

Confucius: His Life and Thought

I. Lineage and Biographical Sketch

Confucius was a descendant of the Sung people who came from the royal house of Yin. According to the *Tso Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*, Meng Hsi Tzu said that "his (Confucius') ancestor, Fu Hu Ho, could have ruled Sung, but he ceded it to his brother who later became Duke Li. After him, there was Cheng Kao Fu who assisted Dukes Tai, Wu and Hsüan." (*Tso Commentary*, Duke Chao 7).

Though Confucius was of noble origin, by the time he was born the family had become very poor. It is said that Confucius was "once a keeper of stores" and "once in charge of public fields" (*The Book of Mencius*, BK V, Part B). Later he became the police commissioner of his native state of Lu, but found his principles were not accepted by his superiors. Eventually he gave up public service and devoted himself to editing classical texts and promoting education.

Confucius' teachings were carried on in the ancient tradition and paved the way for future generations. They occupy a very important position not only in Chinese intellectual history but also in the history of human thought as a whole.

II. Historical Background

Two aspects of the historical background of Confucius are particularly important. One is the social and political situation, the other is the general intellectual trends of the Spring and Autumn period in which Confucius lived.

Two quotations from the *Confucian Analects* and the *Book of Mencius* give us some general idea of the social and political situation of Confucius' time. In the *Analects*, Confucius said, "It is five generations since patronage passed out of the control of the Ducal House. It is four generations since government came under control of the counselors. For this reason the descendants of the three Houses of Huan are on the decline" (*Analects*, BK 16). In the *Book of Mencius*, it is reported that "There were instances of regicides and parricides" (Mencius BK III, Part B). These two quotations testify to the fact that the political situation was in a dismal and chaotic state and that the existing system could no longer be preserved. There are many other descriptions to the same effect in the *Tso Commentary*. This was the reason why Confucius actively promoted the doctrine of the rectification of names: "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son" (*Analects*, BK. 7).

The social structure was also undergoing rapid changes. In the ancient times, "Offices and emoluments were inherited", whereas in the Spring and Autumn period, commoners were able to obtain high positions in government. For example, Ming Chi, once a cattle trader, later came to serve in the court of Ch'i; Po Li Hsi, whose original status was not unlike that of a slave, served in the court of Chin. At the same time there were noblemen who lost their rank and status. We read in the *Tso Commentary* that "The Lüan, the Chüeh, the Hsü, the Yüan, the Hu, the Hsü, the Ching and the Po (all noble families) were reduced to the status of menials" (*Tso Commentary*, Duke Chao 3). These are instances of changing social conditions. As we have mentioned, Confucius himself was a descendant of a noble family, yet he had to take lowly jobs and later had to make a living by teaching and tutoring.

By way of intellectual development, the spirit of humanism had already emerged in the late Shang and early Chou period. As the following passages illustrate:

"In the case of Tsu Chia (of the Shang Dynasty)... he understood that the support of the commoners was essential, and was able to protect and to benefit the masses, not daring to mistreat the widows and the orphans." (Book of History, BK XX).

The "Announcement about Drunkenness" (of the early Chou Dynasty) states, "Let them not look for their reflection in water; let them look into the mirror of the people." (Book of History, BK. XV).

In the Spring and Autumn period, humanism gradually became a widely accepted notion, as is evidenced in the following quotations from the *Tso Commentary*:

"When a state is about to prosper, its ruler is listening to his people; and when it is about to perish, he is listening to the gods." (*Tso Commentary*, Duke Chuang 32).

"The Way of Heaven is remote, while the way of man is near. Since we cannot reach to the Heavens, how then can we know it?" (*Tso Commentary*, Duke Chao, 18).

"Hsueh makes its appeal to men while Sung appeals to spirits. The offense of Sung is indeed great." (*Tso Commentary*, Duke Ting, 1).

