

# Self-immolation as the ultimate form of crisis response in early Chinese philosophy

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In early China, the perception and conceptualization of suicide, and especially of honour-related suicide, is substantially positive. This despite the fact that suicide is in principle an unfilial act, since the body is considered a sacred gift received by one's parents, the integrity of which has to be protected at any cost. Under certain circumstances however, self-immolation is the only possible choice left for someone to preserve one's dignity and reputation. In particular, in early Confucianism "protest suicide" is not only accepted, but openly promoted as the ultimate resolution that a true scholar might find himself to make in order to restore one's tarnished reputation from unjust accusations, or to strongly re-affirm one's moral stance and dignity against a general situation of corruption and moral decay. This paper addresses the principle of "protest suicide" of a scholar as an ultimate response to a personal or socio-political crisis in early Chinese sources, with an ultimate focus on received texts associated with the Confucian tradition.

The term "crisis" comes from the ancient Greek *krisis*, which concerns two different semantic areas, pertaining respectively to the legal and medical realms. The word can mean "to discriminate, to distinguish, or to judge" (as in a lawsuit), hence "to make a choice, decision, or judgement;"<sup>1</sup> or "the point in the progress of a disease when an important development or change takes place which is decisive of recovery or death" or, more generically, "a state of affairs in which a decisive change for better or worse is imminent; a turning point."<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, the way in which an ancient Chinese scholar would conceptualize and face a situation of personal "crisis" is somewhat similar, and in part seemingly combines these two meanings. From the perspective of a literatus, a "crisis" could be defined as a pondered, lucid decision taken in face of a "life or death situation" – where 'life or death' could be interpreted literally; but more often are to be considered at the same time metaphorically, as referring to the critical moment in which it is possible to restore one's reputation after it has been tarnished. Extreme circum-

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1 "[S]eparation; discord, dispute; choosing, deciding, judgement, sentence; trial, examination, lawsuit, court of justice, punishment; issue, event, outcome." Morwood and Taylor 2002, p. 192.

2 *OED* 1989, p. 27.

stances require extreme measures, especially when one's honour and integrity are at stake. In such a case, a true scholar would eventually resort to the drastic resolution of taking one's life as a form of protest – against a more generalized socio-political and moral “crisis,” meant in the modern sense of the term, as the result of misrule and corruption – or as a form of ultimate self-affirmation, to preserve one's honor when slandered or falsely accused.

The present paper aims at exploring the rhetoric of the scholar's “protest suicide” in early Chinese politico-philosophical discourse, as a means to react to a traumatic personal loss of status, authority or respect<sup>3</sup> due to a sudden, unexpected political and institutional crisis. In this context, “protest suicide” – and especially the scholar's suicide – tends to have a substantially positive connotation.<sup>4</sup> It is considered not only as a socially acceptable way to prove and re-assess one's moral integrity and purity of intention in the face of adversity, misfortune, personal degradation or disgrace. It is also an effective means to express strong political and moral dissent, and to distance oneself from a certain environment or course of action.

While several studies have been carried out to address the ethical, legal, and socio-cultural dimensions of the issue of female suicide in the Classical Chinese tradition, especially in connection with the development of the cult of widowhood and female chastity in the late Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1911) dynasties,<sup>5</sup> comparatively less attention has been paid to the phenomenon of the scholar's honour-related suicide in early Chinese philosophical discourse so far. Recently, there has been a renewed interest in this topic, mostly in connection with the ongoing heated debate about the legalization of euthanasia and assisted suicide in contemporary society all over the world and the related concept of “death with dignity” – a controversial arena of discussion in which some scholars have been problematising the issue from the perspective of Confucian moral philosophy and ethical thought on suicide.<sup>6</sup>

3 See Pridmore and Pridmore 2018; Lee and Kleinman 2003; Barbagli 2015, pp. 191–294; Lewis 2021.

4 Lau 1988–89.

5 The phenomenon of female suicide in Chinese culture and literature, and especially in the Late Imperial period, has been studied in depth. There is a considerable amount of secondary scholarship available also in Western languages on the topic, hence the following list does not aim at being exhaustive, but rather at providing an overview of most relevant publications, e.g. van Gulik 1974; T'ien 1988; Ebrey 1993a and 1993b; Carlitz 1994; Sommer 2000; Ropp, Zamperini, and Zurndorfer 2001; Theiss 2004a and 2004b; Huang 2006; Lu 2008; Mann 2011; Judge and Ying 2011.

