li* exhibit obviously religious semantic attributes.<sup>30</sup>

Although the form of this ritual action evolved over time, the original religious function of integrating and connecting the human realm with the numinous realm remained unchanged. Linked with this religious aspect, ritual action as interpreted throughout Western Zhou society also had a social as well as an aesthetic dimension. The social dimension of ritual derives from its power to delineate meanings within a hierarchical society. More than a simple matter of

27 As indicated in some Confucian texts, music and ritual are the two vectors of a coherent common political agenda: music creates harmony and unity among the subjects while ritual guarantees respect for hierarchical differences. See: SUN, 1989:986–987. This convergence of music and ritual can also be observed in the *Xunzi* where the “Lilun” 禮論 and “Yuelun” 樂論 chapters are to be read as two parts of the same argument.

28 DUAN, 1981:2b. According to the phonetic reconstructions of archaic Chinese, the term 履 was probably homophonous with 禮. See: ULVING, 1997:278.

29 WANG, 1974, *juan* 27:327.

30 Again, the *Shuowen jiezi* dictionary explains these two terms as follows: “*Shi* 示: Heaven sends down phenomena to reveal auspicious and inauspicious affairs to humankind” (DUAN, 1981:2b); “*Feng* 豐: A vessel filled with offerings. The shape of the character is derived from a vessel. It is said that it was used in wine-drinking ceremonies” (DUAN, 1981:208a). Akatsuka Kiyoshi argues that the original meaning of the term “ritual” (*li*) arises from the symbolism of drinking sacred wine during religious services. See: AKATSUKA, 1987:70. This assertion is also supported by the studies on the term *li* as it appears in the oracle bone inscriptions provided, for example, by XU, 1984:41–43; and VANDERMEERSCH, 1994:149–158 (“La mutation rituelle de la conscience religieuse”).

propriety, ritual was understood by Confucius and his allies as the very foundation of political order. From a sociological point of view, rites are clearly concerned with the maintenance of a social structure based on a harmonious pattern of different roles and statuses. The claim that political and social order depends largely on ritual can be complemented by a rather more drastic statement: contrary to the celebrated Aristotelian definition,<sup>31</sup> in some Confucian sources we find that the distinctive feature of human beings is not their ability to utter articulated words but rather their capacity to produce divisions (*fen* 分), and to establish hierarchical differences (*bian* 辨) that are fixed and choreographed through proper ritual actions.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, the aesthetic aspect of ritual activity can be illustrated by evoking the definition as offered by Xu Shen. According to his account, the first significance of ritual action is derived from the nominal meaning of the homophonous character 履 (“shoe”). Given that shoes were originally designed to protect and embellish human feet, they represent a cultural achievement that safeguards and improves on nature. Like ritual, shoes illustrate the ability to discriminate as well as the complementarity of nature and society and of functional and aesthetic qualities. A cultural adornment based on natural qualities, shoes symbolize the ideal harmony between external appearance and inner basic substance that, for Confucians, also defines ritual action.<sup>33</sup> The verbal

31 ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, 1253a, 10–18.

32 The *Liji* states in this same sense: “Ritual is the method that allows one to establish the positions between natives and foreigners; the means that makes it possible to settle doubts, to separate the similar from the different, to distinguish what is right from what is wrong.” SUN, 1989, *juan* 1:6. Another passage from the *Xunzi* clearly reveals the extensive overlap between divisions (*fen* 分), distinctions (*bian* 辨) and ritual (*li* 禮) where these three concepts are perfectly interchangeable: “What is that which makes a human being really human? I think that it is the establishment of distinctions (*bian*). To eat when we are starving, to warm ourselves when we are cold, to rest when we are tired, or to favour profit and hate harm, and we all receive these qualities when we are born. And it is not necessary to wait for them since they are inherent. Indeed, this nature is the same in Yu as in Jie. If somebody is considered a human being, it is not because he is a biped with hair but solely because he is able to establish distinctions. [...] And if it is true that there are parents and sons among the beasts, they do not have any kind of family tie; and if it is true that there are males and females among the beasts, they do not know anything about the separation of sexes. Hence, the way of human beings depends exclusively on their capacity to impose distinctions. Nevertheless, there is no greater distinction (*bian*) than separation (*fen*) and there is no greater separation than ritual (*li*).” WANG, 1974, *juan* 5:50. On this issue, see also: GERNET, 1999; and GOLDIN, 1999:72ff.

33 On this topic, see *Lunyu* 12/9.

signification of the term 履 (“to step on”, “to tread” or “to walk”) is also connected with shoes and feet.

