

Source: *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition (Gale, 2003), Vol 4, pages 99-101

## CONFUCIUS (KONGFUZI)

Honorific title for China's preeminent philosopher, teacher, social thinker and political theorist; real name *Kongqiu* (K'ung Ch'iu); literary name *Zhongni* (Chung-ni); b. 551 B.C., Qufu (Ch'ü-fu) in the state of Lu (modern-day Shandong province in northeastern China); d. 479 B.C. Confucius is the Latinization form of the Chinese *Kongfuzi* (K'ung Fu-Tzu) or *Kongzi* (K'ung-Tzu), in English, "Master Kong."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Confucius lived during China's Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 B.C.), the twilight years of the Zhou (Chou) Dynasty that witnessed the gradual disintegration of the Zhou feudal structure into the turbulent Warring States period. Born into a family of petty aristocracy that had fallen upon hard times, he was a prolific scholar who had distinguished himself in learning as a member of the class of *ru (ju)*, i.e., itinerant scholars who were usually sons of petty aristocratic families that had fallen upon hard times and were now wandering from court to court, offering their services as teachers, masters of ritual, astronomers and specialists in calendrical computations.

A firm believer in education as the *sine qua non* for one's self-cultivation, Confucius achieved fame by establishing China's first school of learning more than a century before Plato had established his academy in Athens. Before this, education was available only to the wealthy Chinese aristocratic families who could afford to hire a *ru* (itinerant scholar) as a private tutor for their children. An enthusiastic and charismatic teacher, Confucius was able to gather some thirty men as his first batch of students. As a teacher, he made no distinction between the sons of nobility or peasantry, accepting whatever payment they could afford for his services (see *Analects* 7:7, 15:38). In return, he expected a high degree of commitment toward learning and self-cultivation from his students, and was intolerant of those who were lazy or unenthusiastic (*Analects* 7:8). His curriculum of the traditional "six arts" (1) ritual and ceremony (*li*), (2) music, (3) archery, (4) charioteering, (5) calligraphy and (6) mathematics, was geared as much toward personal-cultivation and character refinement, as toward training for employment as government functionaries. Viewing himself as a transmitter rather than an innovator ("following the proper way, I do not forge new paths," *Analects* 7:1), he made his students study the ancient Chinese classics – the Book of Poetry ( *Shijing*), the Book of History (*Shujing*) and the Book of Changes (*Yijing*).

Confucius firmly believed that everyone could benefit from self-cultivation and insisted that everyone could aspire to be leaders by proper training and education. For him education was more than mere acquisition of knowledge or a means of acquiring power. Rather, education is primarily about character building and self-cultivation, and only secondarily about acquiring skills for career advancement. His twofold legacy of proper education as a cornerstone of socio-political transformation, and teaching as the highest and most noble calling continues to animate the East Asian societies that venerate him as teacher and philosopher *par excellence*.

Confucius did not achieve fame and recognition in his lifetime, failing to secure any influential administrative position where he could implement his vision of life and socio-political theories. His idealistic socio-political vision did not endear him to these rulers. For him, a ruler had to rule in the manner of the Former Kings (*Xianwang*), i.e., the ancient sage-kings Yao, Shun and Yu, and the first three rulers of the Zhou (Chou) Dynasty, viz., King Wen, his son King Wu, and Zhou Gong (the Duke of Zhou), the younger brother of King Wu. He regarded these rulers as having governed by observing propriety (*li*) rather than by imposing laws and using force. He associated governing by propriety with the maintenance of cosmological harmony and natural order between “Heaven” (*Tian*) and earth, while using force was associated with the corruption and chaotic disorder that led to the downfall of wicked kings. Very little is known about the twilight years of life, except that later biographers recorded him as dying a broken and dejected man, having no inkling of the tremendous impact his teachings would subsequently have throughout East Asia to the present.

While Confucius claimed to be a transmitter rather than an innovator (see Analects 7:1), the originality and vitality of his overarching vision of life, characterized by a threefold principle – the love of tradition, the love of learning, and the love of self-cultivation was to transform China and the other East Asian societies of Korea, Japan and Vietnam indelibly. Although he personally did not found any mass movement, his teachings was disseminated by his admirers among the *ru* (*literati*) and co-opted by them, gradually evolving to become the foundational tenets of the *rujiao* (“Teachings of the *Literati*,” commonly but inaccurately translated as CONFUCIANISM\*). His vision also caught the imagination of the masses and was appropriated by them in their popular folk traditions and customs centered around rites of passage, filiality and ancestor veneration.

Confucius himself did not appear to have written anything that can be clearly attributed to him. The only extant collection of his sayings is the *Lun Yu* (Analects), a later compilation by his disciples of sayings attributed to him.

### PHILOSOPHY AND VISION OF LIFE.

The core of Confucius’ teachings centers on the self-cultivation of *li*, *xiao* (*hsiao*), *yi* (*i*) and *ren* (*jen*), commonly translated as propriety, filiality, appropriateness and human-ness. The objective of such self-cultivation is to become a *junzi* (*chiün-tzu*) or “superior person.”