In Classical Chinese philosophy, and especially in the Confucian tradition, suicide is openly addressed as a sensible option, if not a proper “right” that is typically – but not exclusively – exerted by a true scholar<sup>7</sup> when faced with extreme circumstances that do not allow any other possible course of action without irremediably tarnishing their honour and reputation and degrading themselves. Therefore, such circumstances require and allow for the most extreme self-sacrifice as the only possible appropriate response.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility of having to make the ultimate sacrifice and commit suicide in the name of one’s principles is already addressed in the *Lúnyǔ* 論語, where it is presented by the Master himself as an almost inescapable choice for those who are ready to fight for their ideals, especially to preserve their integrity and dignity, but mostly their adamant devotion to the pursuit and practice of humaneness:<sup>9</sup>

The Master said: “A resolute scholar and a humane person will not try to preserve their lives at the expense of damaging their humaneness, there are some who will kill themselves in order to preserve their humaneness intact.”

子曰：「志士仁人，無求生以害仁，有殺身以成仁。」<sup>10</sup>

And once again, in the following passage the Master praises the nobility of the act of supreme self-sacrifice and the purity of intentions it entails, if it is committed in the name of virtue with the goal of preserving it at any cost. When performed with this inner disposition, this genuine act of self-immolation can contribute to perfecting one’s own morality, pairing it with the love of learning, one of the most esteemed and laudable qualities he acknowledges in a human being:

The Master said: “He has the sincerest faith in the love of learning, and holds on to death to perfect his course of action. He would not enter a country in jeopardy, he would not reside in a country in turmoil. When the world is well-governed and in good order then he will show himself, when it is not well-governed and in good order then he will hide. If a country is well-governed, it is

6 On this topic, see especially the extensive work of Lo Ping-Cheung (1999, 2002, 2010, 2016). Cf. Fan 2002; Cheng 2002; Döring 2006; Döring and Ren 2002; Li and Li 2017; Fei 2010 and 2021.

7 On the role and duties of scholar-officials, in particular in the Confucian tradition, see Chan 2004 and Pines 2012.

8 Hsieh and Spence 1981; Lin 1990; Khushf 2002; Lee and Kleinman 2003; Hinsch 2011; Pines 2020 and 2012, chapter 3 on literati, esp. pp. 97–100; Lewis 2021, pp. 124–156. On the case of Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 (c. 163–85 B.C.) preferring castration over death, see Li and Li 2017 and Durrant 1995, esp. pp. 9–10, 18, 109–110.

9 All translations in the article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

10 *Lúnyǔ* 15.9.

shameful if there are poor and lowly people in it. If a country is ill-governed, it is shameful if there are rich and wealthy people in it.”

子曰：「篤信好學，守死善道。危邦不入，亂邦不居。天下有道則見，無道則隱。邦有道，貧且賤焉，恥也；邦無道，富且貴焉，恥也。」<sup>11</sup>

Suicide becomes the means par excellence by which it is possible to re-establish and re-affirm one’s moral, intellectual, and, in the case of women, even physical,<sup>12</sup> integrity.<sup>13</sup> It is an extreme example of self-affirmation that can be used as a powerful form of remonstrance<sup>14</sup> to express social and political protest, a “*cri de cœur*” that speaks one’s truth out loud, and an empowering act through which the individual re-states their dignity and virtue. In certain cases, suicide can also be enforced upon someone as a form of supreme punishment, typically from a superior in rank or by the ruler himself, thereby raising serious concerns and doubts about its fairness. This even occurs within the most upright Confucian circles who would strongly advocate such a solution. Literati and scholar-officials who engaged in government activities at different levels, regardless of their political agenda and their intellectual affiliation to a certain trend of thought, were all equally aware of the dangers that court life entails, and the damage that slander could cause to one’s reputation. Another *Lúnyǔ* passage (18.1) dryly warns the reader/user of the text<sup>15</sup> of the life-threatening risks that remonstrating against one’s ruler might entail: “Bǐ Gān remonstrated and died because of this” (比干諫而死).

