

The Value of Waiting— Inspired by Huang Zongxi's *Waiting for the Dawn*, *A Plan for the Prince* **

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Foreword

Waiting for the Dawn, A Plan for the Prince by Huang Zongxi (1610–1695) is one of the twelve texts in the syllabus of “In Dialogue with Humanity”.¹ By the time students encounter this text, they will have had eight weeks of discussing the classics. On the one hand (at least theoretically), students would be at a comfortable level of familiarity with the format of the course and with their peers’ ideas and habits in the class. On the other hand, as the first text of the last section of the syllabus, *Waiting for the Dawn* is

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1 This course is to be fully launched as part of the General Education Foundation Programme in fall, 2012. The syllabus organizes the texts into three sections: “self and human capacity”, “faith and human limitation”, and “self in social institutions.”

to inaugurate a variety of issues concerning the self in society that students may not have asked in earlier parts of the course.² The text therefore plays a double role: opening a new field of inquiry and new kinds of reasoning, while showing the limitations and complexity of the concerns of self proposed in the contexts of individual self-cultivation. This paper aims at registering some common responses from students when they encountered *Waiting for the Dawn*. I have chosen to paraphrase their responses into an imaginary letter to the teacher so that the concerns culminate into the figure of one first-year student. While this figure is a generalization, my purpose of doing so is twofold. First, I would like to give readers a sense of who the student is in Hong Kong, and specifically in The Chinese University of Hong Kong. I hope this figuring would conjure up a concrete sense of students' queries and needs that may become a reference for teachers joining the Programme and those outside of Hong Kong who may be considering "global texts" and their possibilities in any core curriculum. Second, the idea of the letter creates a dialogue situation, which is the core value of our programme. We believe it is by bringing students into dialogues with each other that their ideas are exposed, articulated, examined, and made debatable. Only then could they learn to become good listeners and acquire an awareness of living among others. Only then can the waiting for the syllabus to unfold, for ideas to anchor, can be active and positive.

I have all my students to thank for contributing their energy and thoughts

2 Of the twenty-one chapters of the book, we have selected four of them for discussion: "On the Prince" (*yuan jun* 原君), "On Ministership" (*yuan chen* 原臣), "On Law" (*yuan fa* 原法), and "Schools" (*xue xiao* 學校).

to the classes. They have made this paper possible, and our brief encounter, a fruitful process of learning together.

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Dear Teacher,

When I first came into university, I wanted to know everything about the world—where it is, how it works, where it ends. My parents were thrilled, too. I am the first in my family to have been admitted into a university. They have high hopes: University education promises a good job, and hence, stable income to support the family.

This is why I was at first perplexed that the university makes the course “In Dialogue with Humanity” compulsory. I thought universities encourage independent and autonomous learning. I thought we as students are recognized as adults and capable of making choices. I am not interested in classics, but I can’t skip the course. I was very worried that not doing well would affect my grades, and disqualify me from applying for exchange programmes and overseas internships! I was also panicking over the sheer thickness of the book! I was thinking to myself so many times, “How could I ever finish the readings?”

But then, time flies. Now that I have stumbled my way through, I must admit I find Homer, Plato, Confucius, and Zhuangzi not as intimidating and distant as I thought before. They are all great story tellers! Aristotle’s writing is quite different, but his concern for friendship helps me a lot in thinking about my campus life. There are many “friends” that I say hello and goodbye

to every day. But they are far from what Aristotle thinks are true friends. I feel assured by him that true friends are rare. As for the Book of Genesis and Book of Job in the Bible, reading them made me realize it's not what people said it is.³ I never thought that there could be two different, even contradictory creation stories in one holy book, and their differences are fascinating to me. Also, I have never thought of the Bible as being authored. I remember when we were discussing the order of God's creation, we were all puzzled why God creates human beings last. I like the answer from one classmate most: She commented that the creation order isn't just a sequence of events, but a set of relations. Humans are created last because God wants humans to be dependent on nature. How true, how sad, that we seem to have forgotten this relation as we keep consuming natural resources. I can also see this message in surah 2 of the Qur'an, too. The image of gardens where rivers flow strikes me—water must have been as important for the ancients as for us now. The Heart Sutra is so short that at first I thought it would be easy. Of course it turned out to be a compact expression of all core ancient Buddhist ideas. Without Master Thich Nhat Hanh's commentaries with many modern and lifelike stories told in metaphors, I don't think I would have understood the sutra. It seems the stories are quietly slipping into my life, touching me in spots that itch, which is also why I felt disoriented when I picked up Huang Zongxi's text. His comments are so brisk and sweeping, his attitude so scornful, that I find it hard to be convinced.

