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Confucian Philosophy and its Relevance in Modern Day

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Abstract

Among the great thinkers of Ancient China, Confucius was one of the most renowned teacher followed by people of that country since ancient times. His thoughts on moral principles, criteria and quality of a good leader through proper education, character of good teacher and ways of successful teaching, formation of good government and social development of a pupil through uprightness, continue to inspire modern thoughts in social, political and educational scenario.

Introduction: China has a complete set of comprehensive and profound classical philosophies. As China's mainstream ideology, Confucianism represented by Confucius and Mencius, Taoism represented by Lao Zi and Zhuangzi, and the Buddhist philosophy merged into the Chinese culture, and exerted the most significant influence upon the Chinese nation in the progress of its long history.¹

Confucian Philosophy: The aim of Confucius was the establishment of a new order in society by straightening out the ideas and habits of leaders and common people on the fundamentals of character-building, social obligations, and decent government. As Hu Shih has described it:- "The age of Confucius. . . was an age of political disintegration, social unrest, and intellectual anarchy. Above all, it was an age of moral- disorder. . . . It was natural at the central problem of Confucius should be the reform of *society*. . He was in quest of the *Tao*, of the way of ordering the world."

Confucius felt the dire necessity therefore, of bringing order out of chaos by teaching monarchs to take their responsibilities seriously and by instilling into common people the principles of sane human living. He believed the quickest way was to work from the top down, by correcting the mind and heart of the emperor and all his nobles, until they recognized the principle of *noblesse oblige* and made it their aim to become exemplars for their people.

The body of thought that has the most enduring effect on subsequent Chinese life was that of the School of Literati, often called the Confucian school in the west. "Confucius (551-479 B.C) laid down a pattern of thinking followed by more people for more generations than any other human being on earth". Confucius had an overwhelming message; if we are to achieve a state of orderliness and peace, we need to return to traditional values of virtue. These values are based entirely on one concept: *jen*, which is best translated as "humaneness," but can also mean "humanity," "benevolence," "goodness," or "virtue". Confucius believed that the human order in some way

¹ www.ChinaHotSchools.com, 2005

reflected the divine order, or the patterns of heaven. More than anything, according to Confucius, the ancients understood the order and hierarchy of heaven and earth; as a result, Confucius established the Chinese past as an infallible model for the present. What is incumbent on individual people is to determine the right pattern to live and govern by; this can be achieved by studying the sage-kings and their mode of life and government and by following rituals scrupulously, and understanding and practicing the order of traditional and solemn music and dance.

The Confucian Virtues: If good qualities are to be practiced by everybody, there must be a code of good manners, or *Li*, to include not only the rules of personal courtesy but all the best social and governmental usages. As a standard for his theory and a pattern for his practice, Confucius confessedly took the customs and manners of the Kingdom of Chou, in the honest belief that they represented the best culture of the age. In his own personal life, he sought to exemplify those qualities that he so persistently built into his teachings on ethical character as the foundation of all true living. Selecting the greater virtues of the ideal person, delineated for his pupils a pattern of personality which they could follow if they would.

1. Uprightness (Chih): Confucius insisted that first of all a man must be upright, deceiving neither himself for his neighbors.

2. Benevolence (Jen): Another quality to which Confucius most often referred was that of *jen*, "It is to love your fellow men.".... (or) "*Jen* is the denial of self and response to the right and proper (*Li*)~Then there are the oft-quoted lines:

"When abroad, behave as if interviewing an honored guest; in directing the people, act as if officiating at a great sacrifice; do not do to others what you do not like yourself. Then neither in your state nor in your private home will there be any resentment against you." The Great Sage is also quoted as saying:

"For the man of *jen* is one who desiring to maintain himself sustains others, and desiring to develop himself develops others. To be able from one's own self to draw a parallel for the treatment of others: that may be called the way to practice *jen*."

3. Conscientiousness (Chung) and Altruism (Shu): This inclusion of loyalty to and concern for others in the concept of *jen* led Fung Yu-Ian to make the comment: "This is why *jen* is the 'all-pervading principle' of Confucius' teaching, and the center of his philosophy."

