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# To learn from the past is to serve the present: a Confucian lesson

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Confucius (551-479 BC) ranks as China's most renowned educator and philosopher. His thought not only spans generations but also crosses diverse cultures in its worldwide appeal. Indeed, the very name Confucius is the Latinised version of Kong Fu Zi. A study of Confucius philosophical thought provides a significant civilisational resource in our understanding of the world and our efforts to change it. In the spirit of Confucius who studied the past to serve the present, this article examines the philosophy of this ancient educator to enlighten our modern ways.

## **Keywords**

Confucius, philosophy, ethics

## VIEWPOINT FROM CHINA

# To Learn from the Past is to Serve the Present: A Confucian Lesson

*by Li Tianchen\**

Confucius (551-479 BC) ranks as China's most renowned educator and philosopher. His thought not only spans generations but also crosses diverse cultures in its worldwide appeal. Indeed, the very name 'Confucius' is the Latinised version of Kong Fu Zi. A study of Confucius' philosophical thought provides a significant civilisational resource in our understanding of the world and our efforts to change it. In the spirit of Confucius who studied the past to serve the present, this article examines the philosophy of this ancient educator to enlighten our modern ways.

### **The Will of Heaven and the Art of being Practical**

The first pertinent observation that can be made is that Confucius was practical. He paid more attention to living human beings and existing social problems than to the dead, spirits and ghosts.

#### *Heaven (Tian) and the Living*

What is Heaven? Is it the highest and noblest in the universe? Does it enjoy absolute authority? And can it dominate everything? As a philosopher in the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC), Confucius addressed these serious philosophical questions. He revised the viewpoints of that time, asking: "Has Heaven said anything?" Adding: "But the four seasons run their course as always, and as always all things on earth rise and decline regularly and continuously, just as water in the river" (*Analects*, XVII.19)<sup>1</sup> This is often taken to mean that "Confucius did not believe in an anthropomorphic God but in a Heaven which reigns rather than rules."<sup>2</sup>

Confucius took human beings as the subject of his philosophical meditation - a position embodied in his attitude of "respecting spirits but keeping them at a distance" (VI.22).

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<sup>1</sup> For the benefit of readers outside China, the readily available Penguin edition (D. C. Lau's translation) of the *Analects* is cited in terms of book and section, though not in terms of English translation from the Chinese. For references on general subjects, readers are referred to: Wing-Tsit Chan (trans. and comp.), *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1969.

<sup>2</sup> Chan, *ibid.*, p. 47.

When Zi Lu<sup>3</sup> asked about a person's duty to spirits, Confucius said: "Before we are able to serve the living, how can we serve the spirits of the dead?" (XI.12) Zi Lu went on to ask about death, to which Confucius replied: "Before we know what life is, how can we know what death is?" (XI.12)

Hence Confucius laid emphasis on living people and their concerns. He asked his disciples to study the realities emergent in society, rather than to dwell on the supernatural and the uncertain.

#### *The Will of Heaven (Tianming)*

Despite this attitude, Confucius did speak of Heaven on several occasions. First, he spoke of Heaven when he swore. For instance, when Confucius arrived at the state of Wei, Nanzi, wife of Duke Ling, asked to meet him. He went and paid her a visit. When the above-mentioned disciple, Zi Lu, learned of this, he was displeased, for he knew that Nanzi did not always behave properly. Confucius was so concerned by Zi Lu's reaction that he swore an oath: "If I had done anything wrong during the interview, may Heaven detest and reject me! May Heaven detest and reject me!" (VI.28)

Second, Confucius spoke of Heaven when he was in an adverse circumstance and felt indignant. For instance, when Confucius and his disciples were in the state of Song, Sima Huantui (an officer of Song) wanted to kill him. So his disciples urged him to leave quickly. But Confucius said: "Heaven has endowed me with good moral character, how could Huantui do anything to me?" (VII.23)

Third, Confucius spoke of Heaven when he was angry or grumbled. Once Confucius looked up, heaved a sigh and said: "Only Heaven knows me!" (XIV.35) Here Confucius was complaining about not being understood. Like great philosophers in all ages, Confucius' contemporaries had difficulty reconciling his ideas with prevailing attitudes. He was especially saddened by the failure of his political ideals to take root. But he could do nothing to change this. All that was left for him was to sigh to Heaven.