Appropriate walking exemplifies correct and decorous conduct and, thus, it is possible to argue that in ancient China “ritual” and “step” sprang from similar terminology and compatible ideology. But it may be difficult to grasp the philosophical scope and the ethical implications of this term without taking into consideration its appearance in the *Zhouyi* 周易, or the *Book of Changes*. The tenth hexagram analyzed in this divinatory text precisely concerns the concept of 履, and the judgement on this hexagram states: “Even if one treads on the tiger’s tail it will not bite, so one will prevail.”<sup>34</sup> In terms of the hexagram lines, it refers to the one on top treading on the one below it, that is, Third Yin treading on Second Yang. Some lines later, the text clearly links the meaning of this term with the social function traditionally attributed to ritual action when it states: “Above the sky and below the lagoon, this is *lǚ/li* [履]. The noble man distinguishes the superior from the inferior and he appeases the purpose of the people.”<sup>35</sup> It seems obvious that the hexagram not only delineates the distinction between the different social classes but also defines the codes that regulate their exchanges: the acceptable logic is that of the superior treading on the inferior. This means that with the purpose of maintaining the moral order, the noble and the humble should pay close attention to, and respect, hierarchical rank. The association between the social and the moral values of this hexagram is reinforced when we read the commentary attached to the Third Yin, the position that governs the entire hexagram: “The one-eyed may still see, and the lame may still tread, but when such a person treads on the tiger’s tail, it will bite him, and he will suffer misfortune.”<sup>36</sup>

### The ultimate significance of feet and walking: ritual and destiny

The instruction of the superior man (*junzi* 君子), the authentic depository of the political and moral values of the idealized society according to the Confucian ideology, is accomplished through a meticulous and scrupulous process of ritual

34 LOU, 1980:272 (“Zhouyi zhu” 周易注). All fragments from the *Zhouyi* mentioned in this article are modified translations from LYNN, 1994. The relationship between walking and ritual action has been already suggested by LEVI, 1997.

35 LOU, 1980:272.

36 LOU, 1980:273.

training whose first and most important goal is a body conveniently instructed to express and translate externally, with precision, harmony and beauty, the inner moral quality through appropriate corporal gestures<sup>37</sup>.

The swinging oscillation of the head, the modulation of the voice, the position of the chest, the physical movements when walking, seating or standing and every single other aspect of the body should appropriately correspond to the patterns of the perfect ritual decorum transmitted through generations<sup>38</sup>. It is not solely a formal question, a strictly ceremonial matter; rather, it puts at stake the ritual correctness and, consequently, the interplay of the “choreographic” exchanges that very often determine the denouement of a political convention, a diplomatic reception, a family meeting, a burial, a banquet with comrades, etc., in ancient China. Moreover, as we have already stated, bodily accuracy directly translates the moral quality of any person and, hence, corporal movements should necessarily be scrutinized. The convergence between the maintenance of appropriate bodily attitudes and the structuring value of ritual as the supreme guarantee of social hierarchy is clearly stated in the following passage from the *Analects* where Confucius stresses the crucial significance of corporal accuracy when serving a lord:

入公門，鞠躬如也，如不容。立不中門，行不履闕。過位，色勃如也，足躩如也，其言似不足者。攝齊升堂，鞠躬如也，屏氣似不息者。出，降一等，惺顏色，怡怡如也。沒階趨進，翼如也。復其位，蹶蹶如也。

When entering the palace gate, he bended his body as if it were not sufficient to admit him. When standing, he did not dwell in the middle of the gateway and when advancing he did not tread upon the threshold. When passing the throne of the prince, his countenance was solemn, his feet moved swiftly, and his words came as if he hardly had breath to utter them. He ascended the reception hall holding up his robe, with his body bended and holding in his breath as if he dare not respire. When he came out from the audience, as soon as he had descended one step, he began to settle down his countenance, and regained peacefulness. When he had got the bottom of the steps, he advanced rapidly to his place, with his arms like wings, and on occupying it, his manner still showed respectful uneasiness.<sup>39</sup>

37 For example, Xunzi considers that the goal of ritual learning for the superior man is precisely to embellish his body: WANG, 1974, *juan* 1:8. Similarly, in the *Liji* it is stated that “the beginning of ritual decorum lies in correcting the body and the demeanour” (禮義之始，在於正容體): SUN, 1989:1411 (“Guan yi” 冠義).

38 As it is clearly stated in the *Liji*: “If the movements of hands and feet are not careless, they will fit ritual decorum” (手足不苟動，必依於禮): SUN, 1989:1239 (“Ji tong” 祭統).

