

Confucius

Born: 551 BC, Ch'ü-fu, state of Lu [now in Shantung Province, China]

Died: 479, Lu

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Chinese (Wade-Giles) K'UNG-FU-TZU, or K'UNG-TZU, or (Pinyin) KONGFUZI, or KONGZI, original name K'UNG CH'IU, literary name CHUNG-NI, China's most famous teacher, philosopher, and political theorist, whose ideas have influenced the civilization of East Asia.

Confucius' life, in contrast to his tremendous importance, seems starkly undramatic, or, as a Chinese expression has it, it seems "plain and real." The plainness and reality of Confucius' life, however, underlines that his humanity was not revealed truth but an expression of self-cultivation, of the ability of human effort to shape its own destiny. The faith in the possibility of ordinary human beings to become awe-inspiring sages and worthies is deeply rooted in the Confucian heritage, and the insistence that human beings are teachable, improvable, and perfectible through personal and communal endeavour is typically Confucian.

Although the facts about Confucius' life are scanty, they do establish a precise time frame and historical context. Confucius was born in the 22nd year of the reign of Duke Hsiang of Lu (551 BC). The traditional claim that he was born on the 27th day of the eighth lunar month has been questioned by historians, but September 28 is still widely observed in East Asia as Confucius' birthday. It is an official holiday, "Teachers' Day," in Taiwan.

Confucius was born in Ch'ü-fu in the small feudal state of Lu in what is now Shantung Province, which was noted for its preservation of the traditions of ritual and music of the Chou civilization. His family name was K'ung and his personal name Ch'iu, but he is referred to as either K'ung-tzu or K'ung-fu-tzu (Master K'ung) throughout Chinese history. The adjectival "Confucian," derived from the Latinized Confucius, is not a meaningful term in Chinese, nor is the term Confucianism, which was coined in Europe as recently as the 18th century.

Confucius' ancestors were probably members of the aristocracy who had become virtual poverty-stricken commoners by the time of his birth. His father died when Confucius was only three years old. Instructed first by his mother, Confucius then distinguished himself as an indefatigable learner in his teens. He recalled toward the end of his life that at age 15 his heart was set upon learning. A historical account notes that, even though he was already known as an informed young scholar, he felt it appropriate to inquire about everything while visiting the Grand Temple.

Confucius had served in minor government posts managing stables and keeping books for granaries before he married a woman of similar background when he was 19. It is not known who Confucius' teachers were, but he made a conscientious effort to find the right masters to

teach him, among other things, ritual and music. Confucius' mastery of the six arts—ritual, music, archery, charioteering, calligraphy, and arithmetic—and his familiarity with the classical traditions, notably poetry and history, enabled him to start a brilliant teaching career in his 30s.

Confucius is known as the first teacher in China who wanted to make education available to all men and who was instrumental in establishing the art of teaching as a vocation, indeed as a way of life. Before Confucius, aristocratic families had hired tutors to educate their sons in specific arts, and government officials had instructed their subordinates in the necessary techniques, but he was the first person to devote his whole life to learning and teaching for the purpose of transforming and improving society. He believed that all human beings could benefit from self-cultivation. He inaugurated a humanities program for potential leaders, opened the doors of education to all, and defined learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as character building.

For Confucius the primary function of education was to provide the proper way of training noblemen (chün-tzu), a process that involved constant self-improvement and continuous social interaction. Although he emphatically noted that learning was "for the sake of the self" (the end of which was self-knowledge and self-realization), he found public service a natural consequence of true education. Confucius confronted learned hermits who challenged the validity of his desire to serve the world; he resisted the temptation to "herd with birds and animals," to live apart from the human community, and opted to try to transform the world from within. For decades Confucius was actively involved in politics, wishing to put his humanist ideas into practice through governmental channels.

In his late 40s and early 50s Confucius served first as a magistrate, then as an assistant minister of public works, and eventually as minister of justice in the state of Lu. It is likely that he accompanied King Lu as his chief minister on one of the diplomatic missions. Confucius' political career was, however, short-lived. His loyalty to the King alienated him from the power holders of the time, the large Chi families, and his moral rectitude did not sit well with the King's inner circle, who enraptured the King with sensuous delight. At 56, when he realized that his superiors were uninterested in his policies, Confucius left the country in an attempt to find another feudal state to which he could render his service. Despite his political frustration he was accompanied by an expanding circle of students during this self-imposed exile of almost 12 years. His reputation as a man of vision and mission spread. A guardian of a border post once characterized him as the "wooden tongue for a bell" of the age, sounding Heaven's prophetic note to awaken the people (Analects, 3:24). Indeed, Confucius was perceived as the heroic conscience who knew realistically that he might not succeed but, fired by a righteous passion, continuously did the best he could. At the age of 67 he returned home to teach and to preserve his cherished classical traditions by writing and editing. He died in 479 BC, at the age of 73. According to the Records of the Historian 72 of his students mastered the "six arts," and those who claimed to be his followers numbered 3,000.

Bibliography

For a major study of Confucius, see H.G. Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (1949, reissued 1975), also published as *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (1949, reprinted 1960). Also see the introduction to *Confucius, The Analects (Lun Yü)*, trans. from Chinese by D.C. Lau (1979, reissued 1986). (T.W.-m.)

