WORD AND WORD HISTORY IN THE ANALECTS:  
THE EXEGESIS OF LUN YÜ IX.1  

BY  
WILLIAM G. BOLTZ  

I. 

Those anonymous worthies, admirable in their faithfulness to the Master, disciples of his disciples, who are responsible for giving written form to Confucius' teachings and sayings have stirred up immeasurable perplexity with their rendering of the opening line of Book IX of the Lun yü (abbr. LÝ). The received version of the text reads: tzu han yen li yü ming yu jen 子罕言利與命與仁 and is usually translated something like "the Master rarely talks about profit, or fate, or jen" (however one chooses to translate the abstraction called jen.) The trouble arises, of course, from the all too obvious fact that whatever may be the case for li and ming, the Master has something to say about jen at nearly every turn. The ten additional occurrences of the word li, at least five of which can be considered to be about li, rather than just uses of the word as 'profit' in its quotidian sense, may be few enough to justify the qualifier 'rare'. For the twenty-one occurrences of ming (not counting the expression t'ien ming 天命), at an average of about once per book, we may have to stretch our notion of what the word 'rare' signifies a bit. But there can be no quibble with the claim that Confucius was regularly and indeed primarily concerned with jen, and it never seems to have been long removed from his thoughts or words, at least as they are conveyed to us in the LÝ. It is mentioned more than a hundred times, and the ostensible assertion that he 'rarely' talked about it simply cannot be countenanced.  

It is just the impossibility of such a statement that has kept the textual critics and exegetes busy already from Han times trying to explain away the manifest incongruity of IX.1. Ho Yen 何晏 (ob. 249), the compiler of the collected Han notes to the LÝ, and author of his own, followed by Hsing Ping 邢昺 (932–1010) of the Sung, suggests that since jen is the fulfillment of human behavior, and few men have the capacity to achieve it, the Master therefore rarely spoke of (achieving) it.¹ Little more than a century after Hsing

¹ LÝ chu shu 御疏 9/1a. Shih san ching chu shu chiao k'an chi ed.
Ping that staunch defender of the word and re-molder of the faith, Chu Hsi (1130-1200) simply stresses the harm to \textit{i} that is sure to ensue should one indulge an over-anxious concern with ‘profit’, and maintains a stolid silence in the face of the inherent implausibility of the claim with respect to \textit{jen}.\textsuperscript{2} The most important of the Ch’ing \textit{LY} scholars from a hermeneutic point of view is generally considered to be Liu Pao-nan 劉寶楠 (1791-1855) whose \textit{LY cheng} \textit{i} 正義 appeared posthumously in 1866. He avers, with unmistakable understatement, that of the three things mentioned Confucius spoke less rarely of \textit{jen} than of the other two, and of \textit{li} most infrequently. Thus, it is \textit{li} that heads the list of what the Master rarely spoke of, followed by \textit{ming} and \textit{jen} conjoined to it in each case with the word \textit{yì} 與 to indicate a kind of decreasing magnitude of not being spoken of.\textsuperscript{3} Liu adds to his notes the comments of his contemporary and senior, the great Ch’ing philologist and lexicographer, Juan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1848) to the effect that as a matter of fact Confucius’ discussions of \textit{jen} are not only frequent, but rather fully developed, and how can anyone seriously claim that he “rarely spoke of it” at all?\textsuperscript{4} Later efforts to see the sense of this passage, Chinese, Japanese, and Western alike, have on the whole not fared notably better.\textsuperscript{5}

The line has most recently been singled out by Stephen Durrant as an instance where a conscientious translator ought in good faith alert his reader to the fact that there is some doubt about the exact meaning of the passage, and that whatever translation is being offered, it is only one of a couple of possibilities.\textsuperscript{6} Durrant does not himself opt for any particular understanding of the line, but confines his remarks to citing a few of the various ways it has been dealt with in the past. From his notes, as well as from the opinions he cites, it becomes clear that the crux of the matter lies with the meaning and function of the word \textit{yì} 與 in the passage.

Durrant refers to the opinion of the Sung scholar Shih Sheng-tsu

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{LY chi chu} 樂注 5/1a. \textit{Chung hua ts’ung shu} ed.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{LY cheng i 正義} 10/1a-b. \textit{Huang Ch’ing ching chieh hsü pien} ed.
\textsuperscript{4} For Juan Yuan’s discussion see his \textit{LY lun} \textit{jen} \textit{lun} 論仁論 14a. \textit{Huang Ch’ing ching chieh} 1071.
\textsuperscript{5} The respected Japanese scholar of the Chinese classics, Takezoe Kökō 竹原光鴻 (1842-1917), for example, allows as to how these are things Confucius is said to have rarely spoken of, not things he is said to have never spoken of, as if this concession to the relative sense of \textit{han} 可 could be a recourse. At the end of his remarks he is forced to acknowledge that the \textit{LY} is in fact heavily laden with references to \textit{jen}. But he seems to suggest that these are allusions to \textit{jen}-type behavior, which he enumerates, and are thus to be distinguished from actual discussions of \textit{jen} itself. See his \textit{Rongo kaisen} 詩箋 9/1a-b. \textit{Kuang wen shu chi} ed.
\textsuperscript{6} On Translating \textit{Lun yì}, \textit{CLEAR} III. 1 (Jan., 1981), p. 112.