

Confucius: the Man, His Ideas and Ideals about Learning and Education

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Confucius the man (551-479 BCE), who lived in the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese history (770-476 BCE)

The age in which he was born

Concerning the worldwide panorama of culture of the age in which he was born is termed as the pivotal age of history.

The 6th century BC. And this is a special age.

The axis age/pivotal age/axial age/ axial period, which lasts from 800 to 200 BC, is identified by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in his *The Origin and Goal of History*. According to Jaspers, during this period, a number of key thinkers emerged in different regions of the world, including the Middle East, Ancient Greece, India, and China, and between which there is neither proof of any extensive intercommunication nor direct transmission of ideas from one region to the other. All these key thinkers, including Plato (423 BCE -347BCE), Sakyamuni (563 BCE-483BCE), and Confucius(551-479 BCE) (Moses 13th century BCE) have had profound influence upon the future philosophies and cultures in general.

So, in distant sky of the night of history, if we look up carefully enough, we can see that that axial age is the brightest area. And Confucius came from that period of the past.

Looking domestically, the age of his is an age of disorder and turmoil in China. Before Confucius, in China, there had been a dynasty of slavery society, called the Zhou Dynasty (circa. 1046–256 BCE). Although the Zhou Dynasty lasted longer than any other dynasty in Chinese, the actual political and military control of China lasted only until 771 BCE, a period known as the Western Zhou. Since 771 BCE China had been caught in incessant wars and instability for several hundred years till 221 BCE when the Kingdom Qin conquered the other six kingdoms, united China and made the first imperial dynasty in China.

So Confucius lived in the age when a great dynasty has declined. And the society was plunged into endless chaos and turmoil. Not only so, the chaos was getting from bad to worse, and there seemed to be no stopping of it. And he therefore was quite nostalgic and set an ambition of saving the ideals of order and preserving the teaching of the earlier emperors and great statesmen, especially the great statesman of the Zhou Dynasty, Duke Zhou Gong, who was also the once the Duke of his home state or home kingdom, the kingdom of Lu.

The ups and downs of his fame after his death

Confucius is the philosopher of order, harmony, and human ethical refinement, hence his teachings are always adopted and played up whenever such values are restored and valued in history in China. But when chaos are in the making, when some guys are about to call for some trouble in the society, such as a revolution, Confucius is again and again rejected and given many bad names, such as a regressive guy, a conservatist, a restorationist.

His family China

His life

Confucius was born in 551 BC in the place named Zou of the state Lu (near present-day Qufu, Shandong Province).

Family name Kong, given name Qiu, meaning a mould or a small hill, courtesy name Zhongni. One of his ancestors is the founder of Shang Dynasty (circa 17-11 century BCE). His father Kong He (孔紃), also known as Shuliang He (叔梁紃 Shuliang is the courtesy name), was an officer in the army of the state Lu. Once his army was ambushed by the enemy and was in the danger of being caught in a city. He held up the lift door of the city and let out his soldiers. For such brave behavior he was rewarded special military merits. Kong He's wife was from the family of Shi (施). She gave birth to nine daughters, and girls could not be the heirs. Kong He's concubine gave birth to a son, but the son was lame. He could not be the heir either. Kong He was very worried. He made an offer to a Yan family, asking to marry one of the girls of the family. When the father of the Yan family asked his three daughters about the idea of marrying Kong He as a concubine, saying that though Kong He was already 70 years old and also quick tempered, he was of a noble ancestry, learned, and strong. The two elder daughters remained silent, unwilling to take this offer, but the youngest daughter, Yan Zhengzai, agreed, and became the concubine of Kong He. And because the age gap was so large (the husband, 70, and the concubine 18), this marriage was not in accordance with the rituals of the Zhou Dynasty. So the couple married and lived not in home but in a hill called Nishan. Therefore, in history, this marriage was also referred to as "coupling in the wild". And Confucius was child born out of this "coupling in the wild". Not a very honorable one, of course. Confucius's mother prayed to the Hill of Nishan, and conceived and gave birth to Confucius. Therefore, he was named Qiu, meaning "small mount or a hill". And his courtesy name is "Zhongni", "zhong" means "number two in seniority", and "Ni" means "Nishan".