**Propriety (*li*).** This refers to the ritualized norms of proper conduct regulating all aspects of human interactions according to relations of position and rank in family and society. For Confucius, *li* is the proper expression of sincere emotion, distinguishing the civilized person from barbarians who gave free and undisciplined vent to their emotions. He condemned empty and formalistic displays of rituals (see Analects 3:12), insisting that *li* must combine the *external* aspect of performing the proper ritual form with the *internal* disposition of heartfelt inner attitude. Indeed, Analects 2:7 criticizes empty and insincere ritualized displays of filiality toward one’s parents. There is no separation or contradiction between external propriety and inner disposition. The goal of propriety is social harmony:

Achieving harmony (*he*) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li*). In the way of the Former Kings, this achievement of harmony made them elegant, and was a

guiding standard in all things large and small. But when things are not going well, to realize harmony just for its own sake without regulating the situation through observing ritual propriety will not work (Analects 1:12)

**Filiality (*xiao*).** Filiality is defined as the primacy of the parent-child relations in the indivisible personal, social and religious realms of one's life. For Confucius, filiality undergirds one's obligations of reverence, obedience, and love toward one's parents when they are still alive, venerating them with the proper rituals when they are dead, and perpetuating this veneration by producing descendants (see Analects 2:5). At the same time, filiality is more than merely giving material support to one's parents. It also involves the self-cultivation of proper respectful and reverential inner dispositions toward them:

Ziyou asked about filial conduct (*xiao*). The Master replied: "Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference? (Analects 2:7)

It does not mean an uncritical obsequiousness:

The Master said, "In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary. Although concerned, voice no resentment (Analects 4:18).

The practice of ancestor veneration as a ritualization of filiality became a defining characteristic of Chinese culture and the cornerstone of the Chinese family. Attempts by some missionaries in the 17th century to prohibit Chinese Catholic converts from participating in ancestor veneration were viewed as attacks on Chinese culture and family structure, triggering the CHINESE RITES' CONTROVERSY\* that lasted more than three centuries.

**Appropriateness (*yi*).** The term *yi* (*i*) is commonly translated by Western scholars as "benevolence," "morality," or "moral." However, traditional Chinese dictionaries, e.g., the *Ci Hai* ("Sea of Words") translate this term "right," "fitting," or "proper." Etymologically, the word comprises the ideograph of a sheep (*yang*) above the ideograph for the first person pronoun (*wo*) that can be translated both in the first-person ("I," "me") or the third-person ("we," "us"). Sinologists think that the ideograph for *yi* represents a community doing something proper or fitting by sacrificing a sheep (see e.g., Analects 3:17). On this basis, the term *yi* – "appropriateness," or doing something "proper" or "fitting" undergirds other virtues such as propriety and filiality, enabling one to do what is proper and fitting in relation to others:

The Master said, "Exemplary persons (*junzi*) understand what is appropriate (*yi*), petty persons understand only what is of personal advantage" (Analects 4:16).

**Human-ness (*ren*).** The concept of *ren* (*jen*), often translated as "humanity" or "human-ness," refers to the attribute of "being fully human," in contrast with barbarians or animals acting on instincts. The *Shuowen jiezi* suggests that etymologically, the Chinese character for *ren* comprises the character for "person" and the number "two," indicating perhaps a relational quality that marks the "human" character of persons in community. Herbert Fingarette expresses this succinctly as

follows: “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings.” Confucius himself defined *ren* as “loving people” (*ai ren*) (Analects 12:22), emphasizing the *inter-relationality* and *intersubjectivity* of human living, where one is always *one among many* and seeking to achieve full humanity in one’s relations with others. For him, *ren* is the highest moral virtue and the totality of all moral virtues embodying an ideal moral life. In practical terms, *ren* embodies *yi* (appropriateness), *li* (propriety) and *xiao* (filiality).

**Superior Person (*junzi*).** Confucius consistently extolled and upheld the *junzi* (*chün-tzu*) or “superior person” as the goal of self-cultivation. For him, a *junzi* is someone who embodies the virtues of propriety, filiality, appropriateness and human-ness (see Analects 1:2, 1:8, 1:14, 2:11, 2:13, 4:5, 4:24, 6:16, 9:13, 13:3, 14:30, 15:17, 15:20, 15:31, 16:8, 16:10). Originally, the term referred to the son of a ruler who was heir to the throne. Confucius appropriated and relativized this political term to communicate his belief in meritocracy, viz., real leaders are formed, not born. For him, a true leader is one who has perfected himself through a life-long engagement of moral self-cultivation. Anyone, even the son of a peasant could aspire to be a *junzi*, the epitome of perfection. Here, the quest to become a *junzi* should not be understood as a selfish, individualistic quest for its own sake, but rather within a wider context of human relations in society. Confucius often contrasted the *junzi* with the *xiaoren* (*hsiao-jen*, or “petty person”), a self-centered and individualistic person whom he portrayed as selfish, calculative, unrefined and vindictive (see Analects 2:14, 4:11, 4:16, 8:6, 12:16, 13:23, 13:26, 14:24, 15:20, 17:23).

See also: CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, CHINESE RITES’ CONTROVERSY, CONFUCIANISM, MENCIUS (MENZI)

[J.Y. Tan]

## **Bibliography**

### **Sources:**

D.C. LAU, *Confucius: The Analects* (Hong Kong 1992).

C. HUANG, *The Analects of Confucius* (Oxford 1997)

R.T. AMES and H. ROSEMONT, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York 1998)

W.T. CHAN, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton 1963)

### **Studies:**

H.A. FINGARETTE, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York 1972)

B.I. SCHWARTZ, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass. 1985)

A.C. GRAHAM, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago 1989).

D.L. HALL and R.T. AMES, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York 1987)

D.L. HALL and R.T. AMES, *Anticipating China: Thinking Through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture* (New York 1995)

D.L. HALL and R.T. AMES, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (New York 1997)

X. YAO, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge, England 2000)