



Confucius, Ink on silk, Ming Dynasty

CONFUCIANISM

While Confucius was the first of the classical Chinese philosophers and the founder of this school of philosophy, there are other important philosophers that developed the basic philosophy of Confucius, and thus the school is also sometimes referred to as *Ruism*, "the school of the scholars (*Ru Jia*)". The most important books of this school are known as the Four Books:

Analects (Lunyu)
(The sayings of Confucius)

The Great Learning (Daxue)
(The teachings of Confucius)

Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)
(Confucian teachings about harmony and balance in life)

The Mengzi
(teachings of Mengzi, an early follower of Confucius)

It seemed to Confucius that the main problem with Chinese society during the time of the Warring States was that the rulers were only interested in their own self-interest instead of being concerned with the benefit of all the people. Thus, as illustrated in this passage from the *Analects*, Confucius emphasized the importance of the *dao*: "The Master said, 'He has not lived in vain who dies the day he is told about the Way (道 *dao*)'" (*Analects*, IV/8). The humanism of Confucius' thought is evident in another passage that emphasize that the *dao* emerges from human beings, from the best in human civilization: "The Master said, 'It is Man who is capable of broadening the Way (*dao*). It is not the Way that is capable of broadening Man'" (*Analects*, XV/29). The Way could be broadened and society flourish if the rulers could incorporate into their particular virtue or charismatic power (德 *de*) certain moral principles that would enable them to become role models (君子 *junzi*) for the people to follow. This important term *junzi* is often translated as "gentleman" but would perhaps be better understood if one thinks of the *junzi* as an exemplary person or role model. Confucius had a basically optimistic view of human nature. He thought if the people just had good role models as leaders, then the people would also develop the moral principles of the leaders. This view is illustrated very well in this passage in which Confucius is in a discussion with a ruler about government:

Chi K'ang Tzu asked Confucius about government, saying, "What would you think if, in order to move closer to those who possess the Way (*dao*), I were to kill those who do not follow the Way?"

Confucius answered, "In administering your government, what need is there for you to kill? Just desire the good yourself and the common people will be good. The virtue (*de*) of the gentleman (*junzi*) is like wind; the virtue of the small man is like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass and it will surely bend." (*Analects*, XII/19)

In this analogy, the ruler is to the people, like the wind over the grass. If the ruler incorporates moral principles into his *de* (德), then this charismatic power of the ruler will sway the people like the wind over the grass. The important thing in understanding Confucius' thought is thus to understand the moral principles that Confucius recommends. The most important of these principles are benevolence or human goodness (仁 *ren*), a respect for the rites, or propriety (禮 *li*), filiality (孝 *xiao*), and rightness (義 *yi*). Two other important Confucian moral principles are deference or reciprocity (恕 *shu*) and loyalty or doing one's best (忠 *zhong*). The following selections from the *Analects*, as well as reading chapter 16 of Koller's book, should help in understanding the basic philosophy of Confucius. These selections have been arranged by topic, illustrating the main themes and principles of Confucius' thought.

Selections from *The Analects of Confucius*

These first selections illustrate the modesty of Confucius' thought. These passages might be compared with Socrates, the great philosopher of ancient Athens, who suggested that the true philosopher (lover of wisdom) is the one who knows he does not possess wisdom. The last passage here also indicates that Confucius, unlike Socrates, was concerned not with what happens after death, but rather with this life. The chaos of the Warring States period led Chinese philosophers to be more concerned with the practical concerns of trying to figure out the best way to bring about a peaceful and harmonious society and thus a more flourishing life.

The Master said, "At fifteen I set my heart-mind (心 *xin*) on learning; at thirty I took my stand; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven (天命 *Tianming*); at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line." (II/4)

The Master said, "Yu, shall I tell you what it is to know? To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is wisdom (知 *zhi*)." (II/17)

The Master said, "Do I possess knowledge (知 *zhi*)? No, I do not. A rustic put a question to me and my mind was a complete blank. I kept hammering at the two sides of the question until I got everything out of it." (IX/8)

The Master said, "I was not born with knowledge (知 *zhi*) but, being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it." (VII/20)

Chi-lu asked how the spirits of the dead and the gods should be served. The Master said, "You are not able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?"