39 *Lunyu* 10/4. For a similar standpoint, see also: SUN, 1989:817 and 834 (“Yu zao” 玉藻).

In this very same sense, the movements of the feet would seem to be in no way trivial when it comes to preserving ritual order since morally and ritually worthy persons should transform and adjust them appropriately, according to the circumstances, to the person who carries out the liturgy or to the social status of guests. For example, when facing the steps for ascending to the platform of the ancestral palace, the lord of the household will start by raising his left foot while the guest raises his right foot, each of them placing their opposite feet without ever inverting the correct order, in perfect synchrony. As Jean Levi has brilliantly shown, sometimes the rhythmical steps are sluggish, while other times they need to be swift and hasty. Frequently, the two feet are moved almost without leaving the floor, situating one after the other in silent, slithering procession. Sometimes, we should advance with circumspection; sometimes, on the contrary, it is suitable to adopt a lively step but, in any case, the destiny of a man can be divined from the way he walks.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the inner disposition and the very future of a person can be read in his way of walking, in the particular way he puts down and moves his feet. The following anecdote extracted from the *Discourses of the States* is illuminating on this issue: in the course of a convention of political ambassadors of various states that took place in Keling 柯陵, in the western area of Zheng 鄭, duke Xiang Dan 襄單公, counsellor of the sovereign of Chu 楚, meets prince Li 厲 of Jin 晉. However, when the encounter occurs, the gaze of the prince of Jin, who is clearly looking upwards, is far away and when he moves he excessively raises his feet. After noting all these subtle but significant details, duke Xiang Dan meets the prince of Lu and warns him about the troubles that will soon beset the state of Jin. Surprised by this statement, the prince of Lu asks how he has come to such a conclusion. Duke Xiang Dan is unambiguous: it is sufficient to scrutinize the movement of the prince's feet and the nature of his gaze to deduce the misfortune that will soon afflict the state of Jin. The duke's final claim is as follows:

夫君子目以定體，足以從之，是以觀其容而知其心矣。目以處義，足以步目，今晉侯視遠而足高，目不在體，而足不步目，其心必異矣。目體不相從，何以能久？

In the case of the superior man, it is the eye that governs the body while the feet just obey. Hence, when observing his demeanour it is possible to grasp his mind. The eyes express the sense of what is appropriate and the feet are accustomed to making the steps that the eyes have ordered. However, the lord of Jin has a distant look in his eyes and walks raising his

40 See LEVI, 1989:41.

feet so that his eyes are not in accord with his body and the feet do not follow the orders of the eyes: his mind is thus in disagreement. If the eyes and the body do not follow each other, how can one last long?<sup>41</sup>

The rules of courtesy require that one should not turn one's gaze upward but direct it towards the trunk of one's interlocutor. Consequently, in this particular case the prince of Jin shows complete ignorance of ritual conventions: he improperly and dangerously looks upwards in a gesture that may be interpreted as defiant. On the other hand, taking long strides is also read as a sign of smugness. The excessively lifted stride of the lord of Jin reveals a profound lack of knowledge of protocol, provoking an inevitable disturbance in social relationships, and is read by the duke Xiang Dan as divinatory, as a sign, as a revealing prophetic foretaste of what is to come. In fact, this is not the only fragment in pre-Han literature where a mistake or negligence in the bodily manifestation of the ritual protocols is interpreted as an unequivocal symptom of impending fatality.<sup>42</sup> We might also mention the evocative anecdote by Zigong concerning the ill-omened future of his sovereign, the lord of Lu:

十五年春，邾隱公來朝。子貢觀焉。邾子執玉高，其容仰；公受玉卑，其容俯。子貢曰：「以禮觀之，二君者，皆有死亡焉。夫禮，死生存亡之體也，將左右、周旋，進退、俯仰，於是乎取之；朝、祀、喪、戎，於是乎觀之。今正月相朝，而皆不度，心已亡矣。嘉事不體，何以能久？高、仰，驕也。卑、俯，替也。驕近亂，替近病，君為主，其先亡乎！」

