

CONFUSIANISM

Confucianism—Rituals and Relationships

Lecture 9

Two most important indigenous traditions from China are Confucianism and Daoism. In *The Analects of Confucius*, a passage reads, "Confucius would not sit unless his mat was straight." Why does one of the most influential books ever written, a book that articulated a worldview that transformed all of East Asia, concern itself with how Confucius sat? If we understand that, we get an important clue to understanding Chinese—and all of East Asian—culture.

Confucius and the *Analects*

- Many scholars agree that the strongest force shaping East Asian culture is still Confucianism, and therefore one must understand Confucian values in order to understand East Asia. To do this, we must start with this little book, *The Analects of Confucius*, written by disciples recalling the master's words and conversations, and consider how it shaped the Chinese imperial bureaucracy.
- Confucius's surname was Kong, and his given name was Qiu. He was given the honorific title Master, which is Fuzi in Chinese. So he was known as Kong Fuzi, or the shorter form, Kongzi. When Jesuits were translating Chinese names, they Romanized Kong Fuzi as Confucius. Confucius is most commonly used in the West, but Kongzi is more accurate.
- Confucius was born in 551 B.C.E. in the state of Lu, the modern Chinese Shandong province. He lived during a time of great chaos. Rulers of different states fought each other for supremacy, often raising large armies capable of tremendous brutality. The rulers invited philosophers from different schools to hear the best ideas of the day and select advisors.
- Confucius and many of his rivals would journey around China trying to persuade rulers to hire them or implement their ideas.

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Along the way, Confucius gathered many disciples. His willingness to accept anyone who wanted to learn and his broad-based approach to education were innovations. He is revered for virtually creating the role of teacher, and Confucius's birthday is celebrated as Teacher's Day in Taiwan.

- The *Analects* is considered a foundational text for a major religious tradition in that, unlike the texts that we have seen in Hinduism and Buddhism, was concerned more than anything else about our life on this earth. This does not mean that Confucius never talked about death, but the concern is solely on how death impacts us in this life.
- In the time of chaos in which he lived, there were many approaches to restoring order and social harmony. Confucius believed there was a time during the reign of the great sage-kings when there was perfect order in society. If we can restore the practices and values of that golden age, we can bring back a harmonious, flourishing society. Confucius looked for answers in history, and a reverence for the past is a central feature of Confucian thought.
- For this reason, the lessons of history must be learned, and learning is one of the most important practices in Confucian thought. Confucius emphasized learning and study rather than introspection and intuition.

The Plan of Study and Social Order

- Confucius developed a program that focused on the five classics, which included a book of odes, a book focused on ritual practices, two books of history, and the Yi Jing. Studying these texts was important for two reasons: It was a central component of the path to self-cultivation, and it gave people a body of common knowledge, therefore unifying China through a common cultural inheritance.
- Ultimately, learning was a way to develop one's character with the ultimate goal of becoming a cultivated person and, if possible, a sage. Along with learning from the classics, there is another key component to the Confucian self-cultivation program—ritual (li).

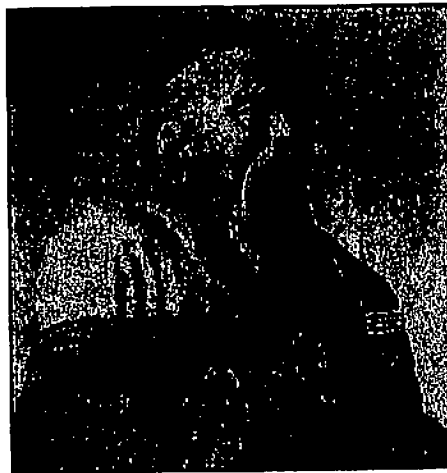
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People who had internalized the li would be able to navigate every possible situation.

- In a deep sense, ritualization is necessary for becoming fully human and living among others in society. Ritual both cultivates and expresses the right attitudes and feelings. Ritual also brings people together in communities. When someone violates the ritual, there are ritualized ways of letting a person know.
- Confucius saw ritual and virtue as superior to law. In healthy communities, day-to-day order is kept through ritual, and conflicts are adjudicated through ritual. By the time people invoke law and punishment, there has already been a breakdown in order. In other words, if people have internalized the proper attitudes, there is no need for legal remedies and threats of punishment to keep them in line.
- Now we are in a position to see why the *Analects* contains the passage: "Confucius would not sit unless his mat was straight." For the Confucian, everything people do says something about their character. Doing those things the proper way throughout one's life is a way to cultivate the proper character.

Virtues in Confucian Culture

- Over time, through learning and ritual, as well as aesthetic practices such as music and dance, a person cultivates virtues. Confucians, like classical Greeks, focus on virtues, and as one cultivates



Confucius was, above all, a teacher of ethics, ritual, and law.

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virtues, Confucians believe one develops a certain kind of moral power, including the ability to influence others. They called this *de*, a word for virtue that also has the meaning of power. For Confucians, it is a kind of moral charisma. This is the quality that good rulers need to possess.

