

Article

The Wang–Buwang Sequence and Positive Forgetting in Early Confucian Texts

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Abstract

This study investigates the roles of *wang* (忘, forgetting) and *buwang* (不忘, non-forgetting) in early Confucian texts, emphasizing their interdependence within a *yin–yang* framework. Rather than signifying total erasure, for the purposes of the mnemonic process, *wang* functions as a selective and creative mode, aiding cognitive refinement by withdrawing content considered secondary or extraneous. Primarily through close textual analysis of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Mengzi* (孟子), and *Xunzi* (荀子), this study shows how *wang* and *buwang* operate relationally, avoiding polar extremes in favor of a dynamic equilibrium. Conceptually, I argue that these terms are more accurately aligned with suspended and attentive modes of awareness, respectively. Tracing their pattern across these sources reveals the affirmative role of *wang* in optimizing memory, distancing the Confucian tradition from the notion of oblivion and offering a foundational perspective for future explorations of early Chinese memory-related discussions.

Keywords: *wang–buwang* sequence; *yin–yang* reasoning; axis and margins paradigm; memory; Confucian; oblivion

1. Introduction

Values, such as identity, continuity, and meaning—essential to the fullness of human experience—unfold through dynamic mnemonic (memory-related) processes. Examining these processes from a Chinese perspective opens new vistas in the study of memory and reveals the adaptability of the Chinese tradition to imagine and accommodate new conceptual horizons. The merit of the present analysis of the constructive role of forgetting as articulated in early Confucian texts, rests in framing forgetting (*wang* 忘) and non-forgetting (*buwang* 不忘) as a dialectical pair through which the mnemonic process can be more fully understood. Drawing on the *yin–yang* 陰陽 mode of reasoning inherent to this pairing—where each concept necessitates and moderates the other—I argue that forgetting performs an essential economizing function within the mnemonic process. Echoing the *yin–yang* structure while integrating the narrative momentum of history—conceived as an ethically charged unfolding rather than a linear record—I further articulate this mnemonic process, introducing what I call the axis-and-margins paradigm.¹ The axis serves as a mobile orienting center, where meaning coheres amidst evolving cognitive and moral demands; the margins, as generative peripheries, continuously refresh and challenge the axis, ensuring vitality and responsiveness. Recognizing the often involuntary nature of forgetting, this study further incorporates a factor of uncontrollability into the interweaving of inner and outer experience, emphasizing its integral role in the holistic constitution of the person. In this open-ended axis-and-margins dynamic, the mnemonic process emerges as a form of ethical-cognitive modulation—an ongoing negotiation between presence and



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absence, retention and release. Such a conception resonates with the Confucian ideal of moderation and continuity, privileging adaptability over possession, and responsiveness over rigidity. Ultimately, it aligns with a vision of the mnemonic process as participation in a spiritually-inflected ongoing transformation—what might be called the suffusion of the cosmos.

Remarkably, however, these novelties of the Chinese tradition in the field of memory studies only recently became the subject of specific scholarly research, and still, the available works study sources predominantly associated with the Daoist tradition. The present discussion, in contrast, concentrates on the texts of early Confucian learning. The term “Confucian” is employed not as a fixed doctrinal category but as a heuristic designation for a constellation of related ideas that have evolved and shifted across time and interpretive communities. While such sources are otherwise extensively researched, their mnemonic relevance is markedly neglected. Addressing this deficit, the following explores several major Confucian writings, detecting the reasoning, formulation, and spiritual implications of their approach to the positive role of forgetting.

Indeed, considering the prominent role that forgetting has in the *Zhuangzi* and other Daoist texts, it is no coincidence that scholars’ studies of mnemonic phenomena in the Chinese tradition tend to explore mainly Daoist sources. To Antonio S. Cua, forgetting distinctions in the *Zhuangzi* is constitutive for attaining the *Dao* experience (Cua 1977, pp. 305–6). In discussing the poet Meng Hao-ran (689–740 AD), Stephen Owen discerns the suggestion that some form of forgetting the self may promote continuity and meaningful tradition (Owen 1986, p. 25). In *The Craft of Oblivion: Forgetting and Memory in Ancient China* (Galvany 2023), several contributions engage directly and positively with the constructive or necessary role of forgetting. For example, Franklin Perkins (2023) discusses the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* as advocates of forgetting for the purpose of achieving impartiality, spontaneity, and liberation from rigid thought structures.² Hong-ki Lam authored a “State of the Field Report” on contemporary Chinese studies of *wang* in the *Zhuangzi*. He titled the second section “*Wang* as Elimination” and the third “*Wang* Is Not Elimination.” In that same report, reviewing Tu Guangshe (2003)’s study of the *Zhuangzi*, Lam cites the formers’ observation: “...[F]orgetting is ‘not without merits, and it is sometimes even necessary. It could be even intentionally made use of’” (Lam 2023, p. 314).

The exceptions where Confucian sources are engaged cannot be taken as focused studies of forgetting. In Edward S. Casey’s “Commemoration and Perdurance in the *Analects*,” the positive role of forgetting is not discussed directly but is meaningfully implied in association with the suspension of recollective memory in ritual practice. In one place, he sees how in ritual ceremonies, forgetting particulars can serve deeper continuity and emotional resonance (Casey 1984, p. 392). Kwong-loi Shun’s discussion of joy in the *Analects* interprets saying VII19, exploring the role and meaning of *wang* (forgetting). Among other observations, he comments: “...what one loses [when experiencing *wang*] is not awareness as such but attentive awareness” (Shun 2017). Readers will see that his choice of words has an impact on the present study. Obviously, the Confucian concern with forgetting features in numerous studies, yet a study that takes the mnemonic process as a major concern and integrates the role of forgetting with Confucian sources has not yet been published. The only outlier to these exceptions is Isay (2022), and the present study ventures to further amend this gap.

As a point of departure, it is worth observing that in the sources of the early “Chinese” tradition, the idea of remembrance is more often than not conveyed through the negated form of forgetfulness—*buwang*—and related variants. This linguistic propensity has notable implications for how the non-negated form of forgetfulness—*wang*—is understood, particularly in its role within the broader mnemonic process. As the following discussion

demonstrates, when situated within the framework of *yin–yang* reasoning, the *wang–buwang* sequence communicates two central features: avoidance of extremes and mutual reinforcement of the mnemonic process. These principles suggest that the mnemonic process in early Confucian thought is conceived not in binary terms of presence or absence but as a dynamic continuum shaped by degrees of concentration and suspension. Given this relational structure, it would be misleading to interpret *wang* as “forgetting” in the strong sense of total erasure. Accordingly, I argue that the *wang* variant is incompatible with the notion of oblivion. Instead, *wang* functions as a mode of creative transformation within the mnemonic process—modulating awareness by relegating non-essential content to the periphery, thereby contributing to the efficacy and orientation of what we call memory.

Rather than exhausting the scope or complexity of mnemonic processes within the Confucian tradition, the present study aims to present a starting point for further inquiry. My argument skips many twists and turns recognized in the modern field of memory studies. Indeed, the references that follow also avoid the many taxonomical differentiations of both forgetting and remembering and, therefore, do not apply to all the mutations of mnemonic phenomena. Affirming the positive role that *wang* (forgetting) plays in the dynamics of the mnemonic process,³ the approach is to stay grounded in the conceptual vocabulary of the Chinese tradition. The discussion proceeds chronologically and thematically, focusing on early, primarily philosophical texts later associated with the Confucian canon. The sources consulted include the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Commentary on the Appended Statements* (*Xicizhuan* 繫辭傳) of the *Classic of Changes*, the *Mengzi* (孟子), and the *Xunzi* (荀子). These texts collectively provide a representative sample of early Confucian thought, offering insights into how the mnemonic process—framed through the inter-related notions of *wang* and *buwang*—configures as a dynamic and attuned process.

Section 2 outlines the overarching aim of the mnemonic process and a preliminary conceptual framework as it appears in the early texts under consideration. This includes an introduction to the heart-mind (*xin* 心), its inseparable mode of awareness (*zhi* 知), and the term *cang/zang* 藏, referring to a mode of accumulating and also to accumulation, respectively. I then address other memory-related terms beyond *wang* (forgetting), setting up a broader lexical perspective for the discussion that follows. Section 3—the core of this study—focuses on occurrences of the *wang–buwang* (forgetting–non-forgetting) sequence in early Confucian philosophical texts. I begin by briefly examining references to *wang* in early materials, where the pattern that later manifests is still incipient. As the pattern becomes more clearly articulated, *buwang* becomes a marker of concentrated attention toward a specified goal. At the same time, non-negated *wang* signals the withdrawal of less relevant mnemonic content, thus supporting the accomplishment of that goal. Independent of the subject’s degree of conscious awareness, this form of forgetting economizes cognitive resources, thereby optimizing the mnemonic process and facilitating effective practice or achievement. To set up the foundation for this interpretive model, Section 3 highlights the conceptual differences between *wang* and *buwang*, and tracing their recurring pattern across the examined sources. This approach risks excessive repetition, but it underscores the consistency and structural coherence of these texts’ mnemonic logic at work. This groundwork supports the broader theoretical reflections developed in the sections that follow.