I first came across Huang's name during my secondary school days in China. But we have never read his work in the original. My teacher back

3 This is a remark made by my student after her oral presentation for the Bible class.

then said that Huang, as a Confucian scholar, was concerned about political change like Confucius himself. Indeed, our readings show how critical he is with the dynastic system. But I don't see him proposing any change to this system, in which the prince still holds final power on all matters regarding the all-under-Heaven. If the prince continues to hold this power, doesn't it still make him autocratic, the very problem that Huang identifies in the first place?

Huang also speaks strongly about the relation between the prince and ministers. For him, the idea that their relation is the same as the father-son relation is wrong. He believes the son is naturally born to know the father's unexpressed needs, for they are born from the same "vital spirit" (Huang, 1993, p. 96). However, the terms "prince" and "minister" are designations for public offices. They are derived from the relation to all-under-Heaven (Huang, 1993, p. 96). I think this is consistent with Confucius's original idea, too. He may not be as clear as Huang about these designations being public offices, but he is very much aware of the reciprocal relation between the prince and minister—they respect each other, and the minister should not blindly obey the prince.⁴ For him, it's vital that both relations are based on the concrete virtue of humaneness. I guess somehow, there must have been some meddling up of the ideas by generations of Confucians to come so that during Huang's times, a clarification and re-examination became urgent.

4 "Master You said, A man filial to his parents, a good brother, yet apt to go against his superiors—few are like that! The man who doesn't like to go against his superiors but likes to plot rebellion—no such kind exists! The gentleman operates at the root. When the root is firm, then the Way may proceed. Filial and brotherly conduct—these are the root of humaneness, are they not?" (*Xue Er* 1:2, Confucius, 2007, p. 16). See also the idea of reciprocity between the prince and minister here, "Duke Ding asked how the ruler should treat his ministers and how the ministers should serve the ruler. Confucius replied, The ruler should treat his ministers according to ritual. The ministers should serve the ruler with loyalty" (*Ba Yi* 3:19, Confucius, 2007, p. 29).

But there's what makes me truly perplexed about Huang's ideas. It seems to me Huang's "law" refers to something different from the "law" in our idea of rule of law. Huang argues those who rule share the same purpose, and laws share this purpose, too. But he doesn't talk about equal rights under the law. Why then would people call Huang's ideas "democratic"? Above all, what means to me most, and confused me most, are his ideas on schools. He talks about many kinds of schools. I am surprised that he thinks schools are not just for the training of scholar-officials. I have dreamt about landing on a nice, well-paid job in the civil service after graduation. My friends whose parents are civil servants said that in their days, students would scramble to take the civil service entrance examination, because a job in the civil service was considered an "iron rice bowl." While I don't fancy much working in the civil service, I have never thought that this view could actually limit the idea of a university.

I become more confused as he goes on to say that schools should share with the Son of Heaven "the determination of right and wrong" (Huang, 1993, p.104). As a first-year student, I don't think I am ready for this! I know so little! How can I judge like the way the Son of Heaven, or any of the leaders and rulers of our society do? Would the Son of Heaven actually listen to us? It's hard enough to find the courage to speak directly to our Vice-chancellor, let alone the head of state! Huang actually makes me realize how courageous Telemachus has been, taking a deep breath before speaking in the public assembly attended by his father's friends, nobles and elders from around Ithaca. Isn't Huang expecting too much when he says the prince would actually sit in the schools and listen to criticisms? I simply can't imagine our Vice-chancellor sitting next to me in a tutorial, and how I may react if he did!