There is some indication that Confucius believed in the will of Heaven. He once observed: "When a doctrine prevails, it is because of the will of Heaven; when a doctrine decays, it is also because of the will of Heaven" (XIV.36).

#### *Ghosts and Spirits*

This raises the related question of whether Confucius offered sacrifices to the spirits. If so, does it mean that Confucius believed in ghosts and spirits? The words of Confucius' disciple, Zeng Shen, who was noted for his filial piety, may well answer this question. He said that if people in high positions carefully and cautiously mourned their parents' deaths, recalled and held memorial ceremonies for their far and remote ancestors, people in lower positions would follow their example and perform their duty well. A moral society would naturally prevail. This shows that the main purpose of holding mourning

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<sup>3</sup> A disciple of Confucius. He was candid and brave, and finally was killed in the internal strife of the nobility.

ceremonies and offering sacrifices serves the living: it is to encourage virtuous conduct and moral rectitude in the broad community. In addition, holding mourning ceremonies hopefully would enhance people's sense of generational continuity, an important factor in instilling the values of sustainability so seriously needed in the world's environment and development policies. In this way, remembrance of past generations and, by implication, of future generations to come, consolidates ethical and religious values which promote ecological and social (eco-social) survival.

**So the lesson from Confucius in modern parlance is: Be practical, attend to the living, but in doing so care about the long continuum of life, so that you act ethically in relation to many generations, as well as to your present eco-social environment.**

*The Key to Ethical Behaviour is Education in its Fullest Sense*

Within Confucius' world outlook is the belief that people can be *educated* into understanding how to behave in an ethically appropriate way in relation to the eco-social world. This is a key source of hope for planetary and social survival in the 21st century: that we are educable. For it is clear that Confucius believed that people could learn about benevolence and rites, the mysterious idea of 'fate' (*ming*) - the will of Heaven - and about themselves.

Confucius said: "I can foretell things in ten generations, even in a hundred generations." (II.23) For he knew that social and historical developments caused by social reforms had their own dynamic (or 'processes' of unfolding). They were not mysterious but knowable, they could be reasoned out.

As to how to learn to interpret these changes, Confucius offered a clear answer: "I am not one who was born with innate knowledge. I am simply one who loves ancient culture and who is diligent in seeking it." (VII.20) He loved to study ancient books and he was astute at deriving the historical experiences of the ancestors. It was this which enabled him to understand contemporary developments.

*Conduct and Cultivation*

In paying attention to learning, however, he did not neglect practice. As emphasised in the opening section of this article, practical matters were important to Confucius. He advised that if there is "surplus energy" after "conduct" (activities), then engage in "learning" (I.6). Hence Confucius placed "conduct" first in ordering the two aspects of human comportment. By "conduct", Confucius mainly meant moral and political activities, while "learning" referred to the cultivation of ethical morality and personal behaviour. He maintained that if you love learning, you should be earnest in what you are doing and cautious in your speech; you should associate with those who are wise and thereby allow yourself to be rectified (I.8). The idea is to seek in society those people and circumstances that contribute to our improvement, not our degeneration.

### *Learning and Thinking*

Confucius laid stress on both learning and thinking, but took learning as the foundation. He said: "He who learns without thinking is lost. He who thinks without learning remains puzzled" (II.15). Learning and thinking are dialectically related. Neither should be over-emphasised at the expense of the other. In cautioning against learning without thinking, Confucius said: "Only when someone is eager to know but finds it difficult do I instruct. Only when someone wants to speak out but fails to find expression do I enlighten. If I present a person one corner of a subject and the other three cannot then be inferred by this person, I do not continue the lesson" (VII.8).

Confucius elaborated on the concept of "thinking" by saying that if you are to become a cultivated person you should possess nine ways of thinking, these being:

1. when you look at something, think about seeing it clearly;
2. when you listen to something, think about hearing it clearly;
3. when you show facial expressions, think about keeping a warm attitude;
4. when you behave, think about keeping a manner of respect;
5. when you speak, think about saying something honestly and plausibly;
6. when you conduct some business, think about doing it carefully;
7. when you are puzzled or have a problem to solve, think about seeking advice from others;
8. when you become angry, think about calming yourself; and
9. when you see there is a profit to be made, think about whether it is proper to pursue that profit.

