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## The Master's Teachings Are Not Far: *The Analects* of Confucius and Its Modern Relevance

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The Master's Teachings Are Not Far:

*The Analects* of Confucius and Its Modern Relevance

### **Editorial Introduction**

*The Analects* of Confucius is believed to have been written by his disciples around 2500 years ago, and has remained one of the most influential texts in China to this day. This text was written in order to provide people with the teachings of Confucius. His disciples did this by writing down their questions along with the answers that Confucius gave them. In this series of questions and answers various terms that Confucius believed people should live according to are continuously referred to. What is the *Dao* the master was pursuing? How to become a *junzi* or superior man? Are the Confucian values such as filial piety and trustworthiness still relevant today? Is Confucius's political goal still meaningful? The three papers here are contributed by students from HIST 3200 Traditional China, an upper-level history course taught by Dr. Hongjie Wang at Armstrong in the spring semester of 2017. These authors try to answer the aforementioned questions from their respective perspectives based on their reading of the ancient text.

### **The Root of Humanity in *The Analects***

Katherine Brigman

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When considering the principles upon which many Chinese people conduct the basis of their life, the philosophy and teachings of Confucius play a large role. Confucius believed that through teaching one could change the manner in which civilizations and governing bodies conducted themselves. Although he did not record many of his personal beliefs and teachings, his students or disciples compiled his teachings in *The Analects*. Confucius, commonly referred to as the Master in *The Analects*, intended to spread his ideas of virtue and benevolence: “The Master said, Set your heart on the *Dao* (the way), base yourself in virtue, rely on benevolence, journey in the arts” (7.6). He prophesized these ideals throughout the text in a manner of ways including *junzi* (superior man), filial piety, and trustworthiness.

When reading *The Analects*, the term *junzi* appears quite often. This term is often used to denote an ideal moral actor. *Junzi* supports Confucius’ belief that people could change the way they conducted themselves through his teachings and self-betterment. This term is first used in Book 1—“to remain unsoured when his talents are unrecognized, is this not a *junzi*?” (1.1) In this case, the reader can see that being *junzi* is associated with the moral characteristic of being humble. Confucius later adds, “the *junzi*’s stance towards the world is this: there is nothing he insists on, nothing he refuses, he simply aligns himself beside right” (4.10). In this case, he adds that doing what is moral would always be an appropriate response, but it is more important to do what is right. He also poses the differences between how men of moral upstanding and “small” men should act: “The Master said: The *junzi* is inclusive and not a partisan; the small man is a partisan and not inclusive” (2.14). He poses the comparison again later in the text, “The *junzi* cherishes virtue; the small man cherishes land. The *junzi* cherishes the examples men set; the small man cherishes the bounty they bestow” (4.11). Confucius shows in his

teachings that to act with *junzi* is key in changing the way civilizations and individuals conducted themselves for the better. This word encompassed a lifestyle based upon ethics, morals, virtues, and the ability to be humble. The idea of doing what is right, or the way of *junzi*, also comes into play when considering the interactions with the community and one's family.

In *The Analects*, filiality is another frequently mentioned value. Filial respect has always been a large part in Eastern Asian culture. Its importance can also be seen throughout Confucius' teachings. Early in the text he presents the idea that respecting one's family is of the utmost importance: "Filiality and respect for elders, are these not the roots of *ren* (benevolence)?" (1.2). *Ren* is a term that is not easily translated but is assumed to mean "benevolence," "humanity" or "goodness" but with a richer meaning. The use of *ren* in this passage shows the importance of filial respect, describing filiality as the "roots to humanity." Although filial relationships were seen as very important, Confucius teaches in his passages that simply being filial was not enough. In Book 2 Confucius states "what is meant by filiality today is nothing but being able to take care of your parents. But even hounds and horses can require care. Without respectful vigilance, what is the difference?" (2.8) This passage further shows that family is not limited to simply humans; all living things require care and compassion. Also as shown above, there is a particular importance placed upon elders, possibly due to them being perceived as wise: "When his clan calls him filial and his neighborhood district calls him respectful of elders" (13.20). Although most of his teachings involve father and son relationship, these principles can be extended to encompass all genders and generations.