Granted that a central aim of this study is to examine how *wang* contributes to optimizing the mnemonic process, Section 4 appeals to the framework I call *yin–yang* reasoning to investigate the interplay suggested by the *wang–buwang* sequence. Within this conceptual framework, *buwang* and *wang* are more accurately understood not simply as “non-forgetting” and “forgetting” but as attentive and suspended modes of awareness, respectively. To illuminate the dynamics of this configuration, I further propose what I call the

axis and margins paradigm, illustrating how *wang*—understood as suspended awareness—plays a constructive role in shaping the functionality of memory-related processes. This paradigm, I argue, reflects both the narrativity of the process and mutual support between *buwang* and *wang*. Building on the interpretive groundwork in the previous three sections, Section 5 presents the conclusions of this study. Then, Section 6 outlines three avenues for further research. First, I argue that applying the *yin–yang* reasoning to the mnemonic process effectively precludes the conceptual contingency of oblivion, understood as radical forgetting. Within the *yin–yang* framework, nothing is entirely erased; instead, the mnemonic content is continuously transformed and repositioned. Second, I critically reflect on the methodological and philosophical implications of examining the mnemonic process without a discrete term for “memory”—a conspicuous feature of the early Confucian texts surveyed in this study. Rather than signaling a conceptual void, this absence invites a rethinking of how mnemonic processes function within a distributed network of awareness, orientation, and continuity. Third, I conclude my discussion with a note on the spiritual aspect resting over the present discussion: the non-voluntary nature of forgetfulness gestures the interactive relationships between the person and their surroundings, and hence the contingency of a sense of union with the creative growth of the universe. My discussion of the spiritual dimension, however, confines itself to the conjectured operation of the mnemonic process.

2. The Goal of the Mnemonic Process and Its Essential Framework

Any account of mnemonic processes necessarily entails the consideration of their aims. In early Chinese texts, the goal of continuity—particularly about moral, social, and ancestral legacies—frequently emerges as paramount. According to Martin Kern, in his analysis of the *Classic of Odes*, approximately 80% of the sacrificial hymns employ a “memory formula,” reflecting a pervasive concern with sustaining continuity across generations (Kern 2009, p. 171).⁴ A comparable emphasis surfaces in a well-known passage in the *Zuozhuan* (*Zuo Tradition*, 4th century BCE), where the idea of “never perishing” (*buxiu* 不朽) is addressed. The Lu minister, Shusun Bao’a (d. 538 BCE), is recorded as saying:

According to what I have heard, ‘the highest of all is to establish virtue; next to that is to establish achievements; next to that is to establish words.’ Even with the passage of time, these glories are not cast aside. This is called ‘never perishing.’ (Durrant et al. 2016, p. 1125)

Rather than passive preservation, memory is here invoked as the dynamic endurance of cultural and moral value recognized through the ages. The triad of virtue, achievement, and expression defines a hierarchy of lasting influence that persists beyond physical death. A similar logic informs interpretations of *Lunyu* XV.20, where exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are urged to make their lives “worthy of being known” and be remembered for having their actuality match (*cheng* 稱) their reputation (Ni 2017, p. 362). Indeed, continuity in these instances is loaded with meaningfulness, and the joining of meaning and continuity amounts to a sense of spirituality. While broader goals, such as social harmony, are also central to the Confucian tradition, the concern with personal and cultural continuity and meaningfulness constitutes a foundational imperative. In anticipation of the terminologies discussed below, it is worth noting that the pursuit of continuity and meaningfulness requires a dialectic process: sustained attention to that which contributes to humane endurance and significance, and the concomitant marginalization of content considered irrelevant or distracting to that end. Thus, memory—in both its affirmative (*buwang*) and subtractive (*wang*) modes—emerges as a dynamism shaping a life that stays ethically resonant beyond its temporal limits.

The following discussion of the Confucian understanding of the mnemonic process and forgetting is intertwined with conceptualizations of the heart-mind (*xin* 心), awareness (知), and the *cang/zang* 藏 vocabulary. First, in early philosophical texts, the heart-mind is consistently associated with orienting oneself toward a goal through a path that avoids extremes, replicating the *yin–yang* reasoning (see below). It is conceptualized as an intermediary zone condensing and expanding within and beyond the body (Isay 2022). Second, the more specific concept of awareness emerges with greater clarity toward the end of the classical period, particularly in the *Xunzi*. According to *Xunzi* XXII, “the heart has the power to judge its awareness,” and “judging awareness must await the Heaven-given faculties to encounter their respective kinds appropriately” (Hutton 2014, p. 238, adapted). *Xunzi* XXI asserts that “humans are born and have awareness. [And] with awareness, they have focus.”⁵ In *Xunzi* V, humans are described as uniquely capable of making distinctions (Hutton 2014, p. 35, adapted). According to these passages, awareness is subject to the evaluative function of the heart-mind and capable of being directed, focused, and differentiated. Third, the term *cang/zang*—used interchangeably as a verb and noun—is often invoked about the accumulation and storage of mnemonic content. In the sources examined below, *cang/zang* refers to the dynamic process of accumulating and retaining mnemonic content within awareness’s relational and fluctuating framework.⁶ *Zang*-ed contents are constantly modulated by the heart-mind’s active engagement with the world. The heart-mind, awareness, and *cang/zang* suggest that the mnemonic function is best understood as a synchronized and relational process. Mnemonic content functions as modulated awareness, with the heart-mind serving as the intermediary zone of psychic regulation and ethical orientation.⁷

That said, it must be acknowledged—as noted earlier—that early Confucian texts lack a direct lexical equivalent for the concept of “memory.” Nonetheless, several terms across the classical corpus engage with various aspects of mnemonic experience. What follows offers a brief preliminary sketch of some of these “memory”-related expressions, suggesting the fragmentary yet conceptually rich nature of early Chinese mnemonic vocabulary. In texts, such as the *Lunyu* (I4) and the *Mengzi* (Ia7), the term *zhuan* 傳 conveys the idea of transmission and cultural continuity, underscoring the idea of the transmission and endurance of cultural content.⁸ In *Lunyu* VII2 and VII28, *shi* 識 denotes the availability or accessibility of knowledge, implying the presence of some form of mnemonic storage or retention.⁹ Another term, *cheng* 稱—already mentioned above—introduces the notion of measurement, suggesting a mnemonic quality of accord.¹⁰ This idea of reflection or correspondence points to a metaphorical understanding of mnemonic quality as a mental mirror, providing the mind with images that reflect past experiences. The term *ji* 記, meaning “to record” or “a record,” is notably absent from both the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*.¹¹ It appears only once in the *Xunzi* (XXVII2), suggesting that the notion of written or mental record-keeping was not central to these texts’ framing of the mnemonic process. More significant for our purposes is *nian* 念, a term that appears in early sources, such as bronze inscriptions, the *Classic of Odes*, and the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚書). Closely approximating the concept of “remembrance,”¹² it typically translates as “to think of,” “to recall,” or “to keep in mind,”¹³ sometimes appearing in a negated form and occasionally as a positive complement to *buwang* (non-forgetting), possibly signaling an intensified mode of recollection. Curiously, *nian* is absent from several significant texts of the period, including the *Mozi* (ca. 480–390 BCE), the *Mengzi* (ca. 382–300 BCE), and the *Xici* commentary to the *Book of Changes* (late 4th century BCE). It occurs only once in the *Lunyu* (V23), once in the *Zhuangzi* (in chapter 29), and twice in the *Xunzi*—in chapter 26 and chapter 30, where it is cited from the *Odes*. By contrast, it appears ten times in the *Zuozhuan* and six times in the *Records of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). What does this sparse and uneven distribution imply? The apparent marginalization of

nian may reflect broader transformations in the social and political discourse of the period—a topic that warrants further investigation in future research.¹⁴

3. The Wang 忘 and Buwang 不忘 Sequence

Non-forgetfulness is indispensable to various forms of meaningful living, as is its complement—forgetfulness. Even a radical advocate of forgetting, such as Zhuangzi 莊子 (fourth century BCE), exempts one thing from his otherwise sweeping call to forget all things: the great transformation process (*da hua* 大化), which should be recognized as rather a significant “thing.”¹⁵ This exception underscores a broader principle evident across early Chinese thought, including the Confucian tradition—the function of forgetting presupposes its negated form. For Confucian-minded writers, realizing goals depends on orientation and direction, which non-forgetfulness (*buwang*) sustains. As my subsequent analysis demonstrates, *buwang* typically signifies concentrated awareness toward fulfilling a particular objective. At the same time, *wang* refers to the withdrawal of content considered secondary or distracting—thereby enhancing the efficiency of the mnemonic process. Importantly, what is withdrawn is not erased but held in reserve for potential future relevance. This study traces the interplay between *wang* and *buwang* across early Confucian sources, proceeding in chronological order and alternating between representative instances of each. This relational logic underpins the Confucian mnemonic framework, which privileges cognitive economy and ethical attunement over mere retention.