The Analects as the embodiment of Confucian ideas

The Lun-yü (Analects), the most revered sacred scripture in the Confucian tradition, was probably compiled by the second generation of Confucius' disciples. Based primarily on the Master's sayings, preserved in both oral and written transmissions, it captures the Confucian spirit in form and content in the same way that the Platonic dialogues embody Socratic pedagogy.

The Analects has often been viewed by the critical modern reader as a collection of unrelated conversations randomly put together. This impression may have resulted from the mistaken conception of Confucius as a mere commonsense moralizer who gave practical advice to students in everyday situations. If a person approaches the Analects as a communal memory, a literary device on the part of those who considered themselves beneficiaries of the Confucian Way to continue the Master's memory and to transmit his form of life as a living tradition, he comes close to what it has been revered for in China for centuries. Dialogues are used to show Confucius in thought and action, not as an isolated individual but as the centre of relationships. Actually the sayings of the Analects reveal Confucius' personality—his ambitions, his fears, his joys, his commitments, and above all his self-knowledge. (See self.)

The purpose, then, in compiling these distilled statements centring on Confucius seems not to have been to present an argument or to record an event but to offer an invitation to readers to take part in an ongoing conversation. Through the Analects Confucians for centuries learned to reenact the awe-inspiring ritual of participating in a conversation with Confucius.

One of Confucius' most significant personal descriptions is the short autobiographical account of his spiritual development found in the Analects:

At 15 I set my heart on learning; at 30 I firmly took my stand; at 40 I had no delusions; at 50 I knew the Mandate of Heaven; at 60 my ear was attuned; at 70 I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the boundaries of right. (2:4)

Confucius' life as a student and teacher exemplified his idea that education was a ceaseless process of self-realization. When one of his students reportedly had difficulty describing him, Confucius came to his aid:

(See self-cultivation.)

Why did you not simply say something to this effect: he is the sort of man who forgets to eat when he engages himself in vigorous pursuit of learning, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries, and who does not notice that old age is coming on? (7:18)

Confucius was deeply concerned that the culture (wen) he cherished was not being transmitted and that the learning (hsüeh) he propounded was not being taught. His strong sense of mission, however, never interfered with his ability to remember what had been imparted to him, to learn without flagging, and to teach without growing weary. What he demanded of himself was strenuous:

It is these things that cause me concern: failure to cultivate virtue, failure to go deeply into what I have learned, inability to move up to what I have heard to be right, and inability to reform myself when I have defects. (7:3)

What he demanded of his students was the willingness to learn: "I do not enlighten anyone who is not eager to learn, nor encourage anyone who is not anxious to put his ideas into words (7:8).

The community that Confucius created was a scholarly fellowship of like-minded men of different ages and different backgrounds from different states. They were attracted to Confucius because they shared his vision and to varying degrees took part in his mission to bring moral order to an increasingly fragmented polity. This mission was difficult and even dangerous. Confucius himself suffered from joblessness, homelessness, starvation, and occasionally life-threatening violence. Yet his faith in the survivability of the culture that he cherished and the workability of the approach to teaching that he propounded was so steadfast that he convinced his followers as well as himself that Heaven was on their side. When Confucius' life was threatened in K'uang, he said:

Since the death of King Wen [founder of the Chou dynasty] does not the mission of culture (wen) rest here in me? If Heaven intends this culture to be destroyed, those who come after me will not be able to have any part of it. If Heaven does not intend this culture to be destroyed, then what can the men of K'uang do to me? (9:5)

This expression of self-confidence informed by a powerful sense of mission may give the impression that there was presumptuousness in Confucius' self-image. Confucius, however, made it explicit that he was far from attaining sagehood and that all he really excelled in was "love of learning" (5:27). To him, learning not only broadened his knowledge and deepened his self-awareness but also defined who he was. He frankly admitted that he was not born endowed with knowledge, nor did he belong to the class of men who could transform society without knowledge. Rather, he reported that he used his ears widely and followed what was good in what he had heard and used his eyes widely and retained in his mind what he had seen. His learning constituted "a lower level of knowledge" (7:27), a level that was presumably accessible to the majority of human beings. In this sense Confucius was neither a prophet with privileged access to the divine nor a philosopher who had already seen the truth but a teacher of humanity who was also an advanced fellow traveler on the way to self-realization.

As a teacher of humanity Confucius stated his ambition in terms of concern for human beings: "To bring comfort to the old, to have trust in friends, and to cherish the young" (5:25).

Confucius' vision of the way to develop a moral community began with a holistic reflection on the human condition. Instead of dwelling on abstract speculations such as man's condition in the state of nature, Confucius sought to understand the actual situation of a given time and to use that as his point of departure. His aim was to restore trust in government and to transform society into a moral community by cultivating a sense of humanity in politics and society. To achieve that aim, the creation of a scholarly community, the fellowship of chün-tzu (noblemen), was essential. In the words of Confucius' disciple Tseng-tzu, the true nobleman:

Must be broad-minded and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his road is long. He takes humanity as his burden. Is that not heavy? Only with death does his road come to an end. Is that not long? (8:7)

The fellowship of chün-tzu as moral vanguards of society, however, did not seek to establish a radically different order. Its mission was to redefine and revitalize those institutions that for centuries were believed to have maintained social solidarity and enabled people to live in harmony and prosperity. An obvious example of such an institution was the family.

