



From the Annals of the World History

Confucius



"To be able under all circumstances to practice five things constitutes perfect virtue; these five things are gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness and kindness."

Confucius (551-479 BCE), according to Chinese tradition, was a thinker, political figure, educator, and founder of the Ru School of Chinese thought. His teachings, preserved in the Lunyu or Analects, form the foundation of much of subsequent Chinese speculation on the education and comportment of the ideal man, how such an individual should live his life and interact with others, and the forms of society and government in which he should participate.

Many of the legends surrounding Confucius at the end of the 2nd century BC were included by the Han dynasty court historian, Sima Qian (145-c.85 BCE), in his well-known and often-quoted Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji). This collection of tales opens by identifying Confucius' ancestors as members of the Royal State of Song. It notes as well that his great grandfather, fleeing the turmoil in his native Song, had moved to Lu, somewhere near the present town of Qufu in southeastern Shandong, where the family became impoverished. Confucius is described, by Sima Qian and other sources, as having endured a poverty-stricken and humiliating youth and been forced, upon reaching manhood, to undertake such petty jobs as accounting and caring for livestock. Sima Qian's account includes the tale of how Confucius was born in answer to his parents' prayers at a sacred hill (qiu) called Ni. Confucius' surname Kong (which means literally an utterance of thankfulness when prayers have been answered), his tabooed given name Qiu, and his social name Zhongni, all appear connected to the miraculous circumstances of his birth.

Tradition has it that he studied ritual with the Daoist Master Lao Dan, music with Chang Hong, and the lute with Music-master Xiang. In his middle age Confucius is supposed to have gathered about him a group of disciples whom he taught and also to have devoted himself to political matters in Lu. At the age of fifty, when Duke Ding of Lu was on the throne, Confucius' talents were recognized and he was appointed Minister of Public Works and then Minister of Crime. But Confucius apparently offended members of the Lu nobility who were vying with Duke Ding for power and he was subsequently forced to leave office and go into exile.

In the company of his disciples, Confucius left Lu and traveled in the states of Wei, Song, Chen, Cai, and Chu, purportedly looking for a ruler who might employ him but meeting instead with indifference and, occasionally, severe hardship and danger. Several of these episodes, as preserved in the Records of the Grand Historian, appear to be little more than prose retellings of songs found in the ancient Chinese Book of Songs, Confucius' life is thus rendered a re-enactment of the suffering and alienation of the personas of the poems.

In any case, by most traditional accounts, Confucius returned to Lu in 484 BCE and spent the remainder of his life teaching, putting in order the Book of Songs, the Book of Documents, and other ancient classics, as well as editing the Spring and Autumn Annals, the court chronicle of Lu. The best source for understanding Confucius and his thought is the Analects.

By the 4th century BCE, Confucius was recognized as a unique figure, a sage who was ignored but should have been recognized and become a king. At the end of the 4th century, Mencius says of Confucius: "Ever since man came into this world, there has never been one greater than Confucius." And in two passages Mencius implies that Confucius was one of the great sage kings who, according to his reckoning, arises every five hundred years. Confucius also figures prominently as the subject of anecdotes and the teacher of wisdom in the writing of Xunzi, a third century BCE follower of Confucius' teachings.

Confucius' Social Philosophy

Confucius' teachings and his conversations and exchanges with his disciples are recorded in the Lunyu or Analects, a collection that probably achieved something like its present form around the second century BCE. While Confucius believes that people live their lives within parameters firmly established by Heaven-which, often, for him means both a purposeful Supreme Being as well as 'nature' and its fixed cycles and patterns-he argues that men are responsible for their actions and especially for their treatment of others. We can do little or nothing to alter our fated span of existence but we determine what we accomplish and what we are remembered for.