Kong He died when Confucius was three years old, and Confucius was raised by his mother Yan Zhengzai (顏徵在) in poverty. At age 19 he married his wife, surnamed Qiguan (齊官), and a year later the couple had their first child, Kong Li (孔鯉). Confucius was born into the class of shi (士), between the aristocracy and the common people. He is said to have worked as a shepherd, cowherd, clerk, and a book-keeper. When his mother died, Confucius (aged 23) is said to have mourned for

three years as was the tradition.

As legends always, and history sometimes have it, the great ones are often born with extraordinary features. So was Confucius. It is said that he had cow's lips, his hands like tiger's paws, his shoulders like those of a mandarin duck's, and his back was like the shell of a tortoise. And the most surprising thing is on the head. On the top of it, there was a depression, a shallow concave, like the dome of sky turned upward. In Chinese (孔子生有异相, 牛唇虎掌, 鸳肩龟脊, 海口辅喉, 顶门状如反宇。/生而首上圩顶, 故名曰丘。)

From a positive social activist to a withdrawn teacher, compiler, and editor.

Scholars in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) said, if there had not been Confucius, the darkness of world would have lasted for ever.

Confucius studied hard and became very learned and many people came to learn from. By the time when Confucius was in his fifties, Confucius had built up a considerable reputation through his teachings, while the rulers had also realized the value of proper conduct and righteousness, and they found that the teaching of Confucius could to achieve loyalty to a legitimate government. Thus, that in the year 501 BC, Confucius came to be appointed to the minor position of governor of a town. Eventually, he rose to the position of Minister of Crime. He made some reforms and consolidated his mother land, the state of Lu. But the neighboring state Qi became worried that Lu might become too strong, so it made some plots to sow the seeds of discord between the King and Confucius, and estranged the king and Confucius. Confucius foresaw what was in store for him, so he left his post and the state of Lu and went on an exile.

After Confucius's resignation, he began a long journey or set of journeys around the small kingdoms of northeast and central China, traditionally including the states of Wei, Song, Chen, and Cai. At the courts of these states, he expounded his political beliefs but did not see them implemented. And during these journeys or roams, he continued his teachings, and his disciples or students remained with him. They several times fell into very difficult situations, even on the verge of dying from hunger once. But Confucius was never worried about his poverty. When they were weak because of hunger, he was still playing the Chinese zither.

Later, after he had traveled around some different kingdoms and realized that his ideals actually did not fit into the world of his day, he turned to sort out the ideas and ideals of the sages of the past. That is, actually what he has finally settled to do is the great work of a scholar. In his words, he would "Relate the past sages and begin the learning of the future." And he would "Relate but not write." for he would like to preserve the complete truth and avoid any change or distortion of the wisdom of the ancient sages.

His contribution to Chinese culture

The accumulator, gleaner, and the sublimator of the earliest developments of Chinese culture.

He perused, and gleaned all the books that had appeared and existed up to his time. The books then were in the form strung-up bamboo slips with characters engraved on them. These slips are strung up with cord made from ox hide. Chinese writing was already quite mature in the Shang Dynasty (16th—11th century B.C.), and one of the most important abstruse classic, *Book of Changes*, first came into being as a book in the Xia Dynasty (21st-16th century B. C.) .

He edited, revised, and systemized all the important ancient works of Chinese culture.

Confucius collected, and saved the faded and scattered leaves of the earliest growth of the Chinese culture. More importantly, he combed, sorted out the relevant elements concerning ethics, learning, education, self cultivation, the criteria of good man, the ethical governmental ideals or governmental ethics, the duty of scholars, the right attitude toward force and the super natural, etc. and thereby systemized the ancient Chinese culture. And because of Confucius' systemization, the origins of Chinese culture had weathered the erosion of history. So essentially, by so doing, Confucius did more than the work of a transmitter and preserver. Through his systemization, the pervious scene of Chinese culture took a definite perspective and developed certain focuses. In other words, it is Confucius who had endowed the Chinese culture with such a perspective and the various focuses. And it is also reasonable to say that he gave a new value or value at all to the origins of the culture of that land.

In this sense, what he did is the sublimation of Chinese culture. Therefore, Confucius stood like a great mountain in the history of Chinese civilization, preserving the memory of the past and pointing out the direction of future, hence the famous saying:

Mt. Tai is Confucius among the most famous mountains,
While Confucius is Mt. Tai of all the men in China.

