

Confucianism: Government and the Superior (551-479 BCE)

1893. Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean, in Chinese Classics Series of the Clarendon Press. Translated by James Legge. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Confucius was a scholar who lived between ca. 551 and 479 B.C.E. During this time, China experienced political decentralization and social instability as a result of rivalry among different princes. In his search for restoration of social order, Confucius argued that this chaotic situation was due to the breakdown of China's social foundation, which was based on the principle of proper relationships. According to Confucius, the key relationships included those between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. Only by fixing these relationships could China regain peace and order. Confucius' ideas, however, were not well accepted by the ruling class of his time, and he spent the rest of his lifetime teaching.

After Confucius, China sank into an even worse period known as the Warring States (475-221 B.C.E.). Confucius did not leave any written works, but his disciples recorded and further enriched his ideas by putting together – in a rather unsystematic way – a collection of his teachings and arguments. These Analects, which describe what we commonly know as Confucianism, would reshape the Chinese way of thinking in the millennia to come. Confucius's ideas on good government and proper relationships in the society are clearly reflected in the following arguments.

FILIAL PIETY

Zi, you asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "The filial piety of now-a-days means the support of one's parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support; – without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support giver from the other?"

The Master said, "In serving his parents, a son may remonstrate with them, but gently; when he sees that they do not incline to follow his advice, he shows an increased degree of reverence, but does not abandon his purpose; and should they punish him, he does not allow himself to murmur."

Mang I asked what filial piety was. The Master said, "It is not being disobedient." Soon after, as Fan Chih was driving him, the Master told him, saying, "Mang Sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him, 'not being disobedient.'" Fan Chih said, "What did you mean?" The Master replied, "That parents, when alive, should be served according to propriety; that, when dead, they should be buried according to propriety; and that they should be sacrificed to according to propriety."

PROPRIETY

The Master said, "Respectfulness, without the rules of propriety, becomes laborious bustle; carefulness, without the rules of propriety, becomes timidity; boldness, without the rules of propriety, becomes insubordination; straightforwardness, without the rules of propriety, becomes rudeness."

IDEAL GOVERNMENT

The Master said, "When rulers love to observe the rules of propriety, the people respond readily to the calls on them for service."

The Master said, "If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishments, they will try to avoid the punishment, but have no sense of shame.

"If they be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given them by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good."

The Master said, "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."

The duke Ai asked, saying, "What should be done in order to secure the submission of the people?" Confucius replied, "Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit."

Ji Kang asked how to cause the people to reverence their ruler, to be faithful to him, and to go on to nerve themselves to virtue. The Master said, "Let him preside over them with gravity; – then they will reverence him. Let him be filial and kind to all; – then they will be faithful to him. Let him advance the good and teach the incompetent; – then they will eagerly seek to be virtuous."

Ji Kang asked Confucius about government. Confucius replied, "To govern means to rectify. If you lead on the people with correctness, who will dare not to be correct?"

.....

The Master said, "If a minister makes his own conduct correct, what difficulty will he have in assisting in government? If he cannot rectify himself, what has he to do with rectifying others?"

The Master said, "If good men were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years, they would be able to transform the violently bad, and dispense with capital punishments." True indeed is this saying!

THE SUPERIOR MAN

Confucius said, "There are three things of which the superior man stands in awe. He stands in awe of the ordinances of Heaven. He stands in awe of great men. He stands in awe of the words of sages.

"The mean man does not know the ordinances of Heaven, and consequently does not stand in awe of them. He is disrespectful to great men. He makes sport of the words of sages."

Zi Gong asked what constituted the superior man. The Master said, "He acts before he speaks, and afterward speaks according to his actions."

The Master said, "The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain."

The Master said, "If the will be set on virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness."

The Master said, "Riches and honors are what men desire. If it cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If it cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be avoided.

"If a superior man abandon virtue, how can he fulfill the requirements of that name?"

"The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it."

The Master said, "By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart."

.....

The Master said, "By extensively studying all learning, and keeping himself under the restraint of the rules of propriety, one may thus likewise not err from what is right."

.....

The Master said, "The accomplished scholar is not a utensil."

SPIRITS

The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings.

.....

Ji Lu asked about serving the spirits of the dead. The Master said, "While you are not able to serve men, how can you serve their spirits?"

Ji Lu added, "I venture to ask about death?" He was answered, "While you do not know life, how can you know about death?"