Confucius represented his teachings as lessons transmitted from antiquity. He claimed that he was "a

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transmitter and not a maker" and that all he did reflected his "reliance on and love for the ancients." Confucius' social philosophy largely revolves around the concept of ren, "compassion" or "loving others." Cultivating or practicing such concern for others involved deprecating oneself. This meant being sure to avoid artful speech or an ingratiating manner that would create a false impression and lead to self-aggrandizement.) Those who have cultivated ren are, on the contrary, "simple in manner and slow of speech." For Confucius, such concern for others is demonstrated through the practice of forms of the Golden Rule: "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others;" "Since you yourself desire standing then help others achieve it, since you yourself desire success then help others attain it."

He regards devotion to parents and older siblings as the most basic form of promoting the interests of others before one's own and teaches that such altruism can be accomplished only by those who have learned self-discipline. Learning self-restraint involves studying and mastering li, the ritual forms and rules of propriety through which one expresses respect for superiors and enacts his role in society in such a way that he himself is worthy of respect and admiration.

Confucius' Political Philosophy

Confucius' political philosophy is also rooted in his belief that a ruler should learn self-discipline, should govern his subjects by his own example, and should treat them with love and concern. "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity among them be sought by punishments, they will try to escape punishment and have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought among them through the practice of ritual propriety, they will possess a sense of shame and come to you of their own accord."

Most troubling to Confucius was his perception that the political institutions of his day had completely broken down. He attributed this collapse to the fact that those who wielded power as well as those who occupied subordinate positions did so by making claim to titles for which they were not worthy. When asked by a ruler of the large state of Qi, Lu's neighbor on the Shandong peninsula, about the principles of good government, Confucius is reported to have replied:

"Good government consists in the ruler being a ruler, the minister being a minister, the father being a father, and the son being a son."



Confucius and Education

A hallmark of Confucius' thought is his emphasis on education and study. He disparages those who have faith in natural understanding or intuition and argues that the only real understanding of a subject comes from long and careful study. Study, for Confucius, means finding a good teacher and imitating his words and deeds. A good teacher is someone older who is familiar with the ways of the past and the practices of the ancients. While he sometimes warns against excessive reflection and meditation, Confucius' position appears to be a middle course between studying and reflecting on what one has learned. "He who learns but does not think is lost. He who thinks but does not learn is in great danger."

Confucius, himself, is credited by the tradition with having taught altogether three thousand students, though only seventy are said to have truly mastered the arts he cherished. Confucius is willing to teach anyone, whatever their social standing, as long as they are eager and tireless. He taught his students morality, proper speech, government, and the refined arts. While he also emphasizes the "Six Arts" -- ritual, music, archery, chariot-riding, calligraphy, and computation -- it is clear that he regards morality the most important subject. Confucius' pedagogical methods are striking. He never discourses at length on a subject. Instead he poses questions, cites passages from the classics, or uses apt analogies, and waits for his students to arrive at the right answers. "I only instruct the eager and enlighten the fervent. If I hold up one corner and a student cannot come back to me with the other three, I do not go on with the lesson."

Confucius' goal is to create gentlemen who carry themselves with grace, speak correctly, and demonstrate integrity in all things. His strong dislike of the sycophantic "petty men," whose clever talk and pretentious manner win them an audience, is reflected in numerous Lunyu passages. Confucius finds himself in an age in which values are out of joint. Actions and behavior no longer correspond to the labels originally attached to them. "Rulers do not rule and subjects do not serve," he observes. This means that words and titles no longer mean what they once did.

Moral education is important to Confucius because it is the means by which one can rectify this situation and restore meaning to language and values to society. He believes that the most important lessons for obtaining such a moral education are to be found in the canonical Book of Songs, because many of its poems are both beautiful and good. Thus Confucius places the text first in his curriculum and frequently quotes and explains its lines of verse. For this reason, the Lunyu is also an important source for Confucius' understanding of the role poetry and art more generally play in the moral education of gentlemen as well as in the reformation of society. Recent archaeological discoveries in China of previously lost ancient manuscripts reveal other aspects of Confucius's reverence for the Book of Songs and its importance in moral education. These manuscripts show that Confucius had found in the canonical text valuable lessons on

how to cultivate moral qualities in oneself as well as how to comport oneself humanely and responsibly in public.



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