Without Confucius, Chinese culture would not have been what it is today.

In Chinese culture, before Confucius, there were tittles of culture, but after Confucius, there has been only Confucius.

Before him, there were fountains, waters of culture in China, but since him, there had appeared a great flow of the river of Chinese culture.

And as some scholars say, if there had not been Confucius, the ages would have been like an eternal night in China.

Confucius' ideas and ideals about a scholar

曾子曰：士不可以不弘毅，任重而道远。仁以为己任，不亦重乎？死而后已，不亦远乎？ p77

A scholar must be ambitious and resolute, he should also shoulder a heavy mission take a long way. Take advocating the virtue of kindness as one's mission, isn't heavy? Sticking to it till after death, isn't that a long way?

Confucius' ideas and ideals about learning

学而时习之，不亦悦乎。

Learning and relearning, isn't a pleasure?

子曰：学如不及，犹恐失之。P80

Learn, and as if it is too late, or as if one has not learned, and in the mean time, as if there is fear of losing it.

学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆。

Learning without thinking is useless; thinking without learning is dangerous.

吾尝终日不食，终夜不寝，以思，无益，不如学也。

I once spend the whole day without eating, the whole night without sleeping, just thinking, but in vain. It is no better than learning.

博学之审问之慎思之明辨之。

Learn widely; inquire cautiously; think carefully; and differentiate clearly.

温故而知新，可以为师矣。

If one can find new knowledge by reviewing the old ones, he can already teach others.

博学于文，约之以礼。P122

Learn literature broadly, but be bounded by rituals of virtue.

以文会友，以友辅仁。

Make friends with literature and learning, and facilitate the virtue of kindness with friendship.

主忠信，毋友不如己者，过则勿惮改。P91

Stick to loyalty and faith, do not befriend the bad ones, do not fear to correct if one makes a mistake.

君子成人之美，不成人之恶，小人反是。P122

The noble gentleman helps others with their good deed and merit, not their evil deed and demerit. The mean persons are the opposite.

弟子入则孝，出则悌，谨而信，泛爱众，而亲仁，行有余力，则以学文。

Young ones should be filial at home, friendly outside; be cautious and faithful; love people; stick to kindness. Besides these, he can take literature if has the remaining power.

富润屋，德润身。

Monetary wealth moistens the house; but only virtue can moisten the body.

仁者其言也讷。

The kind-hearted men are slow with their words.

格物致知。

Attain knowledge through analyzing things

三人行，必有我师焉。择其善者而从之，其不善者而改之。P68

Among every three persons passing by, there must be one from whom I can learn. Choose the good one and follow him, find the one who is not good and set right one's own same wrongs.

子以四教：文行忠信。（德行言语文学政事。）

Confucius' teaching covers literature, virtue, loyalty, faith.

志于道而耻恶衣恶食者，未足与言也。

The learners who aspire after the way of truth but are ashamed of bad meals and

raiment are not worth speaking to.

君子居之，何陋之有？ p88

If a poor house is dwelt by a noble gentleman, what poverty is there?

君子固穷，小人穷斯滥矣。

A truly noble-minded man is staunch even in poverty, but a mean person will surely be daredevil.

君子无恒产而有恒心，小人有恒产亦无恒心。

The true noble minded man has a consistent mind but not constant wealth; but even with constant wealth, a mean person cannot keep a consistent mind.

君子忧道不忧贫。

A true noble-minded man's concern is the way truth, not poverty.

As a philosopher, he advocated the study of man rather than the ghost, saying that if one doesn't know man, how he can he know the ghost? And thus he started the typical orientation of Chinese culture toward this world. Consequently, the metaphysical color in traditional Chinese culture is not so strong. Confucius' own philosophy is strongly ethics oriented, or human-oriented. In other words, he is concerned is the ideal of man, from king to common man.

“君义臣行父慈子孝兄爱弟敬” The king should be just, the vassal should be devoted, the father, kind; the son, filial; the elder brother love, the younger brother, respect.

“仁义礼智信” mercy, justice, courtesy, wisdom, faithfulness.

“温良恭俭让” Gentleness, kindness, humbleness, frugality, and compromise

“恭宽信敏惠” Humbleness, generosity, faithfulness, quickness, bountifulness.

actually knows a lot

巧言令色鲜矣仁。

Too honeyed words and too pleasing manners are seldom really good.