To summarise Confucius' relative stress on the above matters, he put *conduct* in first place, *learning* in the second, and *thinking* in the third. He was against *doing* something without *knowing* what you are doing, but on the other hand he considered *doing* as more important than *knowing*.

### **The Doctrine of the Mean**

The importance of moderation is another noteworthy teaching of Confucius. The *doctrine of the mean* belongs to the philosophical category indicating the limit, range and sphere of things.

The *doctrine of the mean* opposes 'going beyond' and 'falling short', but puts stress on 'moderation'.<sup>4</sup> Once Zi Gong<sup>5</sup> asked Confucius, who was the better, Shi or Shang?<sup>6</sup> Confucius said: "Shi goes too far and Shang does not go far enough." Zi Gong said: "In that case, Shi must be the better." To this Confucius remarked: "To go too far is as bad as not to go far enough." Confucius thought that people's ideas or behaviour, whether they were conservative or radical, were not in accordance with the doctrine of the mean if they did not achieve the right balance.

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<sup>4</sup> See 'Doctrine of the Mean': 4, in Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Confucius' disciple who was gifted in speech.

<sup>6</sup> Shi and Shang were both disciples of Confucius.

Hence the *doctrine of the mean* opposes holding fast to extremes. To do so would bring harm. Instead, Confucius advocated “harmony but not uniformity”. In other words, the maintenance of harmonious relations between the opposites does not entail destruction of differences; by contrast, omitting differences between the opposites leads not to concord but uniformity. Yan Ying, one of Confucius’ contemporaries, likened the difference between the two terms to making soup. Harmonising may be likened to adding different herbs and ingredients to make the soup taste good. Uniformity, however, is like making soup merely by adding water into water. It will be tasteless and no one will like it. He gave a further example, this time not in the kitchen but in government where harmony meant coordination of different views. The minister is advised to point out that which is feasible and that which is not in the emperor’s guidelines. By acting on that which is feasible, political stability is better maintained and people will not conspire against one another. Uniformity, on the other hand, describes a system of acquiescence to everything the emperor says irrespective of its value. Contradictions will thus be concealed, and the risk of political errors being committed will be high.

Confucius agreed with Yan Ying, proposing that one should never deceive one’s sovereign and never be afraid to remonstrate with him when he is at fault. Confucius himself liked to proffer his own opinions to others, as well as encouraging the expression of diverse views from others, including his disciples.

The proposition, “harmony but not uniformity”, consists of such an idea: a single isolated element cannot operate to perfection; only when various elements, especially contradictory elements, function together and in concord, can we hope for improvement. That which Confucius emphasised was balance, unity and harmony.

To this list should be added the characteristic of flexibility. The *doctrine of the mean* should be used in a flexible way. Conditions are changing: in a certain situation a deed or a word may be considered proper, but not so in another, altered, situation. So under different conditions people need to adjust their ways of doing things. Mencius (who elaborated on Confucian thought in the second half of the fourth century BC),<sup>7</sup> commented on Confucius doing things properly. He said: “Confucius would accept office only when it was proper for him to accept, would retire from office only when it was proper for him to retire, would stay long in office or would withdraw quickly when it was proper for him to do that.” In education, Confucius also adopted a flexible way by offering different teachings suitable for different disciples.

In general, the *doctrine of the mean* places stress on doing things moderately and properly. It suggests that when confronted with two extremes, one should take the middle course. This advice is borne out by history. Extreme policies have brought great harm, even disasters. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the extreme actions of the Red Guards almost ruined China’s economy. The extreme actions

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<sup>7</sup> See D. C. Lau, *Mencius*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1988.

of militants everywhere, and not only in the Middle East, affect the prospects for peace. The long-term economic sanctions against Iraq have caused misery to the common people of the country, and in fact caused resistance to the implementation of the UN resolutions.

If people today could take Confucius' advice, social progress - the ethicosocial order - could be enhanced. By doing as Confucius did, which was to learn from the past and hence serve the present, modern people can learn from Confucius and do better at building a 21st century global civilisation.

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