

Confucius

Confucius is one of the most remarkable persons on this earth, a free thinker invoking past wisdom, a radical individualist promoting the harmonious community, and a great Philosopher transforming one of the largest country in the world, China, based on the power of virtue. His teachings have been recognizing as profound expressions of human spirit and emphasizing on the universal law of life that have drawn both personal and national endeavors to follow his path for over twenty-five hundred years.¹ In order to understand why his philosophy has a great impact on Chinese society for many centuries, I am going to discuss generally his ethical guidelines.

Confucius was born in 551 BCE, and he was the descendant of Hwang-ti (whose reign cycle was around 2637 BCE) or that of the Chou dynasty (1121 BCE). His father, Shuh-liang Heih of the Kung family (a famous officer in charge of the district of Tsow in the State of Lu), has had the first wife with nine daughters and one cripple son and a second wife (Ching-tsai of the Yen family), who bore him a son, Confucius. Three years after the birth of Confucius, his father passed way. Confucius married at the age of nineteen according to Chinese custom and accepted a job as a public keeper of the stores and later as a superintendent of parks and herds. At the age of twenty-two, he began his teaching career by educating an industrious group of students the classical, ethical, and administrative instructions. The founder of Taoism, Lao-Tszu his contemporary, has had several encounters with him around 517 BCE. Up to the age of fifty-two, he was not much in public life. Afterward, he was appointed as a minister of justice for the Duke of Lu. However, because the Duke accepted a female dancer and the horses and looked

¹ James Vollbracht, *The Way of Virtue: an ancient remedy to heal the modern soul* (Atlanta, GA: Humanics Limited, 1998), 5.

down upon him, at the age of fifty-six he withdrew and wandered among the various warring states, giving instruction as requested. Thirteen years afterward, he returned to Lu. In 482 BCE, he lost his only son; in 481 BCE, his favor student, Yen Hwuy, passed away; in 478 BCE another of his favor student, Tsze-lu, died. He died in 478 BCE at the age of seventy-two and was buried at the Kung cemetery outside the gate of Kih-fow, where most of his descendants still live. During his lifetime, there were about three thousand students in which seventy or eighty of them were his beloved ones.² It is said that he actual wrote the book *Chun Chin* (Spring and Autumn, which emphasizes on all ethical, social, and religious subjects) in his seventy-two year, and he had edited several ancient literary, scholastic, and ethical books such as the *Yi King* (Book of Change), *Hsiao King* (Book of Filial Piety), *Shu King* (Book of History), *Shi King* or *The Odes* (Book of Poetry), and *Li Ki* (Book of Ceremonies). After his death, his disciples compiled the collections of his conversations with them in the book *Lun Yu* (The Analect), the *Ta-hio* (Great Learning) written by Tsang-Sin (his disciple), *Chung-Yung* (Doctrine of the Mean) written by Kung-Keih (his grand son), and the Works of Mencius written by Mencius.³ In this paper, I am going to write about his philosophical and practical aspects of personal privileges of men and women, Self-development including self-control, the Will, courage, calmness and firmness, righteousness, humility, human-relationship including the rules of propriety, propriety of demeanor, propriety of deportment, propriety of speech, propriety of conduct, propriety of example, and sexual propriety.

² Miles Menander Dawson, *The Conduct of Life: The Ethics of Confucius* (New York, NY: Carlton House, 1915), xvii-xviii.

³ Brian Brown and Ly Yu Sang, *Story of Confucius: His life and Sayings* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC., 2003), 27.

According to the *Li Ki* (Book of Ceremonies), when children were able to eat by themselves, the parents should teach them to use right hand. When they were able to speak, the boys were taught to response boldly, whereas the girls should be submissively low. The boys were fitted with a girdle of leather; girls were suitable with one of silk. At the age of six, they were taught with numbers and the names of the cardinal points. At the age of seven, boys and girls neither sit in the same mat, nor eat on the same table. At the age of eight, they were required to follow their elders to learn. At the age of ten, boys went to learn different classes of characters and calculation from outside teachers and stayed with them even overnight as well as how to behavior properly; they would be tested in reading the tables and in the forms of polite conversation; neither they wore their jacket nor trousers of silk. Femininely, at the age of ten, the girls ceased to go out from the women's apartments. Their parents taught them the arts of pleasing speech and manners, to be obedient, to handle hempen fibers, to deal with the cocoons, to weave silks and form fillets, to learn all woman's work, to know how to furnish garments, to watch the sacrifices, to supply the liquors and sauces, and to fill the various stands and dishes, and others.