- What virtues were important for Confucius? One of the key virtues is *xiao*, filial piety, honoring and properly serving one's parents. Other important virtues are loyalty and reciprocity. But there is one virtue that is the highest virtue: *ren*, which is often translated as "benevolence." In other words, *ren* can be seen as "person-to-person"-ness, the virtue of co-humanity, being a human being among other human beings.
- Ultimately, this is what it is all about: human relationships. Ritual, family, character cultivation—all of these take place within relationships. For Confucians, we are who we are because of whom we have loved, lived with, and learned from. The self is fully relational. A person is best understood as a nexus of relationships.
- For Confucians, to know me is to know these relationships that matter to me and make me who I am. For me to be a good person means learning to be a good son, husband, father, teacher, and so on.

The Key Relationships and Hierarchy

- Confucians emphasized five key relationships: parent-child, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, ruler-subject, and friend-friend. Confucian feminists are working to rid Confucianism of its patriarchy.
- Confucians believe that hierarchy is important to maintain proper order and a healthy society. For Confucians, this is far better than a false egalitarianism that blurs boundaries that should be maintained. This is an important point if one wants to understand East Asian culture. When you are in East Asia, address people formally unless told otherwise.

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Confucians offer us a different understanding of society. There must be a leader, a conductor, who we all follow. And we must have a great score to play from—in the Confucian case, this is provided by the sage-kings of the past. This image is not of a competitive society but rather of a cooperative enterprise.

The Modern Influence of Confucianism

- There have been dramatic political, social, and cultural changes in East Asia, particularly from the 19th century until today. Still, scholars have argued that Confucianism continues to be one of the most important cultural forces in countries like South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Japan.
- One study tried to determine just how Confucian the country of South Korea is. South Koreans care deeply about the cardinal Confucian virtues; they maintain the veneration of ancestors and sages and the importance of the family and tradition. They practice Confucian rituals, such as the extended mourning period for parents and memorial ceremonies. They are deeply Confucian even if they don't self-identify as such.
- The study also found that 97 percent of people indicating "no religion" on the survey were actually Confucian. What is more, 80 percent of Protestants and 77 percent of Buddhists were found to be "Confucianized" Protestants and Buddhists. Since Confucianism is generally tolerant toward other religions, people are able to combine Confucian values and practices with other religious commitments.
- In fact, some scholars say that one must understand Confucianism to understand the way that capitalist economies developed in places like South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan.
- East Asia's Confucian Capitalism featured family-centered companies and strong government guidance in industry; a group orientation that focuses on consensus building and the sharing of responsibilities and rewards; an emphasis on frugality that led to greater savings rather than consumption; a focus on the long-term

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rather than on quarterly profits; and a strong commitment to human capital investment (an educated, skilled work force).

- One of the notable features of mainland China in recent years is the revival of Confucianism in politics and everyday life. Confucianism is being taught in schools, universities, and corporations. One of the most remarkable signs of this revival is the immense popularity of Yu Dan's book *Reflections on the Analects*. In the book, she tries to show that Confucianism can teach us how to live in the modern world.
- Major Chinese political leaders have used Confucian themes and quotations in their speeches. Some commentators theorize that the Chinese government is using Confucianism to promote stability and order on a traditional Chinese basis.
- Confucianism is now a world religion, as it has traveled wherever East Asians have traveled. It is having an increasing impact on the West, as seen in the phenomenon that some call "Boston Confucianism."
- Confucianism can help temper American individualism and foster a greater sense of family and community. America's contribution to Confucianism can include bringing a stronger feminist perspective and placing a greater emphasis on diversity.
- Confucianism sees the sacred in our everyday lives. Tradition, culture, education, the arts, and human relationships—above all, family—are worthy of our reverence. Confucians would say that devoting your time to learning—as you are doing now—is itself a spiritual practice.

Suggested Reading

Bell, *China's New Confucianism*.

Ching, *Chinese Religions*.

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Confucius, *The Analects*.

Confucius and Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*.

De Bary, Bloom, and Lufrano, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*.

Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*.

Hanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*.

Hochim, *Chinese Religions: A Cultural Perspective*.

Malins and Magida, *How to Be a Perfect Stranger*.

Neville, *Boston Confucianism*.

Paper and Thompson, *The Chinese Way in Religion*.

Sharma, *Our Religions*.

Smith, *The World's Religions*.

Thompson, *Chinese Religion*.

Tu, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*.

Van Voorst, *Anthology of World Scriptures*.

Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you think of the approach to life implied by the sentence, "Confucius would not sit unless his mat was straight"?
2. Two of the most important Confucian values are learning and relationships. How important are these to you? Are there values you consider more important? What virtues do you consider most important for a cultivated person to possess?
3. Do you believe, with Confucius, that ritual is a better way to preserve order than law? In what sense is it true that we become fully human by mastering ritual?

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