In the spring of the fifteenth year, the duke Yin of the state of Zhu came to the court of Lu. Zigong witnessed the event. The duke of Zhu held his ceremonial jade high and turned his gaze upwards. The lord of Lu received the jade low and turned his gaze down. Then, Zigong said: "From the observation of rites, both rulers will perish. Ritual is the embodiment of life and death, survival or perishing. It is adopted by moving the body left or right, circling, advancing and retreating, gazing up or down. It is observed in court, in sacrifices, in mourning, and in warfare. Now, at the meeting in the first month at the court, both rulers failed to observe the proper measures; their minds have already forgotten the rites. If auspicious affairs do not receive the proper bodily forms, how can one last long? To hold the jade high and gaze up means overconfidence; to receive the jade low and gaze down means decrepitude. Overconfidence is close to rebellion and decrepitude is close to ailment. Since our ruler is the host, he will then perish first!"<sup>43</sup>

41 SHANGHAI SHIFAN DAXUE GUJI ZHENGLIZU, 1989, *juan* 3:91 ("Zhouyu xia" 周語下).

42 On this topic, see: ZHANG, 1987:134–136.

43 YANG, 1990:1600–1601 (Ding Gong 定公, 15th year).



Zigong, one of the most eminent disciples of Confucius, clearly considers ritual as bodily form, an embodied sign of human destiny. Accordingly, the fate of a person can be deciphered in his movements, can be observed as a physical phenomenon that is insinuated in his ritual actions. Physical gestures, manners and actions of princes and noble men, from the way they hold an object to the way they look to others, reveal the depths of their nature, of their moral inclinations and, in consequence, also outline their future in a society that is defined through and through by the correct performance of ritual, bodily action. It is not at all strange, then, that Wang Bi 王弼 (224–249 C.E.), one of the most reputed commentators on the *Zhouyi*, should end his explanation of the aforementioned tenth hexagram, which is precisely entitled *li/li* 履, in the following terms:

禍福之祥，生乎所履。[...] 故可視履而考祥也。

Fortune and misfortune are born from the place where feet are put. [...] Hence, by observing his step the destiny [of a person] may be revealed.<sup>44</sup>

Appropriate movement of the body (*xing* 行) exemplifies and sanctions the correct and decorous conduct of the self (*xing*).<sup>45</sup> Only by walking harmoniously (*xing*) is it possible to trace the correct and safe path (*dao* 道) towards moral excellence. As ritual, shoes and steps certify the proper forms and guarantee hierarchy and rank among different social strata. Hence, it is not surprising if the term that traditionally designates “rites”, 禮, or the fundamental principle of individual and collective order, is assimilated to its homophonous 履, “step” (but also “shoe”), by the transposition on the dimension of morality and that of conduct and action, of the necessity of a formal and external display that protects the feet from the danger of twisting or deviating. Ritual action acquires true meaning when the person infuses it with an appropriate aesthetic dimension,

44 LOU, 1980:276 (“Zhouyi zhu”).

45 Léon Vandermeersch seems to confirm such a set of semantic associations when he claims: “Les formes rituelles sont appelées *yi*. Leur nature de forme au second degré n’est pas clairement conceptualisée par les auteurs chinois; mais elle transparait dans une comparaison très ancienne et très courante qui fait des chaussures (*li*) l’image des rites (*li*): les chaussures sont à la façon de marcher ce que les rites sont à la façon de se comporter. Façon de marcher et façon de se comporter s’expriment par le même mot, *xing*.” VANDERMEERSCH, 1994:212.



confirming the necessary link between what is “right” and what is “good form”.<sup>46</sup>

In a text from the Han dynasty, *Discourses on Salt and Iron* (*Yantielun* 鹽鐵論), we find a passage harshly claiming that people who have been punished physically for committing a crime or an offence (*xingren* 刑人) cannot fully be considered as human beings:

古者，君子不近刑人。刑人，非人。

In antiquity, superior persons did not approach punished men since punished men are not human beings.<sup>47</sup>

In ancient China, human beings are only fully human insofar as they are appropriately inserted in a mesh of interpersonal relationships that constitutes their social life and that also defines their positions and ranks within the community. The assumed homophony and morphological similarity between the graphic sign that designates the human species, *ren* 人 (a biped being), and the Confucian moral key value, *ren* 仁, morphologically composed by the radical of the human beings and the number two, is not trivial at all. This latter term expresses the reciprocity and innate sociability of the human condition.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, an amputee, inasmuch as his mutilation (which can even negate his human-defining condition as a biped) is the direct result of a crime committed against the legal and moral order in force and stands to lose not only the possibility of being an ethically suitable, properly human subject (*ren* 仁), but even his very human condition (*ren* 人), thus to become a socially dead being, a

46 In the *Liji* we find the following definition of ritual: “Rituals are like a human body (*ti* 體). If the body is not complete, the noble man will consider that the person is not accomplished.” SUN, 1989, vol. 2:651. On the other hand, for the threefold conceptual convergence of “ritual action” (*li* 禮), “body” (*ti* 體) and “righteousness” (*yi* 義) in Confucian thought, see HALL and AMES, 1985:85–110.