Above all, I don't like politics, and I don't want to waste my time in politics. I don't expect to learn knowledge that is tainted with political stances. In my secondary school days, we had to sing the national anthem during the morning assembly every day. We had to keep quiet and watch the national flag being hoisted. I found the whole ritual very boring, and I didn't see how it was related to me. I do regard myself as Chinese and I don't understand why this ritual is needed to remind me of this. For me, this is politics, and I don't expect to be involved in similar things as a university student. My friends participated in the protest against the high-speed train⁵ two years ago. They skipped classes to be in the protest. I just don't get it. What's the use of protesting if you failed your courses and got kicked out of the university? How then could you contribute to society? I am hoping to hear what you think about all these.

your Student

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Dear Student,

I smile as I read your letter. You begin with an exalted curiosity. You bring it into a wonder, the same way Huang Zongxi opens his book. I am sure Huang would smile like I do if he knows your reaction to his work. To doubt is good.

5 Between 2009 and 2010, a series of protests against the construction of the Guangzhou-Hong Kong Express Rail Link took place. Some protests were in the form of a "prostrating walk"; others included sit-ins around the Legislative Council building in Hong Kong.

You have asked many questions. Let me respond to your queries about *Waiting for the Dawn* first. You mentioned that part of the difficulty comes from leaping from texts written with storylines and a literary dimension to Huang's argumentative thesis. I understand your frustration. It reminds me of some of your classmates who also found it hard to change from the poetic Book of Job, to surah 2 of the Qur'an. When I first read Huang's book, I was taken aback and put off by his style, too. He did sound too scornful to me and I blamed it on his pride. I even doubted his judgment. But then as I learn more about him as a person, how he risked his life when he was just nineteen like you, to avenge his father who died in prison without being brought to trial (Huang, 2001), and how he identified issues of injustice one by one, with the interests of the common people in mind, I started to admire him. I am also moved by the moments of personal reflection that slip into his otherwise strongly-worded essay. Remember in the Preface, he called himself "The Old Man from Li Chou", and he pondered about his age in the midst of rain?⁶ I imagine him sitting in a simple house thinking about a future that is beyond his lifetime, but of which he feels a part. I admire him for caring about something larger than himself. I wonder if he were your friend, speaking to you about getting old, and being anxious with what was going wrong with society, what would you do? Would you be able to empathize with him more? Would you be willing to let him speak with scorn? You know, sometimes we are angry precisely because we care. Just imagine if he takes away all

6 In the Preface of *Waiting for the Dawn*, Huang recalls setting to write "while rain beat at the windows". In the concluding paragraph of the Preface, he says, "Old though I am, I may be that I, like Chi Tzu, could still be visited [by a prince in search of wisdom]. 'Dawn is just breaking and the light is still quite faint,' but how could I, on this account, keep my opinions to myself?" See Huang, 1993, pp. 89-90.

the exclamation marks from the writing. Would it be equally effective? And he hasn't stopped at using the power of emotions. He also uses refutation, confirmation, and other kinds of reasoning, and makes a lot of historical and classical references. His argument is informed and persuasive. I secretly wish I could write like him, with such rigor and passion.

Now, coming to your point about the meddling up of the interpretation of Confucius in the prince and minister relation, I cannot agree with you more. If you read the chapter Eunuchs (Part 1), which is not in our syllabus, Huang says that the true way of conduct for ministers have long lost as "petty Confucians" pronounced, "The Prince, our Father, is Heaven itself!" (Huang, 1993, p. 167) Isn't this analogous to the way the classics are frequently referred to in our daily lives, but not always in the most authentic way? There are also power and interests involved in mis-interpretations. It means a lot to me that we are now sharing our reading experiences, and making our own judgments according to the original text and by comparing translations. This is like a detective's job, don't you think?

You mentioned that Huang hasn't challenged the autocratic tendency of monarchical rule as a political system. This is a perceptive remark. I think you are asking the same question that many of his readers have asked: If the power remains in the hands of the ruler only, any talk about the interests of the people can be mis-informed or mis-directed, for there is no institutional provision for the ruler to seek the views of the people, and act accordingly, and if not, bear the public consequences. It may be interesting for you to note that Wm. Theodore de Bary, who is translator of the English version of the book we are reading, recognizes how Huang's ideas were interpreted as "a distinction between a doctrine emphasizing the primacy of the people's