All these new and progressive ideas and attitudes were approved by Confucius. It is said that Confucius "did not speak of prodigies, force, disorder and gods." (*Analects*, BK 7). He prescribed that one "keep a distance from the gods and spirits." (*Analects*, BK 6). In replying to a student's question concerning the spirits and death, he said, "You are not able even to serve man; how can you serve the spirits?.... You do not understand even life; how can you understand death?" (*Analects*, BK. 11). Though not denying the existence of gods and spirits, he never really believed in them.

III. The Teachings of Confucius

The teachings of Confucius are mainly concerned with politics, personal cultivation and social morality respectively explained as follows:

1. On Politics

The political situation of the Spring and Autumn period has been roughly described above. Confucius, born in a time of instability and confusion, proposed his doctrines of "virtue as the basis of governing" and the "rectification of names."

(a) On Virtue as the Basis of Governing

Confucius said, "A ruler who governs by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve

around it." (*Analects*, BK. 2).

He again 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, keep them in line with rites, and they will, besides having a sense of shame, reform themselves." (*Analects*, BK. 2).

In replying to a minister, he said, "To govern is to correct. If you set an example by being correct, who would dare to remain incorrect?" (*Analects*, BK. 7).

These several passages are meant to point out that a ruler's way of cultivating himself and governing others must be based on virtue. Only when the ruler sets an example in his own conduct and transforms the people with his virtue can political order be effected.

(b) On the Rectification of Names

The content of this doctrine is summed up in the following passages:

Duke Ching of Chi asked Confucius about government. Confucius answered, "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son." The Duke said "If the ruler be not a ruler, the subject not a subject, the father not a father, the son not a son, then even if there be grain, would I get to eat it?" (*Analects*, BK. 12).

The above conversation took place when Chen Heng, who was only a minister, took charge of national affairs in the state of Chi. At roughly the same time, Duke Chao of Lu was exiled to Chi by the Chi family. Confucius was appalled by the dissolution of political order, so he insisted that the proper status of ruler and subject be restored. When Confucius took office as the police commissioner of Lu, the first thing he did was attempt to support the legitimate government and to destroy the capital city of each of three powerful noble families. Confucius thought that if the distinction between ruler and subject was not maintained, and the relationship between father and son was not properly defined, then politics could not be set in order and the common people could not live in peace. And without a stable government, there could not be a stable society. In the final analysis, the main thrust of Confucius' doctrine of the rectification of names is the insistence that the ultimate goal of government is to serve the welfare of the people.

2. On Economics

Economic policy is a vital link in the socio-political structure Confucius advocated the concept of private property and wealth. He was strongly opposed to overtaxation, exploitation and other similar governmental actions. According to Confucius, the most important obligation of the government is to enrich the people. It is recorded in the *Analects* "When the Master (Confucius) went to Wei, Jan Yu drove for him. The Master said, 'what a teeming population!' Jan Yu said, 'When the people have multiplied, what next should be done for them?' 'Enrich them!' 'When they are enriched, what next should be done for them?' 'Instruct them!'" (*Analects*, BK 3).

When one of Confucius' disciples Jan Chiu served the Chi family as their deputy and helped them exploit the people by raking in the taxes, Confucius was so angry that he told his disciples to attack Jan Chiu openly to the beating of drums. (*Analects* BK. 11).

Another disciple Yu Jue in replying to Duke Ai about taxation, expressed Confucius' own ideas very succinctly. 'When the people enjoy plenty, why should the ruler worry about his insufficiency? When the people do not have enough, how could the ruler expect to have sufficient?' (*Analects*, BK. 12).

This principle taken one step further is Confucius' ideal that the head of a state or a noble family worries not about scarcity but about uneven distribution." (*Analects* BK. 16). The rationale behind this view was the insistence that people are the most important consideration in political and economic thought. The idea of the people as the foundation of the state can also be found in the *Book of Mencius*, the *Doctrine of the Mean* and the *Great Learning*. As the orthodox view of the Confucian school, it has till the present day been accepted by the Chinese people as the criterion for deciding whether a government is good or bad, whether it will win the trust of the people, and whether it will be judged favorably by history.