Masculinely, at the age of thirteen, the boys learned music and to repeat the odes. When they were young adult, they studied archery and chariot driving. At the age of twenty, they were capped, first learned the different classes of ceremonies, and were not qualify to teach others. At the age of thirty, they got marry and began to attend to the business of a proper man, learned without limited subjects, and socialized with friends respectfully. At forty, they might become officers; then they either affixed with their positions or abandoned them if they were unsuitable for their needs. At the age of fifty,

they might be appointed as the Great officers and worked diligently. At the age of seventy, they might retire from their positions and duties.

Femininely, at the age of fifteen, the girls assumed the hair-pin. At the age of twenty to twenty-three, they got marry after the engaged rites to become the wives. Otherwise, they might become concubines.⁴

Generally, we can see that men have more authorities and opportunities than that of women in the patriarchy society. Specifically, in China for thousand years, men could go out to study, take official position, and do business. On the other hand, women were prohibited from doing or having those privileges. Historically, only male members were given access to the cultural prerequisites for personal realization.⁵

In Self-development, self-control is an important element; because without the ability to control oneself, there is no way to bring benefit for ourselves and others. Confucius urged his disciples to exercise their self-control through the development of virtue: “A gentleman would be ashamed should his deeds not match his words.”⁶ Namely, his actions should be accorded with his words. Also, a higher quality of self-control of a gentleman that even he might not be able to conduct himself: “A gentleman abides by three principles which I am unable to follow: his humanity knows no anxiety; his wisdom knows no hesitation; and his courage knows no fear.”⁷ Namely, because his deed, speech, and thought are accorded with humanity, he does not have any anxiety; with a bright wisdom of distinguishing the right and wrong conducts, he has no hesitation in doing

⁴ James Legge, *The Sacred Books of the East: The Texts of Confucianism*, Vol. 27, ed. by F. Max Muller (Delhi, India: Motilal Banaridas, 1992), 476-479.

⁵ Chengyang Li, *The Sage and the second sex: Confucianism, ethics, and gender* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 2000), 84.

⁶ Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and notes (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

things; with a clear mind of doing good deeds, he does not have any fear. “A righteous man, who attached to humanity, does not seek life at the expense of his humanity; there are instance where he will give his life in order to fulfill his humanity.”⁸ That is, he abides in humanity with all costs. Here, Confucius’s humanity or humaneness is always related to what humans can become, and humaneness is considered the essential qualification of a virtuous or superior man.⁹ “A gentleman makes demands on himself; a vulgar man makes demands on others.”¹⁰ Explicitly, he should demand on himself for doing things, not from others. “A gentleman must guard himself against three dangers. When young, as the energy of blood is still in turmoil, he should guard against lust. In his maturity, as the energy of the blood is at its full, he should guard against rage. In old age, as the energy of the blood is on the wane, he should guard against rapacity.”¹¹ Specifically, when he is still young immaturely, he should control his lust of materials, passions, and others. When he is mature, he should control his anger patiently, because of the unstable, unpredictable, and changeable life. During the old age, he should control his selfishness and greediness, because of the desire of prolonging the life, protecting oneself, and others. “A gentleman takes care of nine circumstances: when looking, to see clearly; when listening, to hear distinctly; in his expression, to be amiable; in his attitude, to be deferential; in his speech, to be loyal; when on duty, to be respectful; when in doubt, to question; when angry, to ponder the consequences; and when gaining an advantage, to consider if it is fair.”¹² That is, he should see and hear with his vigilances; he should

⁸ Leys, 75.

⁹ Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 214.

¹⁰ Leys, 77.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

express his kindness toward other; his attitude towards others should be courteous; his words should be faithful and trustworthy; he may bring up question if he still has some doubts; if he is annoyed, he should contemplate the consequences (of having angry voice or action), because he may not be able to control his deed and speech while being raged; if he gains the advantage, he should see whether it is fair for him and others or not; otherwise, other people may be disappointed because of their lost (and your gain).¹³

Concerning about the Will, Confucius said: “Set your heart upon the Way.”¹⁴ Namely, people must put their will wholeheartedly on the path of righteousness. That kind of Will should be firmly established, as he said: “The commander of the forces of a large state may be carried off, but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him.”¹⁵ Namely, regardless of the situation, even the common man should be firmed with his Will. “If the will be set on virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness.”¹⁶ Namely, if one sets his will with virtue of trustfulness, genuineness, and industriousness one would not commit any crime. Basically, the will is doing good deed and restraining of evil deed, as he has seen people doing: “Thirst for goodness; recoil from evil: I have heard this saying, and I have seen it practiced.”¹⁷