At the beginning of the first millennium BCE, references to what we may identify as remembrance were mainly expressed through negated formulations—most commonly in forms such as *fuwang* 弗望 (or 忘), meaning “not forget.”¹⁶ A survey of the *Concordance to the Bronze Inscriptions*¹⁷ reveals this tendency: except for a single instance of *wang* without a negative prefix (no. 2827 in the Concordance), there are eight occurrences of “not forget”¹⁸ and three of “not dare to forget” (*fuganwang* 弗敢忘 or *wuganwang* 毋敢忘).¹⁹ This pattern persists in a review of a more selective and chronologically focused source primarily covering the Western and Eastern Zhou periods (1046–771 BCE, 771–256 BCE). Of the ten relevant examples, five overlap with those found in the *Concordance*—all are cases of negated forgetfulness (Cook and Goldin 2016). The sole instance of non-negated *wang* in this corpus records the forgetting of a sacrificial obligation intended to be performed in the Hao capital of the early Zhou. By no means a case of total erasure. Its exceptional status further underscores the prevailing emphasis on non-forgetting as a normative expression of ritual, moral, and political accountability. This early linguistic pattern suggests that “remembrance,” as conceptualized in Zhou ritual and political discourse, was less about the act of recall per se than about the ethical imperative not to forget—that is, to preserve continuity through obligation and restraint.

Negated *wang* (non-forgetfulness) is also prominent in texts traditionally regarded as records of historical and poetic expression from early “Chinese” antiquity—most notably the *Book of Documents* and the *Classic of Odes*. The *Documents* contains three explicit instances of *buwang*, each framed as a moral imperative or commemorative gesture. In the *Dagao* (大誥, “Great Announcement”) chapter, *buwang* appears in the exhortation to “not forget the great task” (不忘大功),²⁰ denoting the sustained commitment to foundational achievements and responsibilities. In the *Jiugao* (酒誥, “Announcement about Wine”) chapter, the phrase “forever not forgotten in the royal house” (永不忘在王家) expresses enduring recognition and memorialization within the lineage of rulership.²¹ A third instance, in the *Weizi zhi ming* (微子之命, “Mandate of Weizi”) chapter, features the king’s admiration for a noble figure whose virtue, he proclaims, should not be forgotten.²² In each of these cases, *buwang* denotes the conscious preservation of what is ethically or politically significant: the ‘remembrance’ of great deeds, the maintenance of royal continuity, and

the honoring of virtue. Whether in the context of fulfilling obligations or commemorating exemplary conduct, *buwang* signals a mnemonic imperative directed toward the consolidation of foundational values and the reinforcement of collective memory.

Instances of negated forgetting in the *Classic of Odes* are consistently associated with the continuity of merit, the persistence of emotional intensity, personal commitment, and alignment with established norms or undertakings. First, *buwang* affirms the enduring significance of noble figures and ancestral exemplars. The constant prominence of the virtuous, noble person is declared “unforgettable” (*huai yun bu wang* 懷允不忘, Mao 208); the former kings are not forgotten (*qian wang bu wang* 前王不忘, Mao 269); the accomplished prince (*you fei junzi* 有匪君子) is described as “forever unforgettable” (*zhong bu ke xuan xi* 終不可諼兮, Mao 55);²³ and in another instance, the prince 君子 (*junzi*) is congratulated with longevity 壽考 (*shoukao*) and, synonymously, with the promise of non-forgetfulness (*buwang* 不忘, Mao 130). These four cases collectively associate non-forgetfulness with an elevated status—symbolically linked indirectly with notions of immortality and lasting virtue.²⁴ Second, *buwang* refers to profound emotional distress. In Mao 183, sorrow is described as “unforgettable” 不可弭忘 in the sense that it persistently occupies the center of one’s heart-mind or awareness. Here, *buwang* does not reflect voluntary memory but, rather, an affective intensity that resists repression. Third, personal commitment is articulated through vows of constant non-forgetfulness. In Mao 56, the speaker proclaims that “asleep or awake,” they will “never forget” (*yong shi fu xuan* 永矢弗諼), expressing unwavering dedication. Finally, Mao 249 introduces a prospective king who is praised for neither transgressing nor forgetting (*bu qian bu wang* 不愆不忘) while following the statutes of antiquity (*shuai you jiu zhang* 率由舊章). This formulation—also cited in *Mengzi* IVa1—illustrates how non-forgetfulness complements non-transgression, denoting a disciplined attentiveness to inherited standards and tradition. These four thematic groupings—enduring recognition, emotional persistence, personal commitment, and normative alignment—demonstrate how *buwang* or negated *xuan* is consistently reserved for ethical or other matters of significance. Whether evoking reverence for the virtuous, lamenting affliction, expressing fidelity, or adhering to ancestral models, non-forgetfulness in the *Odes* operates as a marker of grave concern, whether favorable or adverse. In all cases, it signals the gravity and centrality of the object to which awareness is steadfastly directed.

The *Classic of Odes* has several instances in which non-negated *wang* (or its *xuan* 諼 variant) supports the achievement of a specified goal, often implicitly aligned with the complementary function of *buwang*.²⁵ Notably, none of these cases suggest a contrary usage. In two instances, *wang* is invoked to alleviate intense emotional suffering. In Mao 29, a woman, disillusioned by an unfulfilled relationship, expresses a desire to mitigate her distress through forgetting: “How can [I] settle [my mind by] making it forgettable?” (*huneng youding, bi ye kewang* 胡能有定、俾也可忘).²⁶ In Mao 62, another woman symbolically plants the “flower of forgetfulness” (*xuancao* 諼草) on the north side of her dwelling—a space associated with liminality and anticipation of dawn—to ease her longing for an absent husband. The poem suggests that such engagement with forgetfulness may help to restore her emotional equilibrium. Two further passages complement these examples by framing *wang* from the perspective of marginalization. In Mao 132, a wife contemplates her husband’s possible death but refrains from accepting it outright; instead, she attributes his neglect to a suspension of mnemonic engagement on his part—a failure of non-forgetting. Mao 201 features a speaker lamenting misrecognition: their great virtues are forgotten, while minor faults are emphasized (*wangwo dade, siwo xiaoyan* 忘我大德、思我小怨). Here, *wang* and its antonym—emphasis or *si* 思—highlight the relational dynamics of the mnemonic process, where forgetting entails not erasure but selective devaluation. Across these

four instances, *wang* is consistently presented in relative, not absolute, terms. Forgetting does not denote total loss but, rather, the attenuation of a particular concern through its removal from focal awareness. The first pair of examples illustrates voluntary forgetfulness as a coping mechanism, easing emotional recovery by displacing intrusive or painful thoughts. The second pair narrates instances in which subjects become the object of forgetfulness with negative consequences; namely, the failure to receive due attention or recognition. Taken together, these examples converge on a shared logic: *wang* functions as a cognitive and affective mechanism for reallocating attention, diminishing secondary concerns to support a higher-order objective—be it emotional composure, moral discernment, or interpersonal harmony. In this sense, forgetfulness is not a deficit but a dynamic manipulation of mnemonic and ethical modulation.

In resemblance with Mao 249 of the *Odes*, the *Xicizhuan* articulates how exemplary persons (*junzi*), predisposed to engage in the welfare of the people, delineate their course of action by subscribing to negated *wang* (non-forgetfulness), thereby internalizing collective goals as their own:

Therefore, in calmness, exemplary persons do not forget the threat; in perseverance, they do not forget [the possibility of] destruction; and when engaged in governing, they do not forget [the contingency of] disorder.²⁷

This formulation underscores the capacity of the exemplary person to sustain mnemonic focus on undesirable outcomes, even in moments of apparent stability or success. To not forget (*buwang*) threats in times of calm, potential destruction during perseverance, or disorder amid governance is to maintain concentrated attention on what must be averted—while simultaneously relegating competing concerns to the periphery. In such cases, the exemplary person mobilizes their mnemonic faculties to adopt the goals of the collective as personal imperatives, engaging them with heightened attentiveness. That the text counts only three non-forgettable outcomes does not imply that all other matters are subject to forgetfulness. Instead, negated *wang* marks the focal point—the content that must remain present for awareness—while non-negated *wang* signifies what must be suspended in service of that priority. The *wang* and *buwang* dynamic here economizes the person’s attention: mnemonic contents are not passively retained in full but modulated to maximize ethical and practical efficacy. In this instance, *wang* and *buwang* co-function to concentrate cognitive resources toward the realization of a specific, collectively significant goal.