"May I ask about death?"

"You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" (XI/12)

Dao (道) Way and *De* (德) Virtue, Potency, Charismatic Power

The Master said, "I set my heart on the Way (*dao*), base myself on virtue (*de*), lean upon benevolence (*ren*) for support and take my recreation in the arts." (VII/6)

One who engages in government by Potency (*de*) may be compared to the North Star; it occupies its place and all the stars pay homage to it. (II/1)

The Master said, "Heaven (天 *Tian*) is author of the virtue (*de*) that is in me. What can Huan t'ui do to me?" (VII/23)

One not persistent in maintaining virtue (*de*), not sincere in his trust in the Way (*dao*), how can you tell whether he is there or isn't. (XIX/2)

The Master said, "Have the firm faith to devote yourself to learning, and abide to the death in the good way. Enter not a state that is in peril; stay not in a state that is in danger. Show yourself when the Way (*dao*) prevails in the Empire, but hide yourself when it does not. It is a shameful matter to be poor and humble when the Way prevails in the state. Equally, it is a shameful matter to be rich and noble when the Way falls into disuse in the state." (VIII/13)

The Master said, "When the Way (*dao*) prevails in the state, speak and act with perilous high-mindedness; when the Way does not prevail, act with perilous high-mindedness but speak with self-effacing diffidence." (XIV/3)

Junzi (君子) gentleman, exemplary person, role model

The Master said, "Wealth and high station are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them. Poverty and low station are what men dislike, but even if I did not get them in the right way I would not try to escape from them.

"If the gentleman (*junzi*) forsakes benevolence (*ren*), in what way can he make a name for himself? The gentleman never deserts benevolence, not even for as long as it takes to eat a meal. If he hurries and stumbles one may be sure that it is in benevolence that he does so. (IV/5)

The Master said, "The gentleman (*junzi*) has morality (*yi*) as his basic stuff and by observing the rites (*li*) puts it into practice, by being modest gives it expression, and by being trustworthy in word brings it to completion. Such is the gentleman indeed!" (XV/18)

The Master said, "In his dealings with the world the gentleman (*junzi*) is not invariably for or against anything. He is on the side of what is moral (*yi*)." (IV/10)

The Master said, "What the gentleman (*junzi*) seeks, he seeks within himself; what the small man seeks, he seeks in others." (XV/21)

Tzu-lu, when traveling with [Confucius], fell behind. He met an old man, carrying a basket on a staff over his shoulder.

Tzu-lu asked, "Have you seen my Master?"

The old man said, "You seem neither to have toiled with your limbs nor to be able to tell one kind of grain from another. Who may your Master be?" He planted his staff in the ground and started weeding.

Tzu-lu stood, cupping one hand respectfully in the other.

The old man invited Tzu-lu to stay for the night. He killed a chicken and prepared some millet for his guest to eat, and presented his two sons to him.

The next day, Tzu-lu resumed his journey and reported this conversation. The Master said, "He must be a recluse." He sent Tzu-lu back to see him again. When he arrived, the old man had departed.

Tzu-lu commented, "Not to enter public life is to ignore one's duty (*yi*). Even the proper regulation of old and young cannot be set aside. How, then, can the duty between ruler and subject be set aside? This is to cause confusion in the most important of human relationships simply because one desires to keep unsullied one's character. The gentleman (*junzi*) takes office in order to do his duty." (XVIII/7)

Ren (仁) benevolence, human-heartedness, human goodness

The Master said, "Of neighborhoods benevolence (*ren*) is the most beautiful. How can the man be considered wise who, when he has the choice, does not settle in benevolence. (IV/1)

The Master said, "One who is not benevolent (*ren*) cannot remain long in straitened circumstances, nor can he remain long in easy circumstances.

"The benevolent man is attracted to benevolence because he feels at home in it. The wise man is attracted to benevolence because he finds it to his advantage." (IV/2)

The Master said, "I have never met a man who finds benevolence (*ren*) attractive or a man who finds unbenevolence repulsive. A man who finds benevolence attractive cannot be surpassed. A man who finds unbenevolence repulsive can, perhaps, be counted as benevolent, for he would not allow what is not benevolent to contaminate his person.

