2.4 Confucius: Analects

To many of us, the words “Confucius say” are the preamble to a witticism, but to billions of Chinese people over thousands of years the sayings of the master have been words of highest wisdom, to be received with respect, if not with reverence. As a result, Confucius has molded the Chinese mind and character in a manner and to an extent that has hardly been equaled by any other single figure in the history of a major civilization.

Although it is difficult to summarize briefly the teachings of Confucius, certain of their basic features are apparent. He was an optimistic moralist; believing people to be fundamentally good, he thought that with proper education and leadership they could realize their potential and achieve the form of life which he described as that of “the superior man.” A social order composed of such individuals, including particularly its political leaders, would constitute the ideal society. Although he also believed that such a society is in harmony with the will of heaven, Confucius, unlike many early social philosophers, did not found his ideal society on principles derived from theology. On the contrary, he is well described as a humanist.

Many of the details of the moral and social ideals of Confucius appear in his Analects, or “Collection” (of sayings). This collection, which is rambling, ill-arranged, and repetitious, contains twenty “Books,” in which, besides the master’s sayings, there can be found descriptions of contemporary Chinese society, excursions into past history, stories about various political leaders, and so on.

Confucius (551–479 B.C.) was born of a poor family that apparently had ancestors of substance. Early in life he decided to become a scholar and teacher. He soon gathered a group of disciples about him and, because he believed that society could be reformed only if those who were properly educated held the reins of government, he sought public office and encouraged his students to do so as well. During his career he held a number of government posts, some of consequence. But practical politicians were suspicious of his lofty ideals and he was finally dismissed, to spend the twilight of his career wandering about China, but still teaching.

Near the end of his life he wrote the following succinct autobiography: “At fifteen, I set my heart on learning. At thirty, I was firmly established. At forty, I had no more doubts. At fifty, I knew the will of Heaven. At sixty, I was ready to listen to it. At seventy, I could follow my heart’s desire without transgressing what was right.”

The moral teachings of the Analects, which Confucius did not actually originate but which he edited and molded to reflect his own ideals, were gathered together, mainly after his death, by his admirers. The selection that follows includes some of his central sayings. These have been rearranged to give them greater coherency, and the topic headings have been added.


ANALECTS

The Master said, “Is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application? Is it not delightful to have friends coming from distant quarters? Is he not a man of complete virtue who feels no discomposure though men may take no note of him?”

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FILIAL PIETY

The Master said, “A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good. When he has time and opportunity, after the performance of these things, he should employ them in polite studies.”
Mang I asked what filial piety was. The Master said, “It is not being disobedient.” Soon after, as Fan Ch’ih was driving him, the Master told him, saying, “Mang’sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him,- “not being disobedient.” Fan Ch’ih 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.”

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.”

**EDUCATION**

The Master said, “If the scholar be not grave, he will not call forth any veneration, and his learning will not be solid.”

The Master said, “If a man keeps cherishing his old knowledge, so as continually to be acquiring new, he may be a teacher of others.”

The Master said, “The accomplished scholar is not a utensil.”

The Master said, “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.”

The Master said, “Yu, shall I teach you what knowledge is? When you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it; this is knowledge.”

The Master said, “They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it.”

The Master said, “The scholar who cherishes the love of comfort is not fit to be deemed a scholar.”

When the Master went to Wei, Zan Yu acted as driver of his carriage. The Master observed, “How numerous are the people!” Yu said, “Since they are so numerous, what more shall be done for them?” “Enrich them,” was the reply. “And when they have been enriched, what more shall be done?” The Master said, “Teach them.”

**GOVERNMENT**

The Master said, “To rule a country of a thousand chariots, there must be reverent attention to business, and sincerity; economy in expenditure, and love for men; and the employment of the people at the proper seasons.”

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 Master said, “If the people be led by laws, and uniformity sought to be given them by punishment, 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.”

Chi K’ang 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.”

Tsze-kung again asked about government. The Master said, “The requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficiency of military equipment, and the confidence of the people in their ruler.” Tszechung said, “If it cannot be helped, and one of these must be dispensed with, which of the three should be foregone first?” “The military equipment,” said the Master. Tsze-kung said, “If it cannot be helped, and one of the remaining two must be dispensed with, which of them should be foregone?” The Master answered, “Part with the food. From of old, death has been the lot of all men; but if the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the State.”

Chi K’ang asked Confucius about government, saying, “What do you say to killing the unprincipled for the good of the principled?” Confucius replied, “Sir, in carrying on your government, why should you use killing at all? Let your evinced desires be for what is good, and the people will be good. The relation between superiors and inferiors is like that between the wind and the grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.”

The Master said, “When a prince’s personal conduct is correct, the government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed.”

Tsze-chang asked Confucius, saying, “In what way should a person in authority act in order that he may conduct government properly?” The Master replied, “Let him honor the five excellent, and banish away the four bad, things; then may he conduct government properly.” Tszechang said, “What are meant by the five excellent things?” The Master said, “When the person in authority is beneficent without great expenditure; when he lays tasks on the people without their repining; when he pursues what he desires without being covetous; when he maintains a dignified ease without being proud; when he is majestic without being fierce.”…
Tsze-chang then asked, “What are meant by the four bad things?” The Master said, “To put the people to death without having instructed them; this is called cruelty. To require from them, suddenly, the full tale of work, without having given them warning; this is called oppression. To issue orders as if without urgency, at first, and, when the time comes, to insist on them with severity; this is called injury. And, generally, in the giving of pay or rewards to men, to do it in a stingy way; this is called acting the part of a mere official.”