needs and interests (*min ben zhu yi* 民本主義), compatible with constitutional monarchy, and one instating on the people's sovereignty (*min zhu zhu yi* 民主主義) as the republicans would have it." (Huang, 1993, p. 19) His reading is that Huang makes it very clear that the people, or "all-under-Heaven", should be "masters" or "proprietors" (*zhu* 主) in the land, hence writing in a language that "corresponded closely to that found in political discourse to represent democracy as 'the sovereignty of the people' (*min zhu zhu yi* 民主主義)." (Huang, 1993, pp. 19–20) Remember we learnt the Greek meaning of democracy as people (*demos*) holding power (*kratos*) when we read Plato's *Symposium*? Think also of how schools are expected to participate in decision making. This amounts to saying that dissenting opinions are legitimate and can be voiced out. So we can at least argue that Huang is concerned about the checks and balances of power that would make the monarchical system relatively less autocratic. What do you think about this?

Regarding schools, you have raised an important point about how Huang's proposal could be relevant for us today—how universities as a community of teachers and students are related to political institutions in a society. There are many layers in this "relation". In the most basic sense, Huang would like to see, first, a relation formed, for the distance between the court and the scholars was widening during his times. One could also say that he would like to see the primary purpose of the relation reinstated. It was understandable because during his times, opinions that were different from and critical of the court's had been systematically discouraged, let alone channeled all the way to the prince. The court had simply been

blocked out from the information about how the common people lived, thanks to powerful eunuchs who controlled the treasury and used secret service to eliminate critics. This constituted the kind of misrule that Huang was highly critical of. For Huang, good rule must be informed rule, hence the importance of schools in contributing to informing the rulers. Secondly, Huang would like to see this relation be formalized, hence safe for scholars who openly expressed dissent. If the safety of the prince's critics could be guaranteed, this would have been a big step towards protecting the freedom of speech and expression, which we value so much in our society today.

Now, with these few points in mind, do you have a different sense of what "politics" can be? Huang's idea of political activity is public debates on values. While I understand your frustration with singing the national anthem in morning assemblies, it isn't the best example to illustrate Huang's concern. I wouldn't know how he might have reacted to this ritual, but for him, politics is an important area of life for those holding public offices. The aim of political activities is the people affected by them. Also, when you talked about politics tainting knowledge, you are suggesting that politics is somehow a barrier to learning. I think this way of understanding politics and learning or the pursuit of knowledge is too much of a simplification. For now, I would say that politics isn't just about taking sides; it is about being aware of the terms on which we live together in a society, and the terms on which changes are legitimate and valid. Only when we think of these terms as responsibilities concerning common interests can we understand why Huang is so angry with princes who regard all-under-Heaven as his own personal

property. To talk about responsibilities is easy, but to carry them out, holding them up in times of difficulties, and holding them dear for others, could be very demanding.

Finally, a brief response to your question about Huang's style. I am happy to learn that you have noticed the differences between Huang and the classics we have read earlier in the course. In fact, there is a more complex collection of styles than just an opposition between narrative and argumentative writings. Huang uses metaphors, too. Remember how he compares the relation between the prince and the ministers as partners in carrying logs, to illustrate the similarity between their goals and designations? You have also noticed how the style of each text varies according to the intended purpose and how it becomes a text. For example, some of you in the tutorial group were frustrated by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, saying it is repetitive and convoluting. It is true in a way, but we must also keep in mind that this book was originally a set of lecture notes. Imagine Aristotle speaking in the Lyceum, pacing about in the grove while thinking at the same time. It would be unfair to demand Aristotle of Plato's style. This applies to your work, too! Your work is your voice, just as Huang's work is his voice. Think also of the multi-cultural character of the Bible. Having been passed on to us from many different generations of scribes, its diversity precisely defines its unique style. All these don't explain Huang's style, of course. But they do tell us something about appreciating how authors express their ideas are closely related to particular historical and cultural contexts and conventions. Now that you have critically and sensitively identified the strengths and limitations of each style, I encourage you to pursue your own.

On this note, let me reiterate that all these texts we have read together have gone through long processes of canonization. And this process doesn't have to end. In fact, we are the ones who live the texts by reading them, asking questions about them, letting them lead us into worlds that are far in place, but close and graspable in time. The questions you have asked have a reach that stretches far beyond one text. Let them linger in you and don't rush to conclusions. You may be surprised how in time, you will smile at this memoir of learning that cuts through time.

I happily wait for the day our paths cross again.

your Teacher

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