Having self-control, set the Will according to virtue, goodness, and others, one should have courage to follow; otherwise, the Will would be impractical. Hence, he puts: “To see what is right and not to do it, is want of courage.”¹⁸ Namely, if one recognizes what is right, one should process to do without any hesitation. “A good man is always

¹³ Leys, 83.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Dawson, 49.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48-49. Here, virtue is defined as an inquiring with earnestness and inwardly making application (Brown, 25).

¹⁷ Leys, 83.

¹⁸ Dawson, 54.

brave; a brave man is not always good.”¹⁹ Namely, with a proper conduct, a good man is always brave without any fear because of his faultlessness. Conversely, a brave man may not always be good, because he may be influenced by desire, anger, and other emotion to stimulus his courage. In addition, if one makes mistakes, one should have courage to admit and correct them. “When a gentleman commits a fault, he is not afraid to amend his ways.”²⁰ If one recognizes one’s mistake, one should not commit it again: “If anything that he did was not good, he was sure to become conscious of it; and when he knew it, he did not do the thing again.”²¹ And he courageously rejoiced when other found his mistakes: “I am fortune indeed: whenever I make a mistake, there is always someone to notice it.”²²

Having self-control, the Will and the courage to do good deeds and to avoid bad deed, one should do so with calmness and firmness: “The influence of the world makes no change in him; he would do nothing merely to secure fame. He can live withdraw from the world without regret; he can experience disapproval without a trouble mind. He is not to be torn from his root.”²³ Namely, with calmness and firmness in the proper way, one would not be torn or changed by worldly influences regardless the situations because of his pure mind parting from regret, seeking fame, and others. “The superior man composes himself before trying to move others; make his mind at rest and easy before he opens his mouth; determine upon his method of communicating with others before he seeks anything of them.”²⁴ Namely, he should change himself before requiring others to

¹⁹ Leys, 66.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

²¹ Dawson, 55.

²² Leys, 33.

²³ Dawson, 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 59.

change; he should feel at ease with his mind before starting the conversation; and he should find the way how to communicate with others before working with them. “A gentleman’s ability cannot be seen in small matters; yet he can be entrusted with the great task. A vulgar man cannot be entrusted with great tasks, but his ability can be seen in small matters.”²⁵ That is, a gentleman can take care of a great matter, whereas a vulgar man can only handle the small matters.

Having self-control, the Will, courage, and calmness, one should abide in righteousness in thought, deed, and speech. Here, Confucius pointed out that only superior man concerns about the righteousness: “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the ordinary man is conversant with gain.”²⁶ “Man is born for uprightness. If a man loses his uprightness and yet he still lives, his escape is the result of mere good fortune.”²⁷ Namely, people should act with uprightness because they were born with it; to live without performing it, it is a sort of good luck for them. In the *Book of Li Ki*, he spelled out ten essential right-livings or conducts for everyone: kindness in father; filial piety in a son; gentleness in an elder brother; obedience in a younger; righteousness in a husband; submission in a wife; kindness in elders; deference in juniors; benevolence in a ruler; and loyalty in a minister.²⁸ To enhance the righteousness, one should practice the sincerity: “Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles.”²⁹ Namely, without sincerity, one may not be successful in education, profession, and others. “There is the love of being sincere without the love of

²⁵ Dawson, 61.

²⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁸ Ibid., 73.

²⁹ Ibid., 77.

learning.”³⁰ Namely, as long as one is sincere in life, people would love him. To the youth, he reminded: “He should be earnest and truthful.” To the superior man, he mentioned: “He who aims at complete virtue is earnest in what he is doing and careful in his speech.”³¹ Namely, he reminded the young and old to be sincere and earnest.

Next, humility may help one walking on the righteous path: “Do not worry if you are without position; worry lest you do not deserve a position. Do not worry if you are not famous; worry lest you do not deserve to be famous.”³² Namely, one should concern only whether one is qualified to have a position or being famous. In the *Shu King*, he said: “He who says that others are not equal to him, comes to ruin.”³³ Namely, if one is arrogance towards others, one would cause the animosity with them. As a result, one may find many enemies who may harm or obstruct him. “Indulging the consciousness of being good is the way to lose that goodness.”³⁴ Namely, if one is arrogance towards others, one would lose his advantage and goodness.