**RELIGION**

The Master said, . . . “He who offends against Heaven has none to whom he can pray.”

Chi 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?” Chi Lu added, “I venture to ask about death.” He was answered, “While you do not know life, how can you know about death?”

The Master said, “Alas! there is no one that knows me.” Tsze-kung said, “What do you mean by thus saying—that no one knows you?” The Master replied, “I do not murmur against Heaven. I do not grumble against men. My studies lie low, and my penetration rises high. But there is Heaven;—that knows me!”

The Master said, “I would prefer not speaking.” Tsze-kung said, “If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?” The Master said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?”

The Master said, “Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man.”

**VIRTUE AND GOODNESS**

The Master said, “Fine words and an insinuating appearance are seldom associated with true virtue.”

The Master said, “See what a man does. Mark his motives. Examine in what things he rests. How can a man conceal his character?”

The Master said, “I do not know how a man without truthfulness is to get on. How can a large carriage be made to go without the cross-bar for yoking the oxen to, or a small carriage without the arrangement for yoking the horses?”

The Master said, . . . “To see what is right and not to do it is want of courage.”

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 virtue cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If virtue cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should be avoided.”

The Master said, “I have not seen a person who loved virtue, or one who hated what was not virtuous. He who loved virtue, would esteem nothing above it. He who hated what is not virtuous, would practice virtue in such a way that he would not allow anything that is not virtuous to approach his person. Is any one able for one day to apply his strength to virtue? I have not seen the case in which his strength would be insufficient.”

The Master said, “A man should say, I am not concerned that I have no place, I am concerned how I may fit myself for one. I am not known, I seek to be worthy to be known.”

The Master said, “When we see men of worth, we should think of equaling them; when we see men of a contrary character, we should turn inwards and examine ourselves.”

The Master said, “Virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it will have neighbors.”

The Master said, “Let the will be set on the path of duty. Let every attainment in what is good be firmly grasped. Let perfect virtue be accorded with. Let relaxation and enjoyment be found in the polite arts.”

The Master said, “With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow; I have still joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness are to me as a floating cloud.”

The Master said, “Is virtue a thing remote? I wish to be virtuous, and lo! virtue is at hand.”

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.”

The Master said, “Can men refuse to assent to the words of strict admonition? But it is reforming the conduct because of them which is valuable. Can men refuse to be pleased with words of gentle advice? But it is unfolding their aim which is valuable. If a man be pleased with these words, but does not unfold their aim, and assents to those, but does not reform his conduct, I can really do nothing with him.”

The Master said, “Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles. Have no friends not equal to yourself. When you have faults, do not fear to abandon them.”

The Master 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.”

55
The Master said, “The wise are free from perplexities; the virtuous from anxiety; and the bold from fear.”

The Master said, “To go beyond is as wrong as to fall short.”

Chung-kung asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “It is, when you go abroad, to behave to every one as if you were receiving a great guest; to employ the people as if you were assisting at a great sacrifice; not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself to have no murmuring against you in the country, and none in the family.”

Fan Ch’ih asked about benevolence. The Master said, “It is to love all men.” He asked about knowledge. The Master said, “It is to know all men.”

Fan Ch’ih asked about perfect virtue. The Master said, “It is, in retirement, to be sedately grave; in the management of business, to be reverently attentive; in intercourse with others, to be strictly sincere. Though a man go among rude, uncultivated tribes, these qualities may not be neglected.”

Tsze-kung asked, saying, “What do you say of a man who is loved by all the people of his neighborhood?” The Master replied, “We may not for that accord our approval of him.” “And what do you say of him who is hated by all the people of his neighborhood?” The Master said, “We may not for that conclude that he is bad. It is better than either of these cases that the good in the neighborhood love him, and the bad hate him.”

The Master said, “He who speaks without modesty will find it difficult to make his words good.”

Some one said, “What do you say concerning the principle that injury should be recompensed with kindness?” The Master said, “With what then will you recompense kindness? Recompense injury with justice, and recompense kindness with kindness.”

Tsze-kung asked, saying, “Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?” The Master said, “Is not RECIPROCITY such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.”

The Master said, “Virtue is more to man than either water or fire. I have seen men die from treading on water and fire, but I have never seen a man die from treading the course of virtue.”

Confucius said, “There are three friendships which are advantageous, and three which are injurious. Friendship with the upright; friendship with the sincere; and friendship with the man of much observation; these are advantageous. Friendship with the man of specious airs; friendship with the insinuatingly soft; and friendship with the glib-tongued; these are injurious.”

Confucius said, “There are three things men find enjoyment in which are advantageous, and three things they find enjoyment in which are injurious. To find enjoyment in the discriminating study of ceremonies and music; to find enjoyment in speaking of the goodness of others; to find enjoyment in having many worthy friends; these are advantageous. To find enjoyment in extravagant pleasures; to find enjoyment in idleness and sauntering; to find enjoyment in the pleasures of feasting; these are injurious.”

Tsze-chang asked Confucius about perfect virtue. Confucius said, “To be able to practice five things everywhere under Heaven constitutes perfect virtue.” He begged to ask what they were, and was told, “Gravity, generosity of soul, sincerity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are grave, you will not be treated with disrespect. If you are generous, you will win all. If you are sincere, people will repose trust in you. If you are earnest, you will accomplish much. If you are kind, this will enable you to employ the services of others.”

Questions:
1. According to Confucius, what is the basis for a stable society?
2. What behaviors or attitudes does Confucius consider virtuous? What is the purpose of being virtuous?