47 HUAN, 1974, *juan* 57:59 (“Zhou Qin” 周秦).

48 As Peter Boodberg states: “*Ren* 仁, ‘humanity’, is not only a derivative, but is actually the same word, though in a distinct graphic form, as the common vocable *ren* 人, ‘man’, *homo*. That is no mere pun, as Professor Dubs believes; the consubstantiality of the two terms is part and parcel of the fundamental stratum of Chinese linguistic consciousness, and must be reflected somehow in the Occidental translation.” BOODBERG, 1953:328. The *Mengzi* explicitly argues the indissoluble link between these two concepts when it asserts almost tautologically: “Human virtue means to be a human being” (仁也者人也): JIAO, 1974:575 (“Jin Xin xia” 盡心下).

non-person. He must be defined then as an outlaw, an expelled and excluded being, an element of social perturbation.<sup>49</sup> Because of his bodily deformation, the amputee stands outside the order of law and ritual, disqualified from the most elementary religious and social forms, unable to fulfil two basic aspirations in the life of any successful man of his time (being filial and serving his lord): he is no longer a human being and finally becomes a real monster.

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With his terrified and terrifying body that has both suffered horror and provokes it, the mutilated individual is not only a reminder of the unbearable and infinite precariousness of human existence and does not only bring to mind the atrocious anguish of the dismantled body that is the raw material of nightmares. Enshrined in Confucian thought, in the dominating ideology of ancient China, bodily dismemberment includes meanings that directly pertain to the efficacy of the ritual system. Amputation epitomises values that indicate the collapse of the rigid filiation between bodily integrity and moral rectitude. The mutilated being manages to cancel out for a moment the apparent solidity of the social order, thereby becoming a pure threat, a monstrous disturbance that must be excluded and neutralised.

Given this generalised and compact stance *vis-à-vis* deformed men the remarkable position of the *Zhuangzi* should be duly emphasised. Unlike what occurs in the remainder of the period's written tradition, in the *Zhuangzi*, amputees have a radically opposite function, and this should be carefully analysed. As is well known, the presence of these mutilated characters is almost exclusively concentrated in the fifth chapter of the work ("De chong fu" 德充符). In fact, over a third of this section is dominated by a series of characters who have in common the fact that the particular form of physical mutilation that has been inflicted upon them is foot amputation. The chapter begins with the words of Wang Tai whose one foot was amputated. This first

49 As Karen Turner points out: "Just as physical completeness was a necessary condition that enabled individuals to carry out their single most important duty to society, service to their parents and their ancestors, so too a unified realm was a necessary condition for peace and stability. Just as any amputation of the body politic potentially threatened the correct order so too mutilation of the criminal body created a human with no place in the society of the living or the dead. And such humans were feared for their capacity to disrupt normal society." TURNER, 1999:252.

appearance is followed by a dialogue between the celebrated intellectual and statesman Zi Chan and another amputee named Shentu Jia 申徒嘉, paving the way for the conclusion of the cycle with a surprising discussion between Confucius and a lame man by the name of Shushan No-Toes 叔山無趾. One of the most striking features of the amputees that appear in the *Zhuangzi* is that their presence is situated in that part of the text which subsequent textual criticism has come to define as “inner chapters”, by which they refer to the package of core writings that are directly attributed to the handwriting of Zhuang Zhou 莊周 comprising the seven first sections of the *textus receptus*. Hence it would seem logical to think that the emergence of these singular beings in the work cannot be explained by criteria, intentions or circumstances external to the author’s will but, rather, that it is a result of Zhuang Zhou’s own direct intention.

In brief, the presence of the amputees is neither gratuitous nor trivial and, in principle at least, one might suppose that their blatant irruption into the text, their reiterated materialisation throughout these inner chapters is because they have a significant, deliberate and carefully premeditated function. The appearance of these mutilated characters needs to be interpreted in philosophical terms. In the unfolding and development of the ideas expressed in the work, this category of exceptional beings has a clearly defined role to play in giving shape to a major philosophical, social and political critique.<sup>50</sup> One of my intentions in writing this article, then, has been to revive intellectual discussion of the relationship between bodily preservation and moral integrity in the hope that it might be helpful in restoring an appropriate historical, sociological and philosophical context that will lead to an eventual reinterpretation of the value of these important characters in the *Zhuangzi*.

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50 See my two papers GALVANY, 2008 and (forthcoming).

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