"Is there a man who, for the space of a single day, is able to devote all his strength to benevolence? I have not come across such a man whose strength proves insufficient for the task. There must be such cases of insufficient strength, only I have not come across them." (IV/6)

The Master said, "Is benevolence (*ren*) really far away? No sooner do I desire it than it is here." (VII/30)

Fan Ch'ih asked about benevolence (*ren*). The Master said, "Love your fellow men."

He asked about wisdom (*zhi*). The Master said, "Know your fellow men." Fan Ch'ih failed to grasp his meaning. The Master said, "Raise the straight and set them over the crooked. This can make the crooked straight."

Fan Ch'ih withdrew and went to see Tzu-hsia, saying, "Just now, I went to see the Master and asked about wisdom. The Master said, 'Raise the straight and set them over the crooked. This can make the crooked straight.' What did he mean?"

Tzu-hsia said, "Rich, indeed, is the meaning of these words. When Shun possessed the Empire, he raised Kao Yao from the multitude and by so doing put those who were not benevolent at a great distance. When T'ang possessed the Empire, he raised Yi Yin from the multitude and by so doing put those who were not benevolent at a great distance." (XII/22)

The Master said, "Even with a true king it is bound to take a generation for benevolence (*ren*) to become a reality." (XIII/12)

Fan Ch'ih asked about benevolence (*ren*). The Master said, "While at home hold yourself in a respectful attitude; when serving in an official capacity be reverent; when dealing with others do your best. These are the qualities that cannot be put aside, even if you go and live among the barbarians." (XIII/19)

The Master said, "Unbending strength, resoluteness, simplicity and reticence are close to benevolence (*ren*)." (XIII/27)

The Master said, "A man of virtue (*de*) is sure to be the author of memorable sayings, but the author of memorable sayings is not necessarily virtuous. A benevolent (*ren*) man is sure to possess courage, but a courageous man does not necessarily possess benevolence." (XIV/4)

The Master said, "For Gentleman (*junzi*) of purpose and men of benevolence (*ren*) while it is inconceivable that they should seek to stay alive at the expense of benevolence, it may happen that they have to accept death in order to have benevolence accomplished." (XV/9)

The Master said, "Benevolence (*ren*) is more vital to the common people than even fire and water. In the case of fire and water, I have seen men die by stepping on them, but I have never seen any man die by stepping on benevolence." (XV/35)

The Master said, "When faced with an opportunity to practice benevolence (*ren*) do not give precedence even to your teacher." (XV/36)

Tzu-chang asked Confucius about benevolence (*ren*). Confucius said, "There are five things and whoever is capable of putting them into practice in the Empire is certainly 'benevolent'."

"May I ask what they are?"

"They are respectfulness, tolerance, trustworthiness in word, quickness and generosity. If a man is respectful he will not be treated with insolence. If he is tolerant he will win the multitude. If he is trustworthy in word his fellow men will entrust him with responsibility. If he is quick he will achieve results. If he is generous he will be good enough to be put in a position over his fellow men." (XVII/6)

The Master said, "Yu, have you heard about the six qualities and the six attendant faults?"

"No."

"Be seated and I shall tell you. To love benevolence (*ren*) without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness. To love cleverness without loving learning is liable to lead to deviation from the right path. To love trustworthiness in word without loving learning is liable to lead to harmful behavior. To love forthrightness without loving learning is liable to lead to intolerance. To love courage without loving learning is liable to lead to insubordination. To love unbending strength without loving learning is liable to lead to indiscipline." (XVII/8)

The Master said, "What can a man do with the rites (*li*) who is not benevolent (*ren*)? What can a man do with music who is not benevolent?" (III/3)

Li (禮) the Rites, Propriety

Yu Tzu said, "Of the things brought about by the rites (*li*), harmony is the most valuable. Of the ways of the Former Kings, this is the most beautiful, and is followed alike in matters great and small, yet this will not always work: to aim always at harmony without regulating it by the rites simply because one knows only about harmony will not, in fact, work." (I/12)