An exemplary case in point is the infamous death by suicide of Hán Fēi 韓非 (c. 280–233 B.C.). As we are told in his biography recorded in the *Shǐjì* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) chapter 63 ‘Lǎozǐ Hán Fēi lièzhuàn’ 老子韓非列傳, Hán Fēi is sent as a diplomatic envoy to the court of Qín 秦. During the time he spends in Qín, Hán Fēi is badly slandered by Lǐ Sī 李斯 (c. 280–c.208 B.C.) who feels

11 *Lúnyǔ* 8.13.

12 Hsieh and Spence 1981; Raphals 1998; Kinney 2014.

13 See note 4 above, esp. Hsieh and Spence 1981; Lin 1990; Khushf 2002; Goldin 2002, esp. pp. 86–88, 102; Lee and Kleinman 2003; Hinsch 2011.

14 Schaberg 1997, 2002, and 2005; Suddath 2005; Olberding 2013; Andrew and LaFleur 2014; Roetz 2019; Crone, Fahr and Schwermann 2023.

15 As early Chinese texts were mostly performed and/or recited rather than read alone in silence, the “readership” of a text is rather to be conceived as its audience. In the case of texts that are also instructional in nature, such as the *Lúnyǔ*, their content is meant to be explained and transmitted by a teacher to a pupil who is then supposed to be able to put into practice its teachings, but also re-produce it by performing it. Hence the term “reader,” which has a passive connotation, is not quite accurate and has to be integrated with the concept of (active) user. Cf. Richter 2013.

threatened by his superior intellectual ingenuity, eloquence and rhetorical skills. Hán Fēi eventually falls into disgrace with the ruler and is forced to commit suicide by taking poison in 233 B.C. Hán Fēi's tragic fate proves that even the shrewdest politicians were not immune to retaliation and were constantly subjected to the whims of the ruler, who could easily put them to death, as Hán Fēi himself had somewhat ominously lamented in the famous chapter 12 'The Difficulties of Persuasion' ('Shuìnán' 說難) preserved in the eponymous composite collection.<sup>16</sup> Death by suicide – regardless whether it was forced or as the result of a deliberate choice – is typically characterized by a strong negative connotation especially in those texts that are more closely associated with so-called Daoist or yangist<sup>17</sup> trends of thought, which strongly advocate for and promote the preservation of the integrity of the human body and of life in its totality as a core guiding principle. However, also texts that are closely associated with Confucian thought see death in an equally negative light, in particular violent, untimely or premature death.<sup>18</sup> In these texts, the main cause of premature and violent death is typically identified in the lack of moral standing, and especially in the refusal to pursue humaneness, for instance in the *Mèngzǐ* 孟子:

Nowadays, they loathe death and ruin and yet they rejoice in not practicing humaneness, this is like loathing drunkenness and yet drinking heavily. [...] Nowadays, those who wish to become kings [...] do not aspire to (pursue) humaneness and all their lives will be sorrowful and disgraceful until the day they will succumb to death and ruin.

16 Hunter 2013; Indraccolo 2020.

17 A trend of thought dating back to the Warring States period, closely associated with and inspired by the thought of the thinker Yáng Zhū 楊朱 (c. 440–360 B.C.). No proper “yangist” corpus of texts has been transmitted and the available information about his philosophy are known thanks to references in other sources. According to anecdotes recorded in other philosophical texts of the time, Yáng Zhū is known for promoting a form of naturalism, combined with hedonism or “ethical egoism,” as preserving the integrity of one’s body and one’s life at any cost are considered the highest goal. Harshly criticized by his contemporaries for his societal and political disengagement and the deliberate indifference towards other people’s conditions, Yáng Zhū is consistently portrayed in a negative light. In particular, together with Mòzǐ 墨子 and Mohism at large, Yáng Zhū is considered one of the nemeses of Mencius, and the philosophy he is associated with is virulently attacked in the eponymous text. A paradigmatic example of such criticism is the famous statement that “Yáng Zhū opted for ‘each for themselves.’ If he could have benefited the world by plucking one single hair, he would not have done it.” (楊子取為我，拔一毛而利天下，不為也; *Mèngzǐ* ‘Jinxīn shàng’ 孟子・盡心上, 7A26). On yangism and the figure of Yáng Zhū, see Andreini 2000 and 2014; Defoort and Lee 2022.