4. Righteousness (I or Yi): One more of the personal character-qualities which Confucius emphasized was that of *yi*, or righteousness. He believed in doing a thing because it was right, regardless of consequences. He never calculated the results of a particular action. One of his pupils is quoted as saying: "The reason why the Superior Man tries to go into office is that he holds this to be right, even though he is well aware that his principles cannot prevail." Of Confucius himself it was said, "Is he not the one who knows he cannot succeed and keeps on trying to do so?" . . . "The Master seldom spoke of what was 'profitable.'" Occasionally, however, he would say: The Superior Man is informed in what is right. The inferior man is informed in what is profitable (to himself)." Righteousness for righteousness' sake was strongly advocated by Confucius and Mencius alike. It formed the basis of their opposition to the utilitarianism of Mo Tzu, in its personal aspect more especially, although both the Confucian and Mohist Schools approved of what was profitable for the people as a whole.

5. Filial Piety (Hsiao): It was concretely expressed in the Five Relationships:

- (1) Subject to Emperor, or citizen to magistrate
- (2) Son to Father, or daughter to mother
- (3) Younger to Elder Brother, or sister to sister

- (4) Younger to Older Friend
- (5) Wife to Husband

The list could be lengthened, for example, to include the guest-host relationship. The second relationship mentioned above-of children to parents-received extraordinary emphasis in Chinese society.

Human Nature and the Cosmic Order: In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, (Chung-Yung), human nature is the starting point of Confucius' philosophizing. As he looked into his own and other men's minds, he found a basic moral law operating, from which no man could escape. Moreover, when he looked outward, he discovered the same moral order controlling the universe and made the natural deduction that when there is harmony within the central self, human beings are moving in the orbit of cosmic or universal harmony. This law of harmony he tried to express in the words peace, truth, integrity, as the essence of the law of man's moral being. It was susceptible of cultivation but never fully realized.

In his rendering of *The Wisdom of Confucius* into modern English, Lin Yutang has recaptured the quintessence of wisdom in Confucius' reflections on the meaning of life as crystallized in words either from his own pen or from those of his disciples.

True Manhood and the Social Order: Having established the cosmic Quality of human nature, the Confucian philosophy moved on to develop the theme that being true to is own inner self, man will naturally exhibit those qualities of true greatness on which the social order depends for stability." In the *Chung Yung* we read:

"Truth means the fulfillment of our self; and moral law means following the law of our being. . . . Only those who are absolutely their true selves in this world can have pervading influence. . . . Being true to oneself is the law of God." The ideal man, who follows the 'golden mean,' will show no pride of self or position, will be neither wily nor garrulous; neither will he worry over material things. . . . "The Superior Man attends to the spiritual things and not to his livelihood." . . . "Do not worry about people not knowing your ability, but worry that you have not got it." . . . "A glib talker with an ingratiating appearance is seldom a gentleman."

"Humility is near to moral discipline; loyalty (to others) is near to sincerity of heart; simplicity of character is real to true manhood."

Government by Moral Example: Always, for Confucius, the objective in his training of young men was ability to govern wisely because society and government rested upon the five relationships: ruler-subject; father-son; husband-wife; elder and younger brother, and friend-to-friend, every potential ruler must learn the obligations implicit in those relationships, In a word, harmony in each relationship is to be established and all is to be maintained only by moral example. A ruler must be made especially aware of the fact that his people will emulate his example. In one of his aphorisms, Confucius insisted: "When the ruler himself does what is right, he will have influence over the people without giving commands, and when the ruler himself does not do what is right, all his commands will be of no avail. Or again, in the *Chung Yung* we find him saying: "Through sincerity and faithfulness, he (the sovereign) maintains his rule, and through pride and self-indulgent living he loses it."

