

# 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.*

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## 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?"

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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."

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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."

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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.

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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?"

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## Glossary

### **Filial Piety**

Dutiful respect for parents.

### **Propriety**

Conformity to proper behavior or manners.

### **Utensil**

An instrument or tool that serves a useful purpose.



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