In line with the preceding analysis, instances of negated *wang* (non-forgetfulness) in the *Lunyu* are closely tied to the focused orientation required for self-cultivation. In XIV12, a statement attributed to Kongzi identifies three qualities of the “fully mature person” (*chengren* 成人): the ability to prioritize rightness (*yi* 義) when confronted with gain, the readiness to sacrifice one’s life when (others are) threatened, and evading forgetfulness of one’s words even after enduring prolonged hardship. Here, *buwang* marks the enduring relevance of moral commitments and verbal accountability, underscoring the ethical imperative to maintain constancy of intention despite adversity. A second reference appears in XIX5, where Zixia states: “A person who, from day to day, recognizes what is yet to be learned, and from month to month, does not forget what is already attained, may be said to love learning” (Ni 2017, pp. 420–21). This passage presents learning as a dialectic of curiosity and preservation: one must remain open to new knowledge while actively retaining what has already been internalized. As another remark in VII19 implies, either aspect in isolation is insufficient. *Buwang*, in this context, functions as an affirmation of cognitive continuity and depth. In both cases, non-forgetfulness is not treated as rote retention but as a means of anchoring essential values and knowledge in the ongoing process of self-cultivation. Whether in moral resolve or intellectual commitment, *buwang* is

sanctioned as the orienting force that sustains focus, integrates past learning, and guides ethical development.

The role of non-negated *wang* in the *Lunyu* is consistent with the interpretive framework outlined above. In saying VIII19, *wang* appears twice about matters that cannot be forgotten: eating and worrying. A third implicit instance in the same passage employs the term “not knowing” or “not noticing” (*buzhi* 不知)—a close conceptual synonym for forgetting—in reference to the fragility of life. All three cases reflect a pattern of distinguishing between means and end, where the successful pursuit of the latter necessitates the temporary withdrawal or suspension of the former. Here, learning is identified as Kongzi’s singular concern, and dedication to that aim entails the forgetfulness of food, daily anxieties, and even the awareness of one’s mortality. An inverted version of this logic appears in XII21, where “forgetting oneself” (*wang qi shen* 忘其身)—understood as deviating from the appropriate path or fixating on erroneous concerns—is equated with failing in one’s filial obligations and thereby bringing harm to one’s parents. In both passages, *wang* functions as a relative and contextual process. It does not signal content erasure but, rather, the reordering of attentional priorities. This relativity—namely, the conjunction of primary concern with the impossibility of entirely forgetting subsidiary concerns—forms a crucial part of my broader argument. In the *Lunyu*, as in other early Confucian texts, *wang* signifies a sweeping aside, not a total elimination, of that which is momentarily considered less relevant.

Among the texts examined in this study, the *Mengzi* is distinctive in that non-forgetfulness (*buwang*) is consistently aligned with morally legitimate or non-meretricious causes. Passage IIa2 illustrates this orientation, where the phrase “a heart-mind that averts forgetfulness” (*xin wuwang* 心勿忘) is positioned between two cautionary directives: “do not fixate” (*wuzheng* 勿正) and “do not aid growth by force” (*wuzhuzhang* 勿助長). Here, non-forgetfulness signifies a mode of sustained concentration and ethical attentiveness, corresponding to the imperative “Always be doing something” (*biyou shiyan* 必有事焉) at the beginning of the passage. It reflects steady engagement grounded in internal moral alignment rather than external pressure. A similar structure appears in passage IIIb1, which recounts the anecdote of a forest guard who remains committed to his role despite an inappropriate royal summons. His unshaken focus exemplifies vocational integrity and resistance to improper influence. This narrative is followed by a saying attributed to Kongzi: “The committed officer does not forget that he may find himself in a ditch; the courageous officer does not forget that he may sacrifice his head” (also found in Vb7; see Hunter 2017, p. 148, adapted). Here, non-forgetfulness connotes moral steadfastness and existential courage—the commitment to a broader order and readiness to endure personal risk in pursuing just action. In both passages, negated forgetfulness signals disciplined progression along a constant path toward realizing an ethically grounded objective. Notably, both instances imply a balanced mode of attentiveness rooted in one’s inner moral directive. The steady engagement in IIa2, and implicitly in IIIb1, reflects an inner calibration of awareness that aligns with a core principle of self-cultivation—a theme earlier articulated in Mao 249 of the *Odes* and cited in *Mengzi* IVa1. In this light, non-forgetfulness is not merely cognitive persistence but an ethical orientation that affirms coherence between intention, action, and inner moral authority.

Other passages in the *Mengzi* further reinforce the association between negated forgetfulness and the requirement of focused attention. When parents fulfill their roles by expressing genuine care for their children, filial piety is expected to precede the child’s awareness. Thus, the filial person is described as one who is “pleased and does not forget” (*xi er bu wang* 喜而不忘) about their parents (Va1). Another passage highlights *buwang* as aligning with a morally significant message. Shizi (Duke Wen of Teng, r. 324–316 BCE),

heir apparent of the state of Teng, recounts how the words Mengzi once spoke to him have continually lingered in his awareness: “In my mind, I never forgot [his words]” (*yu xin zhong bu wang* 於心終不忘) (IIIa2). Similarly, in VIIb37, Mengzi quotes a saying attributed to Kongzi during his time in Chen, in which he expresses concern that his disciples might “forget their original temperament” (*bu wang qi chu* 不忘其初)—a reference to the foundational ethical dispositions cultivated under his tutelage (Hunter 2017, pp. 224, 228). While the phrase seems to mark a tension between early temperament and present concerns, the overarching message is clear: Kongzi hopes that the teachings will occupy a central place in his students’ minds. Further affirmations of non-forgetfulness occur in political and ethical contexts. In IVb20, King Wu (d. 1043 BCE) is praised for not forgetting those far from home, showing moral attentiveness to the displaced. In VIb7, Duke Huan of Qi (r. 685–643 BCE) and other leaders are commended for agreeing that guests and travelers—symbolically representative of all who are vulnerable or outside the normative social center—should not be forgotten but instead treated with the same respect as native inhabitants. Taken together, these passages associate non-forgetfulness with a range of ethically significant goals: sustained engagement (IIa2), filial devotion (Va1), reverence for the master’s teachings (IIIa2), prioritization of core values (VIIb37), and the enactment of fairness and inclusion in governance (IVb20, VIb7). In each case, *buwang* marks the ethical imperative to focus on what matters most. It functions as a cognitive and moral posture—ensuring that core responsibilities, teachings, and values stay central to one’s awareness and action.

References to *wang* in its non-negated form in the *Mengzi* similarly function to support the realization of significant concern by withdrawing lesser matters from the center of awareness. As in Mao 249 in the *Odes*, *Mengzi* Ib4 employs the metaphor of “following the stream,” regardless of its directional flow, to illustrate proper moral alignment. Forgetfulness here signals a deviation from balanced engagement—either through distraction or delay—that compromises completing a task. In another instance, the text recounts the ordinary forgetting of people’s names yet emphasizes that while names may be forgotten, their merits—what truly matters—are retained (Vb3). This selective forgetting is further illustrated in VIIa8: “The exemplary kings of antiquity loved goodness and forgot power. [...] They delighted in the Way and forgot about the power of men” (Bloom 2009, p. 145). A similar dynamic appears in VIIa35, where the legendary ruler Shun is praised for such profound filial piety that he forgets all else. In each case, *wang* does not denote total erasure but a strategic diminishment of secondary concerns to intensify orientation toward a primary ethical commitment. This pattern mirrors the recurring motif of distinguishing the main from the bland, aligning *buwang* with focused moral attention and *wang* with the marginalization of distractions. As seen in the *Odes* and the *Documents*, the content assigned to *buwang* consistently correlates with ethical salience. *Wang*, in turn, serves not as a negation of memory per se but as a cognitive and moral economy—a recalibration of awareness that enables the subject to concentrate on what is deemed essential.

Two passages in the *Xunzi* echo the reasoning articulated in *Xici Xia* 5, integrating the pursuit of an objective with the non-forgetfulness of potential adverse outcomes. Passage IX26 cautions that aligning oneself with the fulfillment of fundamental tasks must coexist with non-forgetfulness of the threats posed by indulgence and idleness: “and do not forget the reckless Xue Yue [who abandoned society]” (*er wuwang qichi Xue Yue ye* 而勿忘棲遲薛越也).²⁸ Similarly, according to XV14, striving for success necessitates not forgetting the possibility of defeat. In both cases, negated *wang* serves to anchor one’s attention on the primary goal—whether communal or personal—while alerting about potential failure, whether in the moral integrity of the ruler (IX26) or the contingency of loss (XV14). These passages suggest that the full accomplishment of any objective entails a dialectic mnemonic orientation: the sustained focus on the goal itself, and the concurrent attentive-

ness to the conditions that could undermine its realization. Additionally, forgetting the irrelevant is implied. In this context, negated forgetting does not merely signify the act of remembering but rather a form of ethical and strategic alignment with the path that leads to successful and virtuous action. Through this balanced attentiveness—both to aspiration and risk—the mnemonic process supports effective governance and self-cultivation.