18 Lo 1999, pp. 316–317; Fei 2021; Pabst Battin 2015, pp. 53–56.

今惡死亡而樂不仁，是猶惡醉而強酒。[……]。今之欲王者[……]。苟不志於仁，終身憂辱，以陷於死亡。<sup>19</sup>

It must be remarked that suicide and death are never to be taken lightly, as life is valued as the most precious possession of an individual: losing one's life is a disgrace to one's person, but also by extension to one's family and clan, as one is no more capable of providing for one's parents and potentially also ensuring the continuation of the family line, thereby falling short of their filial duties.<sup>20</sup> The preservation of the integrity of the body is considered as the primary and most fundamental expression of filial piety towards one's parents. This cardinal principle is stated pre-eminently in the *Dà Dài Lǐjì* 大戴禮記:

Our physical persona is the body that our parents have handed down to us. We enliven and enact the body that our parents have handed down to us, how could we possibly dare not to respect it?

身者，親之遺體也。行親之遺體，敢不敬乎？<sup>21</sup>

And in the *Xiàojīng*:

The Master said: “One’s body in its entirety, including hair and skin, is received from one’s parents, one must not dare injure it or wound it. This is the origin of filial piety.”

子曰：「身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。」<sup>22</sup>

It is precisely the high value attributed to leading a moral life that makes the sacrifice of self-immolation even harder and more praiseworthy at the same time. Suicide is in no way an easy solution or a shortcut, nor is it the normalized standard reaction to a situation of distress or disgrace. In early China, suicide is socially approved under certain circumstances, though not necessarily nor univocally socially sanctioned.<sup>23</sup> This explains also how and why the somewhat controversial figure of Guǎn Zhòng 管仲 (c. 720–645 B.C.), who, when confronted with failure of his political mission, refused to commit suicide, can be relatively easily redeemed and subsumed within the Confucian philosophical discourse without any substantial issues,

19 *Mèngzǐ* 4A3.

20 On this issue, see Ivanhoe, 2004, pp. 189–202, esp. 190; Döring 2009.

21 *Dà Dài Lǐjì* 11.2.

22 *Xiàojīng* 1.1.

23 Lewis 1990, esp. p. 40.

though even among Confucian thinkers there persist different evaluations and opinions of this charismatic character and his questionable performance.<sup>24</sup>

In early China, there is no moral stigma against suicide in itself, neither from a moral nor from a cultural perspective – and least of all from a religious one. As Lo Ping-cheung (1999) has pointed out, there is an “ethic of suicide” in early Chinese thought, according to which suicide is acknowledged as a form of “death with dignity,” cast in and expressed by a positive rhetoric. It is a form of death that allows to strongly affirm, rather than to deny the individual their identity in suicide, and to take a moral stand, thereby turning oneself into a bright and shining example of virtue that should be praised and emulated. Thus, by committing suicide, it is possible to secure an honourable death, – that is, to avoid an undignified death or a disgraceful and shameful existence, as suicide is instead often understood in other traditions and, to a certain extent, also in late imperial Chinese thought.

What does make a substantial difference in the way in which a case of suicide is assessed, and eventually judged by the community, is the reason that triggered the gesture and the inner disposition with which self-immolation is accomplished, the allegedly higher ethical goal that one should ideally reach thereby, or the moral influence it is meant to exert on society by setting an example. When motivated by purely personal reasons or by inner feelings of emotional distress – even if the latter might in fact have been caused by a situation of reputational damage and social, political or moral disgrace caused by unjust accusations or false claims – suicide can still be excused to a certain extent. In this case, suicide can still be acknowledged as being tragic and people might sympathize with the situation, but the act of killing oneself is not considered as a proper case of honour-related suicide:<sup>25</sup>

[T]he moral issue is not whether one can commit suicide or not, since there is no strict prohibition against it. Rather, the issue is for what kind of reason (trivial or substantial) suicide is committed, and what kind of impact it will produce.” (Lo, 1999: 316) Thus, one is not morally condemned on account of having committed suicide, but might be stigmatized for wasting one’s life and for not fulfilling the lifetime duties towards family members and society at large.<sup>26</sup>

Such is, for instance, the rather controversial case of the suicide of Qū Yuán 屈原 (c. 340–278 B.C.), possibly the most paradigmatic figure of a literatus who took his own life in the premodern period. While his might seem an ideal case of a scholar’s