3. On Morality

Confucius was deeply concerned with the cultivation of personal character and with interpersonal relations and social ethics. Regarding the former, the concept most frequently mentioned is "jen" (benevolence). There are more than one hundred occurrences of this word in the *Confucian Analects*. The meaning of the word is succinctly

defined by *The Doctrine of the Mean*, "Jen is man". That is to say, *jen* is that which makes man a man. In Confucius' view, *jen* stands for the sum of all moral virtues. It includes considerateness (*shu*) (*Analects*, BK 15), love (*ai*) (*Analects*, BK 1), filial piety (*hsiao*) (*Analects*, BK 1), wisdom (*chih*) (*Analects*, BK 5) and courage (*yung*) (*Analects*, BK 14). It also covers such moral virtues as propriety (*li*) (*Analects* BK, 12), respectfulness (*kung*), tolerance (*ruan*), trustworthiness (*hsin*), diligence (*min*) and generosity (*hui*) (*Analects* BK, 17). And the concrete method of realizing *jen* is "In desiring to establish oneself, also establish others. In desiring to promote oneself, promote others as well." (*Analects*, BK 6).

Jen can even be found in the process of learning. "Learn widely and be steadfast in your purpose, inquire earnestly reflect on what is at hand, and there is no need for you to look for *Jen* elsewhere." (*Analects*, BK 19).

Regarding interpersonal relations and social ethics, Confucius put special emphasis on conscientiousness (*chung*). Thus he said, "A subject should serve his ruler with conscientiousness." (*Analects*, BK 3). "Be conscientious and trustworthy in words." (*Analects*, BK 15). "When dealing with others be conscientious." (*Analects*, BK 13). Conscientiousness means earnestly doing one's best.

Confucius also spoke approvingly of straightness (*chih*). To be straight is, internally, not to deceive oneself, and, externally, not to deceive others. So Confucius said, "That a man lives is because he is straight." (*Analects*, BK 6). Straightness is what man carries from the time he is born. Confucius also said, "How straight Shih Yü is. When the way prevails in the state, he is as straight as an arrow. Yet when the way falls into disuse in the state, he is still as straight as an arrow." (*Analects*, BK 15). This means that man must stick to his principles, and not be affected by the political situation of the state.

However, straightness should not be considered as conflicting with filial piety. Confucius said, "Fathers cover up for their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. In such behavior is straightness to be found as a matter of course." (*Analects*, BK 13). Since filial piety is based on *Jen*, we can say that straightness is also an application of *Jen*.

From the above exposition we can see that Confucius' moral theory remains consistent as he moves from personal cultivation through social ethics. Ultimately he proposed his view of an ideal socie-

ty in which "the old are comforted, friends trust each other and the young are cherished." (*Analects*, BK 5). It embodies the Confucian aspiration to a harmonious world in which all men are brothers and the myriad things are men's companions.

4. On Learning and Education

Confucius was a very industrious person. He thus described himself, "I once spent all day thinking without taking food and all night thinking without going to bed, but I found that I gained nothing from it. It would have been better for me to have spent the time in learning." (*Analects*, BK 14). When Confucius heard that the Duke of She asked Tzu Lu about him and Tzu Lu did not respond, he said to Tzu Lu, "Why did you not simply say something to this effect, he is the sort of man who forgets to eat when he tries to solve a problem, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries and who does not notice the onset of old age?" (*Analects*, BK 7). Confucius said of himself, "I was not born with knowledge but being fond of antiquity, I am quick to seek it." (*Analects*, BK 7). "Even when walking in a party of no more than three, I am bound to be able to learn from those I am with. The good points of them I copy, the bad points of them I correct in myself." (*Analects*, BK 7). "How dare I claim to be a sage or a benevolent man? Perhaps it might be said of me that I learn without flagging and teach without growing weary." (*Analects*, BK 7).

These passages all illustrate the extent of Confucius' devotion to learning. His method of learning was strict and meticulous. He claimed that "to say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge." (*Analects*, BK 2). He insisted that "When a gentleman is ignorant, he would not offer any opinion." (*Analects*, BK 13). Thus he said, "I am able to discourse on the rites of the Hsia, but the state of Chi does not furnish sufficient supporting evidence; I am able to discourse on the rites of the Yin, but the state of Sung does not furnish supporting evidence. This is because there are not enough records and men of erudition. Otherwise I would be able to support what I say with evidence." (*Analects*, BK 3).