Although the following passages lack the contrasting structure found in the above two anecdotes, they exemplify the same consistent linkage between non-forgetfulness and focused attention toward accomplishing an essential goal. Remarkably, *Xunzi* XXVII11 attributes non-forgetfulness to Heaven: disciples are urged to persevere in their learning through times of hardship, with the assurance that “Heaven does not forget” (*tian buwang ye* 天不忘也). This statement implies that their efforts are aligned with the unfolding of the cosmic pattern, and thus, their sincerity will ultimately be rewarded. Similarly, passage XXVII11 notes that when confronted with hardship, the exemplary person does not forget the teachings he has previously elaborated (*lin huannan er bu wang xixi zhi yan* 臨患難而不忘細席之言; Hutton 2014, p. 307, adapted), emphasizing the role of *buwang* in ethical consistency under pressure. In IV3, the loyalty of dogs—who, even under threat, do not forget their pups (*bu wang qi qin* 不忘其親)—is used to underscore that concern for kin should remain central to human attention. In XIX25, negated *wang* communicates the enduring grief experienced during the three-year mourning period: “longing and yearning are not yet forgotten” (*sima wei wang* 思慕未忘), affirming the depth and persistence of emotional memory in ritual observance. A similar pattern is discernible in passages that employ *wang* in a non-negated grammatical form but convey the functional equivalent of non-forgetfulness. In XIX19, although the text describes forgetfulness toward the deceased elders of one’s lineage, the context suggests that such forgetfulness leads to a loss of propriety. The underlying message implies that not forgetting one’s reputation is a prerequisite for the correct mode of respect: “If one is sated, then one forgets... and then does not act with reverence” (*yan ze wang... ze bu jing* 厭則忘 [...] 則不敬). Similarly, a son declares to his father: “How would I dare forget your command?” (*gan wang ming yi* 敢忘命矣; XXVII15. Hutton 2014, p. 291).²⁹ Although the statement is phrased in the non-negated form of *wang*, it affirms an unwavering attentiveness and filial obligation. An ethically inverted but structurally consistent example appears in IX8, where feudal lords are criticized for failing to care for their people, instead choosing not to forget their enemies (*er bu wang qi di* 而不忘其敵). This fixation on historical grievances undermines just governance and illustrates how non-forgetfulness can support misguided or ethically problematic objectives. Taken together, these passages—whether explicitly or implicitly—link non-forgetfulness with alignment to a specified and often ethically charged goal: the pursuit of learning (XXVII11), the perseverance of the exemplary person (XXVII11), the care of parents and offspring (IV3), the memory of mourning (XIX25), the safeguarding of social standing (XIX19), the son’s deference to paternal authority (XXVII15), and, in contrast, the unethical persistence in past enmities (IX8). Across these examples, negated forgetfulness consistently corresponds to a focused, directive form of awareness—marking it as a vital part of Confucian ethical cultivation and mnemonic orientation.

In its use of the non-negated *wang* (忘, forgetting) vocabulary, the *Xunzi* remains consistent with the pattern established thus far while also introducing a distinctive application: like *Lunyu* XII21, it uses *wang* not only to mark appropriate forgetting but also to illustrate moral error. A representative passage differentiates between two ethical orientations or modes of conduct:

The petty man takes joy in attaining the object of his desires. If one takes the Way to regulate one's desires, then one will be happy and not disordered. If one forgets the Way for the sake of one's desires, then one will be confused and unhappy. And so music is the means to guide one's joy. (*Xunzi* XX.7, Hutton 2014, p. 221)

The petty person pursues joy through unregulated desire, while the exemplary person attains joy by aligning with the Way (*dao* 道). The passage equates the act of “forgetting the Way” with moral and emotional disorientation caused by prioritizing desires (*yi yu wang dao* 以欲忘道). Forgetting, in this context, functions as a departure from ethical alignment. Notably, while forgetting the Way is explicitly criticized, the inverse is merely suggested: to follow the Way may require the regulation of desires. In this formulation, not forgetting the Way and regulating desires are ethically co-constitutive. Indeed, to the extent that “forgetting” in “forgetting the Way” conveys neglect rather than mnemonic erasure, within the framework of *Xunzi* XX7, the regulation of desires corresponds to forgetting—albeit in a similar weak sense—the desires. This interpretive modification highlights the directional nature of *wang*: it is not the act of forgetting per se that carries moral weight but what is forgotten and in the service of what. In this respect, the *Xunzi* suggests a nuanced model in which forgetting supports the mnemonic process, though it is not inherently negative or positive. It becomes meaningful only within the broader context of ethical orientation.

The *Xunzi* stands out among the texts examined in this study for featuring several instances in which a non-negated *wang* corresponds to a form of “forgetting the Way.” Forgetfulness serves the ignorance of the larger context of inter-relatedness, dissociating the person from others and narrowing their concern to selfish interests (IV3 and IV4; wealthy with the *wang* vocabulary). By introducing several sequences of cause and effect, laziness and haughtiness are associated with forgetting one's place in society and behaving contrary to the norm (I7; see *Lunyu* XIX19). Military rulers (*ba* 霸) are criticized for prioritizing extracting the most from their subordinates and forgetting to reward them for their efforts (IX26). Pursuing selfish achievements, such as enhancing one's reputation while neglecting the tasks of (responsible) rulership and forgetting about the people, are erroneous ways, eventually bound to fail (X12; Hutton 2014, p. 92, adapted; this passage complements VII2 and IX26, see below). Likewise, two other passages communicate heartless rulers who forget (intentionally or not) to care for their subjects, thus aligning with misguided goals (IX26 and X12). To forget is to divert from the course of humane awareness, an act considered unthinkable and disconnected from that which is essential: “perverse men whose ways should not be followed forget by that evening those who have died in the morning” (*zebi zhaosi erxi wangzhi* 則彼朝死而夕忘之) (XIX27; Hutton 2014, adapted). Rather than total erasure, the above incidences of forgetfulness demonstrate how prioritizing the erroneous way entails marginalizing concerns otherwise—and appropriately—considered worthy.

The *Xunzi* introduces two passages in which *wang* features in association with a form of “regulating/forgetting the desires.” Duke Huan of Qi is praised for a policy that secured his reputation to posterity (VII2). He recognized the quality of Guan Zhong (720–645 BC), hence the benefit for the state in recruiting him, and for that purpose, the Duke forgot (*wang*) the enmity and anger he felt when earlier encountering this former counselor of his opponent (Hutton 2014, p. 55, adapted). The same reasoning is revisited, though from the perspective of the ruler's subjects, as the *Xunzi* observes that when the superiors are oriented to care for their subjects, the latter maximize their efforts to advance the common cause of benefiting the state (XIII1). The latter (the people) forget to calculate their costs, forget the strain of their labor, and forget about the possibility of meeting their death. The reasoning in both VII2 and XIII1 highlights a prerequisite for a priority order, and like in the *Mengzi*, the idea is to distinguish the main from the bland. Could the Duke forget (in the strong sense of the word)? Of course, he could not. The same applies to the subjects

who interweave their ruler's concerns with their own. Where Duke Huan could align himself with a policy most beneficial for the people under his dominion, the subjects of the caring ruler could discard the price they might personally pay to enhance the well-being of their community. Observing that the common cause should be prioritized on account of private concerns, the guiding imperative prescribes that concentration on a primary goal necessarily comes at a cost. Practical concerns dictate that forgetfulness in these two cases appeals to lesser (more selfish) concerns to facilitate the focus on the essential. These instances sanction voluntary non-forgetfulness, with forgetfulness being the non-voluntary consequence. While the former refers to high concentration, the latter is not congruent with total erasure. The role of *wang* in the *Xunzi* is to economize the accomplishment of an essential goal for the person or the larger community, and the goal could either be ethically acceptable or not.

4. The Yin–Yang Reasoning and the Positive Meaning of Wang

In my argument, the sequence of forgetfulness and non-forgetfulness—*wang* and *buwang*—simulates the logic of *yin–yang* reasoning, signifying two complementary aspects of a continuous process. This process unfolds akin to the cyclical transformations of the seasons, the transition from day to night, or the alternation between movement and stillness. An early antecedent of this sequence, suggestive of *yin–yang* relations, appears in a series of divinatory texts from the Oracle Bone Inscriptions of the Wu Ding period (ca. 1200–1181 BCE), in phrases such as “We may not receive the millet harvest” and “We will [may] receive the millet harvest.” As David Keightley has observed, such formulations posit a relational structure in which “the germs of one mode [are] always inherent in the other” (Keightley 1988, p. 377). This observation, I argue, anticipates the *yin–yang* reasoning that underpins the *wang–buwang* sequence, which unfolds according to a narrative logic that avoids extremes and preserves a generative interplay between opposing states.