24 Khushf 2002; Nylan 1998–99, pp. 231–233; Pines 2020.

25 Song 2004.

26 Lo 1999 and 2002.

honor-related protest suicide at first sight, Qū Yuán's intentions have been considered ambiguous and problematic especially during the Hán Dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.),<sup>27</sup> even by ancient Chinese scholars like Sīmǎ Qiān, who was also punished and humiliated. Despite showing a certain degree of sympathy for his fate, in the biography he dedicates to Qū Yuán in the *Shǐjì*, Sīmǎ Qiān seems to take a rather critical stance towards his decision to commit suicide.<sup>28</sup> What Qū Yuán's true motives and inner disposition actually were when he drowned himself and whether his act properly qualifies as a case of “protest suicide” is still object of debate among contemporary scholars.<sup>29</sup> The intellectual had indeed been slandered at court and had fallen from imperial grace twice. As a result, he had been sent to exile to the furthest-most regions of his native kingdom of Chǔ 楚, where, according to the tradition, he committed suicide by drowning himself in the Miluó 泪羅 River. However, it is still matter of discussion whether he indeed committed the extreme gesture as a way to restore his lost honour and reputation and to proclaim his innocence and purity of intention in front of the entire world,<sup>30</sup> or rather as a reaction to his psychological and emotional distress.<sup>31</sup> Is Qū Yuán eventually to be considered a tragic hero or a heroic scholar? While it seems hardly possible to disentangle the different, complex motives behind his extreme gesture, some of his poetical compositions, such as the famous *Lí Sāo* 離騷 (Encountering Sorrow), and especially the biographical (or possibly even autobiographical) “*Yúfù*” 漁父 (The Fishermen), seem to hint at a sincere attempt to reestablish his name.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the advice given by the figure of the fishermen in the eponymous composition, i.e. how to survive and live on in a politically corrupted situation, has attracted major criticism during the Hán.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, it seems quite clear that there is a strong underlying connection between the social and political dimensions of one's persona, one's reputation, and honour-related suicide. Every member of the contemporary intelligentsia was, first and foremost, a social and political agent. Therefore, these are indissoluble con-

27 Chan 2012, see in particular Chapters 1 and 7.

28 Nylan 1998–199, pp. 232–233; Fei 2021, pp. 18–19.

29 Liu 1995a.

30 Zhū Xī 朱熹 (1130–1200) would later claim that this was the case (Rusk 2012, pp. 138–143). He was also the first to apply the term “patriotic” (*àiguó zhǔyì* 愛國主義) (Sukhu 2012, pp. 17–28) to Qū Yuán's poetry, followed by a plethora of mid-twentieth century publications.

31 Liu 1995b.

32 Hawkes 1985, pp. 204; 206–207; Du 2019.

33 Chan 2012, pp. 190–194.

stitutive elements of the connective tissue that holds together the different facets of one's personality. By consequence, suicide is a deliberate choice that has to be pondered over carefully and that has to be made only as "ultima ratio," when all other honourable options have been explored and revealed themselves to be insufficient to ensure the preservation of one's honour, reputation, and moral stance. Losing one's moral integrity and dignity, and degrading one's virtue, accepting to put up with a situation that might irremediably compromise one's reputation are considered to be even more disgraceful than losing one's life. This is because living in itself and by itself does not have an absolute value, unless one makes one's life valuable and meaningful by engaging in self-cultivation and -betterment through the consistent pursuit of virtues – in particular humaneness – and of moral behaviour. A life that is truly worth living is the moral life.<sup>34</sup> One has the duty to preserve life, but not at any cost or under unbearable circumstances: one must always serve the superior goal of pursuing virtue in all its facets and in all aspects of one's life. If the highest value is morality and preserving one's virtue and dignity rather than biological life *tout court*, there will necessarily be situations in which sacrificing one's life for a higher ethical goal might turn out to be a much desirable outcome, despite the fact that, as the *Lǐjì* says:

Death, exile/ruin, disgrace, poverty, and suffering: what people loathe the most is gathered in this list.

死亡貧苦，人之大惡存焉。<sup>35</sup>

Thus, under extreme circumstances, suicide might become a moral imperative.