Having set the guidelines for self-developments, Confucius walked a further step to provide general instructions for human relations to create a harmonious society. Initially, building connection between social responsibilities and individual characters is the rule of propriety, especially for the superior man: “Let the superior man never fail reverentially to order his own conduct; and let him be respectful to others and observant of propriety. Then all within the four seas will be his brothers.”³⁵ Namely, because of his

³⁰ Dawson, 78.

³¹ Ibid., 79.

³² Leys, 16.

³³ Dawson, 81.

³⁴ Ibid., 81.

³⁵ Ibid., 98. Superior man sees the Way as important and gives little thought to food. He studies hard in seeking for the Way, and he does not feel disturbed about his poverty (Lifu Chen, *The Confucian way: a new and systematic study of “The Four Books”* (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul Plc., 1986), 256).

responsibility, the superior man should control his conduct, respect his fellows, and observe the propriety, which is the underlying syntax of community, including everything from etiquette to social roles and institutions to the rites of life and death.³⁶ Without propriety, father and son might have the same mate as that of the beasts.³⁷ Also, the functions of propriety are to establish individual character. They remove from a man all perversity and increase what is beautiful in his nature.³⁸ To accord with propriety, a superior man should perform his responsibilities, in well and honor status, in poor and low positions, and in sorrow and difficult situation properly. In high position, he should not abuse his inferiors; in low position, he should not court for his favor. He rectifies himself and seeks nothing from other so that he has no dissatisfaction.³⁹

Having set the rules of propriety, Confucius laid out the propriety of demeanor. “If the heart be for a moment without the feeling of harmony and joy, meanness and deceitfulness enter it.”⁴⁰ Namely, a moment without a feeling of harmony and joy may let the thoughts of deceitfulness and unkindness arising. “Looking at from a distance, he appears stern; when approaching, he is mild; when listening to his speech, his language is firmed and decided.”⁴¹ Namely, according to Confucius, a superior man’s demeanors are stern, firm, and decisive in his action and speech.

Having set the propriety of demeanor, Confucius reminded people to follow the propriety of deportment: “Do not listen with head inclined on one side nor answer with a

³⁶ Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Index*, Vol. 10 (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998), 320. Propriety leads to “proper” conduct in one’s relationships by at once reinforcing traditionally appropriate norms while at the same time insisting that they be internalized and “made one’s own” (Craig, 320).

³⁷ Dawson, 99.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

loud, sharp voice, nor look with a dissolute leer, nor keep the body in a slouching position. Do not saunter about with a haughty gait nor stand with one foot raised. Do not sit with your knees wide apart nor lie face down.”⁴² Namely, a superior man’s manners should be upright and proper. “In all cases, looks directed up into the face denote pride, below the griddle grief, askance villainy.” Namely, one may recognize others’ mentalities by observing how they look at others. If they look directly to others’ face, they carry their pride; if they look down on the ground; it shows their grief; if they look sideways, it shows their suspicious. In the relationship between father and son, he said: “I have also heard that the superior man maintains a distant reserve towards his son.”⁴³ Namely, father should keep a fairly distance to his sons in order to teach and gain the respect from them. In building a friendship, one should base on virtue and keep it without discrimination of age, status, or family background: “Friendship should be maintained without condescension on the ground of age, station, or family. Friendship with a man is friendship with his virtue and does not admit of assumptions of superiority.” Also, he suggested people to associate with the proper friends and stay away from the deviant ones: “Three sorts of friends are beneficial; three sorts of friends are harmful. Friendship with the straight, the trustworthy, and the learned is beneficial. Friendship with the devious, the obsequious, and the glib is harmful.”⁴⁴

Having set the propriety of deportment, he provided the propriety of speech: “A flaw in a mace of white jade may be ground away, but a word spoken amiss cannot be mended.”⁴⁵ Namely, one may mend a broken jade, but one may not mend a wrong word

⁴² Dawson, 109.

⁴³ Ibid., 112.

⁴⁴ Leys, 82.