Indeed, juxtaposing the *wang–buwang* sequence with *yin–yang* reasoning reveals two properties deserving closer consideration. First, in conjunction with the *yin–yang* reasoning, the *wang–buwang* sequence as formulated in these texts avoids polarizing mnemonic activity into binaries of total remembrance or complete oblivion.³⁰ Rather than signifying erasure, forgetting is a form of relegation or suspension. Mnemonic content remains—scattered, distanced, or variably accessible—across the field of awareness. In this context, *wang* is best understood not as forgetting in the strong sense but as “suspended awareness.” Conversely, *buwang*, continuously shaped by its dynamic interaction with *wang*, is more accurately rendered as “attentive awareness.” As in the *yin–yang* framework, neither term stands in isolation: there is no attentive awareness without suspended awareness, and vice versa.³¹ Paraphrasing Keightley's insight, “the germs of the axis (non-forgetfulness, attentive awareness, *yang*) [are] always inherent in the margins (forgetfulness, suspended awareness, *yin*) and vice versa” (Keightley 1988, p. 377). Second, although we, as external observers, may analytically distinguish references to forgetting (*wang*) from those to non-forgetting (*buwang*), the mnemonic functioning revealed in early Confucian texts suggests their inextricable interdependence. As the instances in the preceding section demonstrate, *wang* and *buwang* operate not as discrete or opposing faculties but as complementary modes within a single cognitive process. *Wang* corresponds to withdrawal, *buwang* to concentration; together, they reflect the interactive operations of the mnemonic economy—wherein forgetfulness withdraws less relevant content to enable focused attentiveness to an essential concern, which is itself an enactment of non-forgetfulness.

To contextualize the integration of the *wang–buwang* sequence and the *yin–yang* reasoning observed in the Confucian sources discussed above, with the generative operation of the mnemonic process, this study introduces a figurative metaphor I refer to as the axis

and margins paradigm. Rather than positioning the *wang* (forgetting) and *buwang* (non-forgetting)—or, correspondingly, the suspended and attentive modes of awareness—as binary opposites, the axis and margins paradigm offers a relational and dialectical account of their dynamic interplay. The metaphorical sketch proposed here consists of a continuous segment of concentrated attention—attentive awareness—unfolding within a broader, open-ended region of suspended awareness. This segment, the axis, is neither fixed nor isolated but in constant exchange with its surrounding margins, which serve as both a reservoir of latent content and a generative field of new relevance. The suspended and attentive modes are thus not merely co-present but mutually constitutive: they interact in a continuous modulation process in which focus is maintained through selective attenuation. Associated with “setting the course” and the concentration of awareness toward a specified goal, *buwang* operates as a stabilizing axis—a locus of coherence that anchors direction and narrativity. It forms the axis of the mnemonic process (discussed below). *Wang*, on the other hand, corresponds to the withdrawal of less relevant content and thus inhabits the margins of awareness. Corresponding to the margins, it enables renewal by suspending less relevant content and allowing for reorientation. Crucially, in its role as a mobile vector of orientation, the axis marks the focal direction around which meaning coheres in the midst of shifting cognitive and ethical demands.³² The margins, in turn, serve as the source of flux and generativity, continually feeding back into and revitalizing the axis. The mnemonic process thus conceived is one of ongoing adjustment—a cognitive and ethical balancing act that reflects the Confucian preference for moderation, responsiveness, and continuity.

In conjunction with the axis and margins paradigm, a key implication of both the *wang-buwan*g sequence and *yin-yang* reasoning inheres in the generative role that forgetfulness plays in economizing the mnemonic process. Not reducible to loss, forgetfulness transforms and modulates one’s attention, enabling the mnemonic process to serve the ongoing task of self-cultivation and meaningful engagement with the world. Anchored by an axis of attentive awareness, the mnemonic process unfolds dynamically through ever-shifting margins, reflecting the expansive and multifaceted nature of human awareness. While the function of forgetfulness is associated with the margins or periphery, it plays a critical role in delimiting and shaping the horizon of mnemonic possibility. Forgetfulness conditions the mnemonic process by framing, constraining, and rendering it adaptable. The alternation between axis and margins prevents cognitive overload, enabling the selective prioritization of relevant information and fostering adaptability. In this light, the mnemonic process becomes not merely a technical operation of storage and retrieval but a practice intertwined with ethical discernment and holistic openness. Significantly, the axis and margins paradigm offers a nuanced understanding of recollection, identity, and historical consciousness. Allowing openness, reinterpretation, and transformation, such a process prevents the past and selfhood from being fixed and overdetermined. The past is thus, both collectively and personally, never entirely “contained,” but persists in the background as a modulated, latent presence—always susceptible to renewal.

The transformative role of forgetfulness—or suspended awareness—aligns with the holistic orientation of the Confucian tradition and its corollary emphasis on constant, dynamic change. In a recent study, Edward S. Casey challenges the assumption that experience must be retained as evidence of a coherent and stable inner self. In his argument, emotions possess an autonomy, resisting cognitive control, as they are neither owned nor willed (Casey 2022, pp. 201–2).³³ Furthermore, for Casey, emotions are not solely internal or mental phenomena but are constituted through relational, spatial, and material entanglements. Given the discussion in Section 3 above, I venture to use this observation about emotions to reframe the understanding of forgetfulness in the Confucian context. Forgetfulness, too, is interdependent with relational, spatial, and material entanglements. Both

emotions and forgetfulness are neither willed nor owned; neither are they reducible to internal states. Within the holistic context of the early Confucian sources, the generative act of forgetting functions as a non-localized withdrawal, accommodating new meanings, relations, and modes of engagement. Like emotion, *wang* emerges at the intersection of individual subjectivity and collective atmosphere, operating beyond deliberate intentionality as it participates in the ongoing reconstitution of subjectivity amid the flux of lived experience. The uncontrollable feature of forgetting signals the interweaving of exterior and interior, thus concretizing the holistic nature of personal experience. As Casey notes of emotion, “This is a creativity that comes from somewhere other than the conscious or deliberate intentionality of the human subject” (Casey 2022, p. 204). The same, I argue, holds for forgetting; suspended awareness plays an active, if unpredictable, role in the narrative and mnemonic processes through which we navigate the open-ended terrain of lived experience.

The tension between the role of interiority in human experience, on one hand, and the mnemonic mode that ranges beyond the narrow compass of subjective experience, on the other, is reconciled by the notion of balance that is measured from within. The Confucian texts examined above suggest that the transformative and creative dimensions of the mnemonic process function most effectively when grounded in a mode of balance measured from within and applicable further into the surroundings. The *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi* offer passages instructing the reader on navigating the mnemonic process across their awareness when considering ethical self-cultivation. In *Mengzi* Ib4 (discussed above), forgetting is a warning against yielding to distractions on either “side” that obstruct the path toward a specific goal, such as rulership. The passage critiques excess in the form of indulgent pleasures and dissolute travels, noting that “the former kings did not have pleasures that left them wasted or dissolute, or travels that led them into depravity or debauchery” (Bloom 2009, p. 18). Non-forgetting is, accordingly, associated with a centered and regulated trajectory, reinforcing the idea that ethical orientation must be self-directed: “It is for you to set your course” (*weijun suoxingye* 惟君所行也; Ib4). The balanced path, in this formulation, is not externally imposed but internally measured.³⁴ Similarly, *Xunzi* XX7 distinguishes between following desires (conceivable as margins) and following the Way (axis), ultimately appointing music to guide one’s affective life: “And so music is the means to guide one’s joy” (Hutton 2014, p. 221). Equated with unchanging harmony, music becomes a rudder for regulating desire—enabling one to experience joy without excess. In contrast to Mozi (Mo di 墨翟, ca. 479–381 BCE), who regarded music as a dispensable luxury, *Xunzi* affirms its centrality to human life as an expressive and stabilizing force. In both the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, the centered disposition is tied not to external constraint but to internal alignment. This view fits the reasoning of the axis and margins paradigm: distractions, whether in the form of exaggeration or diminishment, are not developed in parallel with the self but arise in the subject’s continuum of interiority and surroundings. The axis—the site of measured awareness and ethical commitment—is drawn from within, while the margins delineate the shifting field through which external influences and irrelevant concerns are navigated. In this sense, interiority has a role in the ground from which ethical memory and orientation emerge.