Glossary

Filial Piety: Dutiful respect for parents.

Propriety: Conformity to proper behavior or manners.

Utensil: An instrument or tool that serves a useful purpose.

1. Summarize Confucius' idea of an ideal government.
 2. What should be the major qualities of a superior man, according to Confucius?
 3. Why does Confucius consider propriety important for individuals and for family, as well as for the state?
 4. From this document, what can be seen as the major themes in Confucianism?
 5. Why was the Warring States period so important for the development of Confucianism?
-

Daoism: The Classic of the Way and Virtue (500s-400s BCE)

1886. The Sacred Books of the East. Edited by F. Max Müller. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Daoism was associated with a legendary scholar, Lao Zi, who was believed to be a contemporary of Confucius. Lao Zi's view of restoring peace in the face of China's collapsing social order was quite different from that of Confucius. According to Lao Zi, the proper way to escape from war and political entanglement is to retreat into seclusion and embrace the harmony of nature. Through this contemplation of nature, one could become attuned to the Dao ("the way" in Chinese). Daoist views on government and human relationships were also different from those of Confucius. Daoism suggests a less active role for the government and more freedom for the people. Because of this retreatist attitude toward politics and society, Daoism gradually evolved into a popular religion absorbing its rites and organizational forms from Buddhism and local superstitions.

THE WAY

The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

Conceived of as having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; conceived of as having a name, it is the Mother of all things.

.....

The Dao produces all things and nourishes them; it produces them and does not claim them as its own; it does all, and yet does not boast of it; it presides over all, and yet does not control them. This is what is called "The mysterious quality" of the Dao.

When the Great Dao ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue.

Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy.

Man takes his law from the Earth; the Earth takes its law from Heaven; Heaven takes its law from the Dao. The law of the Dao is its being what it is.

All-pervading is the Great Dao! It may be found on the left hand and on the right.

All things depend on it for their production, which it gives to them, not one refusing obedience to it. When its work is accomplished, it does not claim the name of having done it. It clothes all things as with a garment, and makes no assumption of being their lord; – it may be named in the smallest things; . . . it may be named in the greatest things.

.....

He who has in himself abundantly the attributes of the Dao is like an infant.

.....

The Dao in its regular course does nothing, for the sake of doing it, and so there is nothing which it does not do.

THE WISE PERSON

When we renounce learning we have no troubles.

.....

If we could renounce our sageness and discard our wisdom, it would be better for the people a hundredfold. If we could renounce our benevolence and discard our righteousness, the people would again become filial and kindly. If we could renounce our artful contrivances and discard our scheming for gain, there would be no thieves nor robbers.

.....

The sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech.

.....

Therefore the sage holds in his embrace the one thing of humility, and manifests it to all the world. He is free from self-display, and therefore he shines; from self-assertion, and therefore he is distinguished; from self-boasting, and therefore his merit is acknowledged; from self-complacency, and therefore he acquires superiority. It is because he is thus free from striving that therefore no one in the world is able to strive with him.

.....

When gold and jade fill the hall, their possessor cannot keep them safe. When wealth and honors lead to arrogance, this brings its evil on itself. When the work is done, and one's name is becoming distinguished, to withdraw into obscurity is the way of Heaven.

THE IDEAL GOVERNMENT

A state may be ruled by measures of correction; weapons of war may be used with crafty dexterity; but the kingdom is made one's own only by freedom from action and purpose.

How do I know that it is so? By these facts: – In the kingdom the multiplication of prohibitive enactments increases the poverty of the people; the more implements to add to their profit that the people have, the

greater disorder is there in the state and clan; the more acts of crafty dexterity that men possess, the more do strange contrivances appear; the more display there is of legislation, the more thieves and robbers there are.

Therefore a sage has said, "I will do nothing, and the people will be transformed of themselves; I will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity."

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.

Therefore the sage, in the exercise of his government, empties their minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones.

He constantly tries to keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it. When there is this abstinence from action, good order is universal.

1. What is the Way in Daoist interpretation?
2. How does Daoism portray the relationship between people and nature? Why is harmony between man and nature important?
3. What is the Daoist view of "good order"?
4. What kind of people in China's classical society were likely to be attracted by Daoist thinking?

Copyright © 1995 - 2009, Pearson Education, Inc., publishing as Pearson Longman
Legal and Privacy Terms, Pearson Education