It is related in the Analects that Confucius, when asked why he did not take part in government, responded by citing a passage from an ancient classic, the Shu Ching ("Classic of History"), "Simply by being a good son and friendly to his brothers a man can exert an influence upon government!" to show that what a person does in the confines of his home is politically significant (2:21). This maxim is based on the Confucian conviction that cultivation of the self is the root of social order and that social order is the basis for political stability and universal peace. (See socialization.)

The assertion that family ethics is politically efficacious must be seen in the context of the Confucian conception of politics as "rectification" (cheng). Rulers should begin by rectifying their own conduct; that is, they are to be examples who govern by moral leadership and exemplary teaching rather than by force. Government's responsibility is not only to provide food and security but also to educate the people. Law and punishment are the minimum requirements for order; the higher goal of social harmony, however, can only be attained by virtue expressed through ritual performance. To perform rituals, then, is to take part in a communal act to promote mutual understanding.

One of the fundamental Confucian values that ensures the integrity of ritual performance is hsiao (filial piety). Indeed, Confucius saw filial piety as the first step toward moral excellence, which he believed lay in the attainment of the cardinal virtue, jen (humanity). To learn to embody the family in the mind and heart is to become able to move beyond self-centredness or, to borrow from modern psychology, to transform the enclosed private ego into an open self. Filial piety, however, does not demand unconditional submissiveness to parental authority but recognition of and reverence for the source of life. The purpose of filial piety, as the ancient Greeks expressed it, is to enable both parent and child to flourish. Confucians see it as an essential way of learning to be human.

Confucians, moreover, are fond of applying the family metaphor to the community, the country, and the universe. They prefer to address the emperor as the son of Heaven, the king as ruler-father, and the magistrate as the "father-mother official" because to them the family-centred nomenclature implies a political vision. When Confucius said that taking care of family affairs is itself active participation in politics, he had already made it clear that family ethics is not merely a private concern; the public good is realized by and through it.

Confucius defined the process of becoming human as being able to "conquer yourself and return to ritual" (12:1). The dual focus on the transformation of the self (Confucius is said to have freed himself from four things:

"opinionatedness, dogmatism, obstinacy, and egoism" [9:4]) and on social participation enabled Confucius to be loyal (chung) to himself and considerate (shu) of others (4:15). It is easy to understand why the Confucian "golden rule" is "Do not do unto others what you would not want others to do unto you!" (15:23). Confucius' legacy, laden with profound ethical implications, is captured by his "plain and real" appreciation that learning to be human is a communal enterprise:

A man of humanity, wishing to establish himself, also establishes others, and wishing to enlarge himself, also enlarges others. The ability to take as analogy of what is near at hand can be called the method of humanity. (6:30)

The thought of Confucius

The story of Confucianism does not begin with Confucius. Nor was Confucius the founder of Confucianism in the sense that Buddha was the founder of Buddhism and Christ the founder of Christianity. Rather Confucius considered himself a transmitter who consciously tried to reanimate the old in order to attain the new. He proposed retrieving the meaning of the past by breathing vitality into seemingly outmoded rituals. Confucius' love of antiquity was motivated by his strong desire to understand why certain rituals, such as the ancestral cult, reverence for Heaven, and mourning ceremonies, had survived for centuries. His journey into the past was a search for roots, which he perceived as grounded in humanity's deepest needs for belonging and communicating. He had faith in the cumulative power of culture. The fact that traditional ways had lost vitality did not, for him, diminish their potential for regeneration in the future. In fact, Confucius' sense of history was so strong that he saw himself as a conservationist responsible for the continuity of the cultural values and the social norms that had worked so well for the civilization of the Chou dynasty.

Lun yü

(Chinese: "Conversations"), English Analects, one of four Confucian texts that, when published together in 1190 by the Neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi, became the great Chinese classic known as Ssu shu ("Four Books").

Lun yü is considered by scholars to be the most reliable source of the doctrine of the ancient sage Confucius (551-479 BC) and is usually the first Confucian text studied in schools. It covers practically all the basic ethical concepts of Confucius—e.g., jen ("benevolence"), chün-tzu ("the superior man"), t'ien ("Heaven"), chung yung (doctrine of "the mean"), li ("proper conduct"), and cheng ming ("adjustment to names"). The last inculcates the notion that all phases of a person's conduct should correspond to the true significance of "names"—e.g., marriage should be true marriage, not concubinage.

Among many direct quotations attributed to Confucius is one explaining filial piety (hsiao). If hsiao means nothing more than providing for parents, said Confucius, even dogs and horses do that; hsiao does not exist without genuine respect for parents. Lun yü also contains homely glimpses of Confucius as recorded by his disciples.

In general, Lun yü is unsystematic, occasionally repetitive, and sometimes inaccurate historically.