5. Conclusions

My discussion of the *wang–buwang* sequence began with a preliminary reference to its early appearance in the Bronze Inscriptions. I then illustrated how negated *wang* instances in the *Book of Documents* function as exhortations, promoting the accomplishment of essential objectives and praising virtues benefitting the dynasty. The more elaborate treatment in the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing*) links non-forgetfulness not only with moral com-

mentation (as in the first instance) but also, more significantly, with the focused concentration of awareness (in the second, third, and fourth instances). These passages underscore the complementary nature of *wang* and *buwang*, with four distinct examples showing how forgetfulness functions as a form of attentional withdrawal—shifting nonessential content toward the margins of awareness and thereby facilitating concentration on more pressing concerns. In these cases, forgetfulness is not equated with erasure but is instead understood as a modulation of awareness. This reflects a decrease in salience rather than a loss of content, confirming that the mnemonic process operates as a gradational dynamic of focus rather than a binary of presence and absence. The *Xicizhuan* continues this logic, assigning three central, non-forgettable concerns to the exemplary person or ruler, implicitly relegating other matters to forgetfulness. Yet again, the distinction is one of degree, not of kind. The *Lunyu* similarly associates *wang* and *buwang* with self-cultivation and ethical integrity. While the focus is on the individual moral agent, the underlying principle remains consistent: forgetting and non-forgetting refer to differentiated levels of awareness or attention, not absolute cognitive presence or absence. Across these early sources, then, the *wang–buwang* sequence consistently reflects a relational model of memory—one shaped not by the logic of erasure but by the dynamics of attentional prioritization and ethical orientation.

The *Mengzi* and the *Xunzi* are similarly devoid of extreme representations of mnemonic phenomena. Both texts avoid vocabularies such as total erasure or oblivion and instead emphasize ethical and functional modulation. The *Mengzi*, consistent with the broader formulation advanced in this study, is particularly notable for associating forgetfulness and non-forgetfulness with ethical appropriateness. The Mengzian pattern mirrors the logic of distinguishing the main from the bland: *buwang* (non-forgetfulness) corresponds to sustained attention to what is essential, while *wang* (forgetfulness) refers to the attenuation of what is secondary or distracting. Occurrences of non-negated *wang* in the *Mengzi* are consistently directed toward the accomplishment of major objectives, achieved through the strategic withdrawal of lesser concerns from the center of awareness. The *Xunzi* follows this general framework but distinguishes itself through the more significant variation and nuance in its use of the *wang–buwang* sequence. Like the *Xicizhuan*, it includes passages that connect the achievement of a goal with the non-forgetting of its possible failure conditions—demonstrating how attentiveness to potential threats or reversals can reinforce moral or political success. Other passages suggest—whether explicitly or implicitly—that non-forgetfulness is synonymous with focused attention on a specified course of action. Concerning instances of non-negated *wang*, this study appeals to the interpretive differentiation implied in *Xunzi* XX7, which contrasts the person who seeks joy by following their desires with the one who finds joy by following the Way. In this passage, both forgetting and implied non-forgetting are presented without inherent moral valence; their ethical implications depend on what is attentively engaged or suspended. Forgetfulness, in *Xunzi*, supports the mnemonic process independently of moral alignment. This marks a subtle yet significant shift from the *Mengzi*, where *buwang* is more tightly bound to ethical orientation. Both conceptualize the *wang* and *buwang* sequence primarily in terms of cognitive economy and effectiveness.

Within the framework of *yin–yang* reasoning, *wang* in the *wang–buwang* (forgetting–non-forgetting) sequence emerges as a supportive and essential dynamic within the mnemonic process. Drawing on the *yin–yang* model, the interplay between *wang* and *buwang* reflects a dialectical relationship analogous to natural rhythms where each mode contains the germ of its opposite. This correlative structure reveals memory as a fluid, transformative process rather than a static repository. *Wang* performs a crucial economizing function in this context, distancing or suspending the less relevant elements of awareness, thereby enabling *buwang*—attentive awareness—to concentrate on what is essential. Understood

as “suspended awareness,” *wang* signifies an active reorganization of cognitive content. It regulates what remains at the center of attention, mitigating cognitive overload and preserving narrative coherence. In this model, past experiences are repositioned within a fluctuating field of awareness, where they remain latent and potentially retrievable. This dynamic is further articulated in the axis and margins paradigm: *buwang* forms the stabilizing axis that sustains continuity and orientation, while *wang* forms the shifting, open-ended margins—flexible, generative, and responsive. Forgetting thus frames the very conditions under which mnemonic processes become meaningful. As Edward S. Casey has argued about emotion, forgetting arises relationally rather than through deliberate control; it shapes subjectivity by creating space for new meanings and possibilities. In the Confucian tradition, along the dynamic scheme of axis and margins, this balanced interplay between *wang* and *buwang* aligns with the work of ethical cultivation. Forgetting is not an absence but the transformation of functional and integral aspects of holistic living governed by balance and orientation.

6. Avenues for Further Research

First, by conceptualizing forgetting not as erasure but as transformation, the *wang–buwang* sequence fundamentally refutes the notion of oblivion in its sense of total erasure. Two interrelated principles of the Confucian mode of forgetting support this claim. For one thing, *wang* functions not as elimination but, instead, as selective and creative modulation within the mnemonic process—regardless of any definite controlling authority, contents are withdrawn while their potential is preserved for future relevance. For another, the *yin–yang* reasoning attributes an ontological interdependence between forgetting and non-forgetting, precluding absolute states, such as oblivion. As already observed above (at the beginning of Section 3), this claim is reinforced by the fact that even philosophical strands advocating radical forgetting, such as that found in the *Zhuangzi*, concede the persistence of certain unforgettable elements. *Zhuangzi*—arguably the most prominent proponent of total forgetting—exempts the *great transformation* (*da hua* 大化) from his otherwise sweeping vision of forgetfulness.³⁵ My claim that the *wang* variant is incompatible with oblivion connotations underscores the distinctiveness of the Confucian (and Chinese) philosophical framework. Within it, nothing is entirely lost; instead, all content is subject to repositioning within the dynamic interplay of suspended and attentive awareness. In this model, forgetting is a transformational process that challenges reductive understandings of forgetting as mere loss and affirms its role in an ongoing cycle of ethical and cognitive renewal. However, my criticism of the oblivion claims is not without some reservation, as we do find textual instances where such cases are explicitly indicated. For example, Mengzi observes: “The followers of Confucius did not speak of the affairs of Huan and Wen, and thus nothing about them has been transmitted to later generations” (Ia7, Bloom 2009, p. 7). This instance features the “transmitted” (*zhuan*) vocabulary, and yet, this is not a case of a mnemonic process in the sense discussed in this study. In this respect, my contention that the *wang–buwang* sequence contains no reference to oblivion remains intact.

Second, while early Confucian texts lack a direct equivalent for “memory,” this absence should not be interpreted as a conceptual deficiency but as indicative of an alternative epistemological orientation. Rather than positing a singular faculty or imposing lexical uniformity, the texts examined above express the mnemonic process through a constellation of awareness-related dispositions—most notably the dialectic between attentive awareness (*buwang*) and strategic suspension (*wang*). This framework resists the compartmentalization of memory as a static cognitive function, instead emphasizing its generative and transformative potential. In this respect, it aligns with contemporary theories that understand memory not as a passive repository of past impressions but as an active synthesis embed-

ded in present cognition. Within this paradigm, *buwang* connotes an ethically inflected attentiveness rather than mechanical retention, while *wang* does not signify total erasure but the selective inhibition of irrelevant or obstructive content and support of mnemonic continuity. Such an interpretation finds resonance with neuroscientific research, which emphasizes that memory operates through dynamic processes of reconstruction, consolidation, and prioritization—functions that serve adaptive, rather than archival, purposes.³⁶ The early Confucian orientation toward optimizing awareness suggests a model of cognition that is purposive and ethically responsive, privileging practical efficacy over indiscriminate accumulation. This is not to deny that memory may persist at a physiological level beyond conscious awareness. Rather than rejecting conventional memory theory, the Confucian perspective can be read as an implicit recognition that memory attains its highest function when it is ethically modulated and contextually attuned. This view predicts current interdisciplinary understandings of memory as a fundamentally selective, goal-driven process—a principle of enduring relevance in philosophical and scientific discourse.

Third, the religious and spiritual implications of the *wang–buwang* sequence, as elaborated above, are worthy of further and much broader examination. Suffice it here to briefly introduce this aspect and its significance. In his recent *Sourcebook*, Roger T. Ames observes,

Of significance in the nature and function of religiousness in this [Confucian] tradition is that the enchanted, numinous dimension of the human experience and its many mysteries (*shen* 神) does not belong to some other world. Far from it, such spirituality is the inexhaustible product of efficacious living and refinement within this world and the boundless penumbra that emanates out from always contextualized human activities to suffuse the cosmos. (Ames 2023, p. 71)

The axis and margins model fits with the view reserving “the numinous dimension of the human experience” to this world and excludes the possibility of any other world (of relevance). Reflecting an “efficacious living and refinement within this world and the boundless penumbra,” the agent of self-cultivation aligns with their mnemonic axis of non-forgetting while simultaneously exhausting the unbounded forgetfulness margins. The resultant open-ended experience of dynamic transformation is synonymous with joining the universal process of growth, resonating with a sense of “suffusing the cosmos,” the experience of spirituality. Inversely, considering that the mnemonic context is constituted through relational, spatial, and material entanglements, the noncontrollable nature of forgetting is where the inner and outer of the ongoing mnemonic experience are aligned, positioning the person as an indeterminate participant in a holistic living world. To put this sense of spirituality in other words, given that the noncontrollable arrives from places other than the conscious self and meaningfully relates with the self, forgetting reflects the joining of the human with forces beyond the self, epitomizing the sense of participation in the universal process of growth, hence the sense of spirituality.