⁴⁵ Dawson, 114.

after it has been spoken. Hence, one should be careful with one's words, because they are people's characters: "Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men."⁴⁶ One should choose his words carefully because they may contain their virtuous character. "Specious words confound virtue."⁴⁷ Even if one speaks smartly but lack of modesty, one may generate the animosity towards others, non-beneficially. "They who meet men with smartness of speech, for the most part, procure themselves hatred. And he who speaks without modesty, will find it hard to make his words good."⁴⁸ He advised people to prevent three mistakes when talking with a gentleman: "When waiting upon a gentleman, one should avoid three mistakes. To speak before having been invited to do so; this is rashness. Not to speak when invited to do so; this is secretiveness. To speak without observing the gentleman's expression; this is blindness."⁴⁹

Having set the propriety of speech, he leaded people to establish the propriety of conduct: "What I do not wish men to do to me, I also wish not to do to men."⁵⁰ He also spelled out the commonsense of conduct that if people do not like whichever their superior, junior, employer, employee, others in their front and in their back, and others on their left and on their right, were doing, they should not imitate them to do so to others. Namely, this is a golden rule throughout time. "Men of talents and virtue can be familiar with others and yet respect them; they can stand in awe of others and yet love them. They can love others and yet recognize the evil that is in them."⁵¹ Namely, the virtuous people know, understand, and love others without condemning their mistakes. "To evoke love,

⁴⁶ Dawson, 115.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁴⁹ Leys, 82.

⁵⁰ Dawson, 120.

⁵¹ Ibid., 123.

one must love; to evoke respect, one must respect.”⁵² Namely, if one wants the love and respect from others, one should generate them to others as well.

Having set the propriety of conduct, he set the propriety of example: “Virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it, will have neighbor.”⁵³ Namely, one should apply one’s virtuous conducts in daily life in order to gain friends and supports.

After the propriety of example, Confucius emphasized on the sexual propriety; because he recognized that human morality can entail the suppression of their animalistic desires; explicitly, the process of self-transformation could initiate only after people know how to regular their sexual drives, even the masculine and feminine traits form complementary characteristics that together suggest the range of possibilities for self-cultivation.⁵⁴⁵⁵ Hence, to prevent sexual mishap, he mentioned: “Males and females should not sit on the same mat, nor have the same stand or rack for their clothes, nor use the same towel or comb, nor let their hands touch in giving and receiving. They should not share the same mat in lying down; they should not ask or receive anything from one another; and they should not wear upper or lower garments alike”⁵⁶ Namely, males and females should not have any physical and visible contacts, except after their marriage, because disorder would arise and grow if there is no distinctive observation between male and female.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, although male and female are separate and apart, they seek the same objects of common will as same as the separation and harmony between the heaven and earth.⁵⁸ He said further: “The scholar keeps himself free from all stain.”⁵⁹

⁵² Dawson, 125.

⁵³ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁴ Li, 145.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁶ Dawson, 133, 134.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 133.

Here, he referred to the stain of sexual misconduct that scholar should try to avoid. He added further: “The love of virtue should balance the love of beauty. Men of position should not be like anglers for beauty in those below them. The superior man withstands the allurements of beauty to give an example to the people”⁶⁰ Here, he advised people to balances between the love of virtue and beauty, especially those who have positions in society.

In conclusion, to establish the social order and harmony, Confucius provided the basic philosophical and practical aspects of personal privileges for men and women, Self-development including self-control, the Will, courage, calmness and firmness, righteousness, humility, and human-relationship including the rules of propriety, propriety of demeanor, propriety of deportment, propriety of speech, propriety of conduct, propriety of example, and sexual propriety. Since there is space limited, I cannot discuss about the Confucian relationship of people within their family circle, the link between people and the state and their responsibilities, the cultivation of the fine arts, and universal relations.

⁵⁹ Dawson, 131.

⁶⁰ Dawson, 134.

Bibliography

- Brian Brown and Ly Yu Sang, *Story of Confucius: His life and Sayings*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC., 2003.
- Chen, Lifu. *The Confucian way: a new and systematic study of "The Four Books."* London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul Plc., 1986.
- Craig, Edward. *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Index*, Vol. 10. New York, NY: Routledge, 1998.
- Dawson, Miles. *The Conduct of Life: The Ethics of Confucius*. New York, NY: Carlton House, 1915.
- Legge, James. *The Sacred Books of the East: The Texts of Confucianism*, Vol. 27, ed. by F. Max Muller. Delhi, Indian: Motilal Banaridas, 1992.
- Leys, Simon. *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. and notes. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997.
- Li, Chengyang. *The Sage and the second sex: Confucianism, ethics, and gender*. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Co., 2000.
- Vollbracht, James. *The Way of Virtue: an ancient remedy to heal the modern soul*. Atlanta, GA: Humanics Limited, 1998.
- Yao, Xinzhong. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000.