The principle of "killing oneself to preserve one's virtue intact" (*shā shēn yǐ chéng rén* 殺身以成仁) is actually mentioned only once in the *Lúnyǔ*.<sup>36</sup> However, this expression crystallizes over time and apparently becomes almost a motto during the Hán period, although there are only a relatively limited number of occurrences. In early imperial literature, it appears at times in a slightly adjusted form, or in variants that draw the attention to other core virtues of the Confucian ethical discourse. These expressions are invariably associated with outstanding examples of virtue and ethical behaviour, such as the morally and intellectually distinguished person (*jūnzǐ* 君子) or the (true) scholar-official (*shì* 士); or cultural heroes of the caliber of Bó Yí

34 King and Schilling 2011; King 2015.

35 *Lǐjì* 9.19.

36 *Lúnyǔ* 15.9.

伯夷<sup>37</sup> and Shū Qí 叔齊<sup>38</sup>; (Wángzǐ) Bǐ Gān (王子)比干<sup>39</sup> and Liǔxià Huì 柳下惠<sup>40</sup>, who are often cited together in triplets or couplets of parallel sentences.<sup>41</sup> Bó Yí

37 A mythological figure who allegedly lived during the Shāng 商 Dynasty (17<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.). The tradition claims that he helped the mythical pre-dynastic rulers Shùn 舜 and Yǔ 禹 to tame the Great Flood. According to the *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋, he would have developed the technology to dig wells, thereby freeing all body of waters from dragons and other animals. In virtue of these accomplishments, he is acknowledged as a cultural hero. Bó Yí is also said to have been a member of the tribal Dōngyí 東夷 clan subjected to the Shāng. He supposedly served first as minister at his father's court, then refused to claim his legitimate succession right and renounced the throne to let his younger brother Shū Qí rule. There exist competing versions of this story. Due to his virtuous behavior, he is considered an example of loyalty and filial piety, especially in texts associated with the Confucian tradition.

38 A younger brother of the mythical Bó Yí 伯夷, he is often cited together with him (see note above). According to the tradition, he was the younger son of the chief of a barbaric clan that was in a vassal-like relationship to the ruling Shāng Dynasty. When his older brother renounced the throne in his favor, he refused to reign out of respect towards him and their father. The two brothers eventually fled together once the Zhōu 周 conquered the Shāng and starved themselves to death in the mountains rather than serve the new ruler. Due to his virtuous behavior, he is also considered an example of loyalty.

39 Prince of the royal Shāng clan (?–1047 B.C.), he was the son of King Wén Dīng 文丁 (r. 1116–1106 B.C.) and served as prime minister during the reign of his nephew, the last Shāng king, the notorious Dìxīn 帝辛 (posthumous name Zhòu 紂, 1105–1046 B.C., r. 1075–1046 B.C.). According to the *Shǐjì*, he was a virtuous minister and tried several times to admonish his nephew and persuade him to rectify his behavior, but to no avail. He was eventually sentenced to a gruesome death by the king. He is celebrated by the tradition as a sage of antiquity and a wise and loyal minister.

40 Zhǎn Huò 展獲 (c. 720–621 B.C.), also commonly known as Liǔxià Huì, a politician of the Spring and Autumn period (770–481 B.C.) and governor of the district of Liǔxià of the State of Lǔ 魯, known for his integrity and morally impeccable character.

41 There are altogether six variants of this expression that can be identified in early imperial literature: 1) “killing oneself to preserve one’s name intact” *shā shēn yǐ chéng míng* 殉身以成名 (one occurrence in the *Lièzì* 列子 ‘Shuōfù’ 說符, 8.25; one occurrence associated with the figure of the scholar-official in the *Shǐjì*, Fānsuī Cài Zé lièzhuàn’ 范睢蔡澤列傳, 79.2420; one occurrence associated with the *jūnzǐ* in the *Zhànguócé* ‘Cài Zé jiàn zhú yú Zhào’ 戰國策·蔡澤見逐於趙, 3.3.1); 2) “killing oneself to preserve one’s loyalty intact” *shā shēn yǐ chéng qí zhōng* 殉身以成其忠 (two occurrences, both associated with the figure of Wángzǐ Bǐ Gān, one in *Hánshī wàizhuàn* 韓詩外傳, 1.8; and one in *Shuōyuàn* 說苑 ‘Lìjié’ 立節, 4.1, with a slightly different formulation, featuring the verb *zuò* 作 instead of *chéng* 成); 3) “killing oneself to preserve one’s honesty intact” *shā shēn yǐ chéng qí lián* 殉身以成其廉 (two occurrences, both associated with Bó Yí and Shū Qí, cited together, one in *Hánshī wàizhuàn*, juān 1; and one in *Shuōyuàn* ‘Lìjié’); 4) “killing oneself to preserve one’s trustworthiness intact” *shā shēn yǐ chéng qí xìn* 殉身以成其信 (two occurrences, both associated with Liǔxià Huì, one in *Hánshī wàizhuàn*, 1.8; and one