Notably, in terms of its spiritual dimension, this Confucian variant of the *wang–buwang* sequence differs from the more extreme mode of forgetting found in the *Zhuangzi*. Indeed, the latter tends to strip the practitioner of memory, making them memory-less participants in the Way (*Dao*). The former, in contrast, interweaves the noncontrollable with that which the practitioner may be capable of controlling, incorporating the memory-full participants with the whole. However, these two currents (dissectible into various sub-strands) are not that distant from each other. Readers are reminded that the extreme forgetting in the *Zhuangzi* still insists on not forgetting the great transformations—not a trivial matter to remember. The difference, therefore, is one of degree rather than kind.

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Notes

- 1 For Qian Mu's (1895–1990) articulation of the historical process in terms of axis and margins where the former corresponds to the good and the latter to evil, see [Isay \(2020\)](#), pp. 194–95).
- 2 Some of the other contributions to *The Craft of Oblivion* do engage Confucian-related texts, yet their choice of texts does not include the recognized major texts considered in the present study.
- 3 The first chapter in [Wang \(2025\)](#) narrates the challenges against the privileging of remembrance over forgetting in accounts of the mnemonic process.
- 4 Michael Loewe dates the poems that make up the *Book of Songs* to the period of 1000–600 BCE. See his “*Shih ching*” in *Early Chinese Texts*, ([Loewe 1993](#), p. 415).
- 5 Following Eric L. Hutton, “focus” here translates 志. According to Hutton, most commentators and translators read this instance of *zhi* 志 as *zhi* 誌 “memory.” See fn. 11 in Hutton’s translation ([Hutton 2014](#), p. 228).
- 6 See in the *Book of Odes*, Mao 228; *Xicizhuan* IE2, IIE3; and also in *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*.
- 7 For one source among others supporting this assumption, see *Xunzi*: “The heart/mind is the master of the body, the ruler of the illuminating intelligence ...” 心者，形之君也，而神明之主也 ... (*Xunzi* XXI9).
- 8 [Baxter and Sagart \(2014\)](#), p. 282, reads: “...chuán ‘transmit’; also... zhuàn ‘what has been transmitted.’” Besides the radical “person,” on the left side, the right and main part of the character (*zhuān* 專) introduces the image of a hand (*cun* 寸) that turns the spindle (*zhuān* 輿). This part raises meanings relating to having possession of something. *Zhuān* is absent in the *Book of Documents* and in the *Book of Odes*.
- 9 [Baxter and Sagart \(2014\)](#), p. 135, reads 識 as know or recognize.
- 10 [Baxter and Sagart \(2014\)](#), p. 55, renders *chēng* as “weigh; evaluate; call... steelyard; [and]... balance.” Etymologically, this character derives its semantic core from the conceptual domain of lifting upwards or raising, with its fundamental upward motion semantics later extending to abstract senses like “weighing” (稱量 *chēngliáng*) and “praising” (稱讚 *chēngzàn*).
- 11 More on 記 in [Habberstad \(2022\)](#).
- 12 In comparison with *wang* 忘, the “mind” radical is retained, as the *wang* 亡 signifier is substituted with *jin* 今—present, now—introducing, etymologically, the idea of ‘now in mind’ and, additionally, ‘to think’, ‘to reflect’, or ‘to entertain an idea.’
- 13 Other forms of this character include think, keep in mind, remember, often prefixed with “always” (*yong* 永).
- 14 Among several other terms deserving attention in this context of mnemonic concerns in the early Chinese texts, one could mention *si* 思 (think, reflect, recall), *wei* 惟 (reflective recall of precedents), *xiang* 想 (emotional evocation of the absent), and *huai* 懷 (cherish, keep in mind).
- 15 Significantly, where the more “Confucian” sources, such as the *Analects*, the *Xici* commentary of *The Book of Changes*, and the *Mengzi*, consider cultural development as the epitome of human accomplishment, for *Zhuangzi*, inherent cultural distinctions distract an otherwise perfect natural order. To him, non-forgetfulness and the accumulation of knowledge thus foil a person from becoming one with the Way. Therefore, where the Confucian sources stress non-forgetfulness, the *Zhuangzi* advocates forgetfulness, notwithstanding the reservation just mentioned (his “forgetting” is never total). Accordingly, distinct as these two currents are in their formulations of spiritual experience, for mnemonic purposes, both *Zhuangzi*’s non-forgetfulness and the Confucian instances of forgetfulness (discussed below) subscribe to the same category.
- 16 The character of *wang* was yet to assume its current form. In the bronze inscriptions, the more frequent form of *wang* (𠄎) consists of ‘minister’ (臣 *chen*) and ‘moon’ (月 *yue*) above and ‘king’ (王 *wang*) below. Other forms consisted of ‘king’ under ‘minister’ and ‘words’ (言 *yan*) on the right, or ‘king’ under ‘to perish’, ‘to flee’, be lost or dead (亡 *wang*) on the left and, again, ‘words’ on the right, or ‘West’ (西) on the left and ‘king’ under ‘minister’ on the right. *Muwang* 毋忘 or *wuwang* 毋忘 in the sense of negated forgetfulness features in later, Eastern Zhou period sources.
- 17 Research on the bronze inscriptions indicates how “...the inscription was intended... for all generations of the lineage extending backward to the beginning and forwards to the end of time” (Goldin, in [Cook and Goldin 2016](#), p. xv). “The inscriptions were “initially hidden deep inside the vessel and hence barely visible for the human eye,” but over time (early centuries of Western

Zhou period) "... became not only longer over time but also more prominently placed." "...[S]ets of *yongzhong* 甬鐘 musical bells that are inscribed on their outside became common only from the ninth century (BCE) onward" (Kern, in Cook and Goldin 2016, p. xlix).

- 18 *Concordance to the Bronze Inscriptions; Yin, Shang, and the Western Zhou Periods* (Huadong Shifan Daxue Zhongguo wenzi yanjiu yu yingyong zhongxin 2001). While this index lists 11 cases of *wang*, during my research, the present author encountered one more, and under thorough scrutiny of the bronze inscriptions, others may emerge. Hereafter, for forgetfulness, this study uses *wang* in its later and more familiar form, 忘. One is dated to Early Western Zhou (1046–950 BC), five are Middle Western Zhou (950–860 BC), and two are Late Western Zhou (860–770 BC).
- 19 One is dated to Early, and two are Middle Western Zhou periods.
- 20 *Dagao* 2, (Karlgrén 1950, pp. 34–36.2).
- 21 *Jiugao* 4, (Karlgrén 1950, pp. 44–45.7).
- 22 Readers should be informed that the *Weizi zhi ming* is widely regarded by modern scholarship as a Jin dynasty (266–420 AD) forgery. My discussion of this source draws on its consistency with the former two instances.
- 23 *Xuan* (讓) means to deceive, fail in promise or in attending an appointment, and to forget.
- 24 The association between memory and immortality is not unique to Chinese culture.
- 25 "At their most idyllic, the *Shi* [Odes] present a vision of society in which everyone experiences the contentment of belonging to a collective anchored to a virtuous lord." (Hunter 2021, p. 53).
- 26 Arthur Waley's (1996) reading. Legge's (2015) reading reverses the role and yet preserves the mnemonic reasoning.
- 27 *Xici* IIe6 (繫辭下 V:6).
- 28 Hutton renders "and does not recklessly indulge or waste" (Hutton 2014, p. 80). Xue Yue was a legendary recluse who opted to live in seclusion.
- 29 A non-negated that is negated in meaning.
- 30 On oblivion, see the first point in Section 6 above.
- 31 For cases in point, see the discussion of *Lunyu* XII21 and VII19 and *Xunzi* IV3, IV4, IX26, X12, IIV2, and XII1 above. Other instances apply as well. Those mentioned here are ordered by the order outlined in the discussion.
- 32 For cases illustrating the axis and margins paradigm, among others, see Mao 249 in the *Shijing* (quoted in *Mengzi* IVa1), *Mengzi* IIa2, IIIb1, Ib4, Vb3, VIIa8, and VIIa35, and various instances of negated *wang* in the *Xunzi*.
- 33 For Casey applying—differently—his recent ideas on emotions to the understanding of the heart-mind (*xin*) in Chinese philosophy, see Casey (2023).
- 34 *Mengzi* IIa2 and IIIb1 support the same argument.
- 35 For more on this, see the section "Wang in the *Zhuangzi*" in Isay (2022).
- 36 For recent developments in neuroscientific research, see Gravitz (2019).

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