Education: the Prime Necessity: Inasmuch as good government implied the acquiring of true knowledge through the investigation of things, Confucius saw the urgent necessity of education and set himself the task of providing it for those who were 'born to rule,' The first requirement was a

quiet place in which to study, The true man, he felt, must first have a definite purpose, calmness of mind, and 'peaceful repose,' "Only after having peaceful repose can one begin to think," he reasoned, "Only after "one has learned to think, can one achieve knowledge"

(a) A Few General Principles

- The need for education and its general principles are expounded in the *Book of Rites (Li Cthi)* in such passages as the following:
- "The only way for the superior man to civilize the people and establish good social customs is through education. A piece of jade cannot become an object of art without chiselling, and a man cannot come to know the moral law without education,"
- "Reading without thinking gives one a disorderly mind, and thinking without reading makes one flighty (or unbalanced)."
- . . . "Therefore, in the education of the superior man....one is given time to digest things, to cultivate things, to rest and to play."
- In other words, a student must learn to think things out for himself.
- "To know what you know and know what you don't know is the characteristic of one who knows."
- But the learning process will depend very much on the spirit and method of the teaching. All important is it, then, that pupils have a wise teacher and that a harmonious personal relationship be established between them. Only thus can they "feel at home at college," "acquire conviction in ideas," and "leave their teachers without turning their backs on their studies,"

(b) The Ideal Teacher: The worthy teacher is one "who goes over what he has already learned and gains some new understanding from it." He is ever a learner dissatisfied with his own knowledge. Through teaching he comes to realize his inadequacy and "one then feels stimulated to improve oneself. Therefore, it is said, 'The process of teaching and learning stimulate each other.... Teaching is the half of learning.'

The ideal teacher uses four good methods: "prevention" (of bad habits); timely presentation; orderly sequence; "mutual stimulation. . ." (by) "letting students admire the excellence of other students. . ." "A good questioner proceeds like a man chopping wood-he begins at the easier end, attacking the knots last, and after a time the teacher and student come to understand the point with a sense of pleasure,"

Confucius criticized the education of his day as not giving students enough chance to develop their own "natural inclinations" and thereby "bring out the best in their talents," He urged the superior teacher, therefore, to guide his students but not pull them along, urge them to go forward and not suppress them, open the way but not take them to the place. He cautioned against "that type of scholarship which is bent on remembering things in order to answer questions (but) does not qualify one to be a teacher. When he sees a student is doing his best but is lost, then he explains it to him, and if after the explanation, the student still does not understand, he may as well leave the matter alone," "Now if the process of learning is made gentle and easy and the students are encouraged to think for themselves, we may call the man a good teacher."

(c) The Core of Education is Li or Harmony: "Education," declared Confucius 'begins with poetry, is strengthened through proper conduct (*li*) and consummated through music." *Li* is the expression in personal attitudes and behavior of the same harmony that flows through all Nature

(Heaven and Earth). Yutse is quoted as saying: "Among the functions of *li*, the most valuable is that it establishes a sense of harmony.

Conclusion: As we go through the thoughts of the great thinker Confucius we find them very much relevant today in educational, moral, social as well as administrative level. Chinese educational system also finds some ancient theories of education of Confucius important in the present day. Some aspects of the work of Confucius and Mencius still influence the teaching methods used in China today, and some of their educational principles continue to inspire modern thoughts. As per the observations of some Chinese writers, Confucius is a philosopher rather than an educator. He believed in educational equality and found the first old-style private school. With the spread of his philosophy thoughts, his ideas on education were widely accepted. For two millennia, the appeal of Confucius and Mencius to 'cultivate the nobility of the soul' has met with an extraordinary response, giving many people the courage to 'accomplish one's duty, at the risk of one's life'. They advocated a number of extremely sound educational approaches, such as setting strict criteria and encouraging personal initiative, which bore fruit in the rigorous standards of Chinese education after them. The educational tradition of which Confucius and Mencius are the two great pillars is thus being perpetuated in China and with discernment and along new lines, as part of the modernization process now under way.²

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² Mencius (372-289 B.C.) *GeZhengming*
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