Yu Tzu said, "To be trustworthy in word is close to being moral (*yi*) in that it enables one's words to be repeated. To be respectful is close to being observant of the rites (*li*) in that it enables one to stay clear of disgrace and insult. If, in promoting good relationship with relatives by marriage, a man manages not to lose the good will of his own kinsmen, he is worthy of being looked up to as the head of the clan." (I/13)

The Master said, "Guide them by edicts, keep them in line with punishments, and the common people will stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame. Guide them by virtue (*de*), keep them in line with the rites (*li*), and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves." (II/3)

When the Master went inside the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything. Someone remarked, "Who said that the son of the man from Tsou understood the rites (*li*)? When he went inside the Grand Temple, he asked questions about everything."

The Master, on hearing of this, "The asking of questions is in itself the correct rite." (III/15)

The Master said, "The gentleman (*junzi*) widely versed in culture but brought back to essentials by the rites (*li*) can, I suppose, be relied upon not to turn against what he stood for." (VI/27)

The Master said, "Unless a man has the spirit of the rites (*li*), in being respectful he will wear himself out, in being careful he will become timid, in having courage he will become unruly, and in being forthright he will become intolerant.

"When the gentleman (*junzi*) feels profound affection for his parents, the common people will be stirred to benevolence (*ren*). When he does not forget his friends of long standing, the common people will not shirk their obligations to other people." (VIII/2)

Yen Yüan, heaving a sigh, said, "The more I look up at it the higher it appears. The more I bore into it the harder it becomes. I see it before me. Suddenly it is behind me.

The Master is good at leading one step by step. He broadens me with culture and brings me back to essentials by means of the rites. I cannot give up even if I wanted to, but, having done all I can, it seems to rise sheer above me and I have no way of going after it, however much I may want to." (IX/11)

Yen Yüan asked about benevolence. The Master said, "To return to the observance of the rites (*li*) through overcoming the self constitutes benevolence (*ren*). If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole Empire would consider benevolence to be his. However, the practice of benevolence depends on oneself alone, and not on others."

Yen Yüan said, "I should like you to list the items." The Master said, "Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites."

Yen Yüan said, "Though I am not quick, I shall direct my efforts towards what you have said." (XII/1)

Ssu-ma Niu appeared worried, saying, "All men have brothers. I alone have none." Tzu-hsia said, "I have heard it said: life and death are a matter of Destiny (*ming*); wealth and honor depend on Heaven (*Tian*). The gentleman (*junzi*) is reverent and does nothing amiss, is respectful towards others and observant of the rites (*li*), and all within the Four Seas are his brothers. What need is there for the gentleman to worry about not having any brothers?" (XII/5)

The Master said, "When those above are given to the observance of the rites (*li*), the common people will be easy to command." (XIV/41)

Confucius said, "A man has no way of becoming a gentleman (*junzi*) unless he understands Destiny (*ming*); he has no way of taking his stand unless he understands the rites (*li*); he has no way of judging men unless he understands words." (XX/3)

Xiao (孝) Filiality

Yu Tzu said, "It is rare for a man whose character is such that he is good as a son (*xiao*) and obedient as a young man to have the inclination to transgress against his superiors; it is unheard of for one who has no such inclination to be inclined to start a rebellion. The gentleman (*junzi*) devotes his efforts to the roots, for once the roots are established, the Way (*Dao*) will grow therefrom. Being good as a son (*xiao*) and obedient as a young man is, perhaps, the root of a man's character." (I/2)

Meng Yi Tzu asked about being filial (*xiao*). The Master answered, "Never fail to comply."

Fan Ch'ih was driving. The Master told him about the interview, saying, "Meng-sun asked me about being filial. I answered, 'Never fail to comply.'"

Fan Ch'ih asked, "What does that mean?"