子曰：吾十五而志于学，三十而立，四十而不惑，吾师而知天命，六十而耳顺，七十随心所欲而不逾矩。

At fifteen I set my mind to learning; at thirty I got settled in society; at forty I was no longer perplexed; at fifty, I know my destiny; at sixty, no words are unacceptable to my ears; at seventy, I follow my desires and there are no longer the danger of overstepping the moral standards.

勿意，勿必，勿固，勿我。

Don't take things for granted; don't be over positive; don't be stubborn; don't be self-willed.

三年学不至于谷，不易得也。 P78

Studying consistently for three years without ever thinking of trying to get the reward of salary, such a man is unusual.

志于道，据于德，依于仁，游于艺。

Set your heart upon the way of truth; follow the rules of morality; stick to kindness;

seek pleasure in art.

兴于诗，立于礼，成于乐。

Education starts with poetry; confirmed in the form of rituals; and accomplished in the cultivation of a good hobby.

子曰：可与共学，未可与适道；可与适道，未可与立；可与立，未可与权。P92
Confucius said, the people with whom you can study together may not be suitable to go on the way of truth together; people with whom you have arrived at truth may not be suitable to hold on truth together; people with whom you hold on truth together may not be the suitable ones to make adjustments together.

天命之谓性，率性之谓道，修道之谓教。

What is endowed by heaven is nature; to be in accord with nature is the way of truth; to develop the way of truth is teaching and education.

诚则明矣，明则诚矣。

Wisdom ensues sincerity; and sincerity ensues wisdom.

正心诚意修身齐家治国平天下。

Set right one's mind; cherish sincerity; cultivate one's mind; rule one's family; govern one's state; and bring peace to the world.

Why Confucius?

If one knows Confucius, then he has knowledge about the most important thing about Chinese culture, and already knows a lot about Chinese culture.

One important characteristic of his philosophy is that it is simple, nearby, in our life, about our life, and eventually it is to change, improve, and finally to be incorporated with our life. 道不远人，人自远道耳。

子曰：吾有知乎哉？无知也。有鄙夫问于我，空空如也，我叩其两端而竭焉。P85
Do I have knowledge? I have none. Some low man asks me for knowledge, I am like a hollow. I only knock on the two sides——what I really know and what I don't know yet. No more than that.

曾子曰：以能问于不能，以多问于寡；有若无，实若虚，犯而不校。昔者吾友尝从事于斯矣。P76

Though capable, yet not ashamed to ask the incapable; with more knowledge, but learn from the less learned; being in possession of something but seem to have none; full, but seem hollow; offended, but not to take offence. In the past I have a friend who behaved like this.

子曰：吾少也贱，故多能鄙事。

Confucius said, in childhood, my position is very low; therefore I have the ability of doing many base jobs.

子曰：吾不试，故艺。

The master said, I am not eager to try, so I get the perfect art.

达巷党人曰：大哉孔子，博学而无所成名。子闻之，谓门弟子曰：吾何执？执射乎？吾执御矣。P83

Some people say, how great Confucius is, he is so learned but he takes pride upon

nothing. Hearing this, Confucius said to his disciples, “What do I have to pride upon? Archery? Or driving? I may take driving as a pride.”

Sum up:

Time is the best and most powerful filter, which can seek out the essence for us. After more than 2500 years, through so many ups and downs, again and again, history returns the teaching of Confucius to Chinese people. Whenever the government in history wants peace, stability, and harmony, they would resurrect Confucius and his teaching, again and again. But the people has always the love and respect for him and his wisdom.

In 1988, some Nobel Prize winners said in Paris: in the 21st century, if human beings want to survive, they must seek wisdom from Confucianism.

The following words of Confucius’ are inscribed in the United Nations: **Do not give to others what you do not want** (己所不欲，勿施于人) .

His disciples said, oh, my master, the more you look up, the higher he is; the more you study, the harder to comprehend. You look ahead for him, and suddenly you find he is behind.

Several years ago, while reading the collected sayings of Confucius, The Analects, a question occurred to me: Just what is saintliness? Then I realized: Saintliness, isn’t it plain greatness and great simplicity? What do you think?