As for education, it should be mentioned that prior to the Spring and Autumn period, the common people did not have the opportunity to receive education. It was Confucius who first advocated the policy of "education without class distinction" (*Analects*, BK 15) and accepted people from various social backgrounds as his students. According to *Shih Chi* (*Records of the Historian*), Confucius had altogether around

three thousand students among whom seventy-two were well versed in the six arts (rites, music, archery, charioteering, classics and mathematics). He was the person who initiated education for the common people in China.

Confucius' method of education was described as "leading the student on step by step." (*Analects*, BK 9). He was able to "teach without being wearied." (*Analects* BK 7). His instructions were always in accord with particular students' talents and circumstances. He stressed spontaneity, initiative and self-enlightenment on the part of the student. His replies to the students' questions about benevolence, filial piety and other virtues varied from case to case. For example, when Fan Chih asked about benevolence, Confucius's answer was "love your fellow men" (*Analects*, BK 12). Whereas his answer to Yen Yüan was "to master oneself and to return to propriety." (*Analects*, BK 12).

In the case of filial piety, Confucius' answer to Meng Yi Tzu was "never fail to comply." (*Analects*, BK 2). Yet his answer to Tzu Hsia was "What is difficult to manage is the expression on one's face." (*Analects* BK 2). The reason why Confucius gave different answers to different people in response to the same question seems to be that each inquirer had his particular weakness and Confucius' answer was intended to call his attention to it.

The emphasis on spontaneity and self-enlightenment is found in Confucius' remark "I do not enlighten those who are not eager to learn nor those who are not anxious to give an explanation themselves. If I have presented one corner of the square and they cannot come back to me with the other three, I should not go over the points again." (*Analects*, BK 7). This remark provides a vivid description of his method of teaching.

The materials and textbooks Confucius used in his classes were mainly such ancient classics as the *Book of Changes*, the *Book of History*, the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Rites*, the *Book of Music* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. It is said that "Confucius used the correct pronunciation for the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of History* and the performance of the rites. In all these cases he used the correct pronunciation." (*Analects*, BK 7).

Aside from studying the texts, Confucius usually offered his personal opinions in his classes. He paid special attention to the problem of cultivating moral character. We learn that "Confucius taught four

things: culture, conduct, conscientiousness and trust-worthiness." (*Analects*, BK 7). Some of Confucius' disciples distinguished themselves in four different areas: "Moral conduct, Yen Yuan, Min Tzuchien, Jan Po Niu and Chung Kung; speech, Tsai Wo and Tzn Kung; government and Politics, Jan Yu and Tzu Lu; literature, Tzu Yu and Tzu Hsia." (*Analects*, BK 6). Of these four areas, only the last is mainly concerned with scholarly activities. The other three all have to do with personal cultivation.

Confucius instructed his students not only to "study literature extensively" but also to "restrain themselves with the rules of propriety." (*Analects*, BK 12). He did tell his students to read the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Rites* (BK 16). However, what he stressed in those two classics was not their philological or historical import, but rather what one could learn from them regarding one's conduct and behavior. Thus Confucius said that "Unless one studies the *Odes*, one will be ill-equipped to speak... Unless one studies the *Rites*, one will be ill-equipped to take one's stand." (*Analects*, BK 16). It is evident that for Confucius, education should be aimed more at moral cultivation than at the acquisition of knowledge.

IV. Conclusion

As indicated, Confucius maintained that in politics, the people should be considered as the fundamental concern. In economic matters, the most important thing is to improve the welfare of the people. With regard to individual and social morality, the central concepts are benevolence, conscientiousness and personal integrity. In education, the emphasis is placed on equal opportunity and self-enlightenment, while the goal is set at the cultivation of moral character. To sum up, Confucius' thought as a whole shows an unmistakable humanistic tendency which has become the essential characteristic of Chinese culture.