The Master said, "When your parents are alive, comply with the rites (*li*) in serving them; when they die, comply with the rites (*li*) in burying them; comply with the rites (*li*) in sacrificing to them." (II/5)

Meng Wu Po asked about being filial (*xiao*). The Master said, "Give your father and mother no other cause for anxiety than illness." (II/6)

Tzu-yu asked about being filial (*xiao*). The Master said, "Nowadays for a man to be filial means no more than that he is to provide his parents with food. Even hounds and horses are, in some way, provided with food. If a man shows no reverence, where is the difference?" (II/7)

Yi (義) Rightness

The Master said, "It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue (*de*), failure to go more deeply into what I have learned, inability, when I am told what is right (*yi*), to move to where it is, and inability to reform myself when I have defects." (VII/3)

Tzu-chang asked about the exaltation of virtue (*de*) and the recognition of misguided judgement. The Master said, "Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others and to be trustworthy in what you say, and move yourself to where rightness (*yi*) is, then you will be exalting virtue (*de*). When you love a man you want him to live and when you hate him you want him to die. If, having wanted him to live, you then want him to die, this is misguided judgement." (XII/10)

Fan Ch'ih asked to be taught how to grow crops. The Master said, "I am not as good as an old farmer." He asked to be taught how to grow vegetables. "I am not as good as an old gardener."

When Fan Ch'ih left, the Master said, "How petty Fan Hsu is! When those above love the rites (*li*), none of the common people will dare be irreverent; when they love what is right (*yi*), none of the common people will dare be insubordinate; when they love trustworthiness, none of the common people will dare be insincere. In this way, the common people from the four quarters will come with their children strapped on their backs. What need is there to talk about growing crops?" (XIII/4)

Tzu-lu asked about the complete man.

The Master said, "A man as wise as Tsang Wu-chung, as free from desires as Meng Kung-ch'uo, as courageous as Chuang-tzu of Pien and as accomplished as Jan Ch'iu, who is further refined by the rites and music, may be considered a complete man." Then he added, "But to be a complete man nowadays one need not be all these things. If a man remembers what is right (*yi*) at the sight of profit, is ready to lay down his life in the face of danger, and does not forget sentiments he has repeated all his life even when he has been in strained circumstances for a long time, he may be said to be a complete man." (XIV/12)

Tzu-lu said, "Does the gentleman (*junzi*) consider courage a supreme quality?" The Master said, "For the gentleman it is morality (*yi*) that is supreme. Possessed of courage but devoid of morality, a gentleman will make trouble while a small man will be a brigand." (XVII/23)

Shu (恕) deference, reciprocity and Zhong (忠) loyalty, doing one's best

The Master said, "Ts'an! There is one single thread binding my way together."

Tseng Tzu assented.

After the Master had gone out, the disciples asked, "What did he mean?"

Tseng Tzu said, "The Way (*dao*) of the Master consists in doing one's best (*zhong*) and in using oneself as a measure to gauge others (*shu*). That is all." (IV/15)

Tseng Tzu said, "Every day I examine myself on three counts. In what I have undertaken on another's behalf, have I failed to do my best? In my dealings with my friends have I failed to be trustworthy in what I say? Have I passed on to others anything that I have not tried out myself?" (I/4)

The Master said, "When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming his equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine your own self." (IV/17)

The Master said, "I suppose I should give up hope. I have yet to meet the man who, on seeing his own errors, is able to take himself to task inwardly." (V/27)

Tzu-kung said, "If there were a man who gave extensively to the common people and brought help to the multitude, what would you think of him? Can he be called benevolent?"

The Master said, "It is no longer a matter of benevolence with such a man. If you must describe him, 'sage' is, perhaps, the right word. Even Yao and Shun would have found it difficult to accomplish as much. Now, on the other hand, a benevolent man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there. The ability to take as analogy what is near at hand can be called the method of benevolence." (VI/30)

The Master said, "Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself." (VII/22)

Chung-kung asked about benevolence. The Master said, "When abroad behave as though you were receiving an important guest. When employing the services of the common people behave as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire. In this way you will be free from ill will whether in a state or in a noble family.

Chung-kung said, "Though I am not quick, I shall direct my efforts towards what you have said." (XII/2)

Tzu-kung asked, "Is there a single word which can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?" The Master said, "It is perhaps the word 'shu'. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire." (XV/24)

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All Selections from

Lau, D.C. 1998. *Confucius: The Analects*. New York: Penguin Books.