and Shū Qí in particular starved themselves to death rather than serving King Wén 文 of Zhōu after his conquest of the Shàng, hence their deaths qualify as an early virtuous example of “protest suicide.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, it is most fitting that a variant of this expression appears in connection with these two figures in particular.

The most accomplished formulation of this principle is beyond doubt the famous “bear paw” passage in the *Mèngzǐ*, which states explicitly that there are far more detrimental things that should be loathed rather than death, and that one should be ready to give up one’s life for the sake of righteousness. –

Mencius said: “Fish is something I crave; bear’s paws are also something I crave. If I could not have both at the same time, I would give up on the fish, and choose bear’s paws. Likewise, life is also something I crave, and righteousness is also something I crave. If I could not have both at the same time, I would give up life, and choose righteousness. Life is something I crave indeed, but there is something that I crave even more than life, for this reason I would not act in a way so as to attain it undeservingly. Death is something I loathe indeed, but there is something I loathe even more than death, for this reason there are dangerous situations that I would not avoid. If among the things that people crave there was nothing they craved more than life, would there be any means they would not use to attain it? If among the things that people loathe there was nothing they loathed more than death, would there be anything they would not do to avoid dangerous situations? There are cases when there are available means by which you could stay alive that you would rather not employ; and there are cases when there are available courses of action by which you could avoid dangerous situations that you would rather not undertake. Therefore, when it comes to people for whom there exists something they crave even more than life, and people for whom there exists something they loathe even more than death, it is not only the virtuous ones who have such an inner disposition, everyone has it, but virtuous people are able not to lose it.

孟子曰：「魚，我所欲也；熊掌，亦我所欲也，二者不可得兼，舍魚而取熊掌者也。生，亦我所欲也；義，亦我所欲也，二者不可得兼，舍生而取義者也。生亦我所欲，所欲有甚於生者，故不為苟得也；死亦我所惡，所惡有甚於死者，故患有所不辟也。如使人之所欲莫甚於生，則凡可以得生者，何不用也？使人之所惡莫甚於死者，則凡可以辟患者，何不為也？由是則生而有不用也，由是則可以辟患而有不為也。是故所欲有甚於生

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in *Shuōyuàn* ‘Lijié’, 4.1 ); finally, 5) “killing oneself to keep one’s resolution intact” *shā shēn yǐ chéng zhì* 級身以成志 (one occurrence associated with the *jūnzǐ* in the *Guóyǔ* 國語 ‘Jinyǔ’ II.10).

42 Fei 2021, pp. 17–18.

者，所惡有甚於死者，非獨賢者有是心也，人皆有之，賢者能勿喪耳。  
[... ...]<sup>43</sup>

Finally, we may conclude that in early Chinese philosophy, and especially within the Confucian tradition, self-immolation for a higher cause – i.e. to preserve one's dignity and virtue, and to re-establish someone's often unjustly tarnished reputation – is not only socially and culturally accepted and respected as an honourable resolution. In most cases, it is the *only* viable course of action for a true scholar and a person of honour, although exceptions might apply. As we have seen for instance with the figure of Guǎn Zhòng, but also of Sīmǎ Qiān, not to commit suicide when facing disgrace in certain cases might even be tolerated and pardoned, where such deviation from the moral code is justified by self-commitment to one's family or to the state. This is especially true if the subject is endowed with superior skills, and therefore shows concrete potential of being a useful person in society, someone who might be capable of making a difference and of engaging in the advancement of the common good, which can be considered an even higher goal. Still, it must be kept in mind that, despite being a highly codified gesture, suicide is an extreme resolution that is made to answer to equally extreme circumstances, and that the principle of *shā shēn chéng rén* is neither taken lightly nor applied indiscriminately, since to renounce one's life also necessarily implies to some extent a failure to fulfill one's duties towards one's family and society at large.

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43 Mèngzǐ ‘Gàozǐ shàng’ 告子上 (6A10).

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