Trustworthiness, although prevalent in families, is not limited to them. It also expands throughout government and daily life. Confucius defines trust in this manner: “Trustworthiness is close to righteousness: one’s words are tested true” (1.13). In Book 1 his disciple Zengzi explains: “Each day I examine myself...in planning for others, have I been loyal? In company with friends, have I been trustworthy?” (1.4) This passage shows the significance trustworthiness plays in the bettering of one’s self and how holding yourself accountable for your character plays a role in overall trust. Also, he places a strong importance on choosing to surround yourself with people you can trust: “Take loyalty and trustworthiness as the pivot and have no friends who are not like yourself in this” (9.25). Another passage shows the significance it plays in changing a governing body outside of the family unit: “To guide a state great enough to possess a thousand war chariots: be attentive to affairs and trustworthy; regulate expenditures and treat persons as valuable; employ the people according to the proper season” (1.5). He advocates the idea that the people would rather follow a government they trust instead of one who treats based solely upon their social standing.

Confucius continues to be a guiding entity in the modern era. His teachings permeate through the basic levels of goodness that patrons instill into their daily lives. He shows that one’s wealth or class does not determine happiness and self-fulfillment. But rather, accepting one’s standing in society and conducting themselves with benevolence will help in achieving a virtuous lifestyle. Once you do your best in the moral humanitarian way, then others can follow in the path set forth.

*The Analects* as Moral Guidelines

Brian Lee

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*The Analects*, a collection of Confucius's conversations and teachings, strongly emphasizes the importance of morality for the betterment of oneself and society in general. The book lays out several teachings for both commoners and rulers to follow in the pursuit of morality. While some of his teachings rely on idealism, others are very practical. The values of Confucianism can easily be used as moral guidelines and can still be applied in today's world.

One of the most important morals that Confucius teaches is filial piety. He states that “[a] young man should be filial within his home and respectful of elders when outside” (1.6). According to Confucius, being filial is more than simply taking care of one's parents. A “respectful vigilance” (2.7) is necessary and parents must be served “according to *li*” (2.5). This is a value that I believe is still important today. I was taught to respect my parents and elders, and although Western and Eastern methods may differ the intent is still the same. Confucius applies this concept to government, stating that “if [rulers] are filial and caring, [the people] will be loyal” (2.20), however this is a debatable statement. A kind leader is preferable to a tyrant, but kindness does not necessarily guarantee loyalty, as a filial leader could be more inefficient than a non-filial one. It is important to note that Confucius lived in a time of war and strife, and this viewpoint may stem from the environment that he lived in.

Humility is another moral trait taught by the *Analects*. A person should “remain unsoured” (1.1) that their merits go unnoticed, but to “[b]e concerned that [they] may not recognize others” (1.16). This sentiment is repeated in a later passage, where Confucius states, “[d]o not be concerned that no one recognizes you, seek that which is worthy of recognition” (4.14). I am reminded of the saying “be the bigger person” by these passages, which is not always easy to do. All people desire to be recognized in some way, be it for their abilities or accomplishments. However, it is a simple fact that others will not always notice one’s accomplishments. What is important is to try to not let it keep getting in the way of giving recognition to someone else.

Much of Confucius’s philosophy revolves around the concept of *ren*, a term that encompasses several positive character traits such as benevolence and humanity. Filial piety is also a large part of *ren* as it forms the “roots” of the concept (1.2). Many passages are dedicated to examining it and Confucius’s disciples ask him whether or not various men can be called *ren*. Confucius, however, shows great wisdom by simply replying that he does not know if a person is *ren* or not each time he is asked. My understanding is that it is not within his power to decide who is and is not *ren*. It is shown through a person’s conduct, and is not something that can be arbitrarily given or taken away.

The ultimate goal of following the morals of Confucianism is to become a gentleman, or *junzi*. A *junzi* “aligns himself beside [what is] right” (4.10) rather than the pursuit of profit or personal gain, and is expected to be filial, humble, and to have *ren*. Petty men place value on personal gain, whereas a gentleman “cherishes virtue” (4.11). Living in a materialistic society it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely become Confucius’s idea of a gentleman. People are

bombarded with advertisements for products and profit is held in high regard, especially in Western society. Many of the values expected of a gentleman can be successfully incorporated into one's life, however. There are few who could argue against bettering oneself, and Confucian teachings are by no means incompatible with a contemporary worldview.

Despite the old age of Confucianism, the core morals can still be used as a guideline for one's conduct. Disagreeing with an aspect or two does not make the entire message any less valid. Respect for parents and elders, benevolence, and humility are character traits that anyone can benefit from.

#### The Dichotomy of Confucius: A Different Reading of *The Analects*

Juan L. Rojelio

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The philosophies and teachings of the Chinese sages have mystified and attracted many westerners looking for new perspectives on the world. Among Chinese philosophers in history, none stand as tall as Confucius. Confucius is a fascinating figure whose impact on history is cemented by his ubiquitous teachings on Chinese life and culture. What I find most fascinating about him are his political ideals, not because he offers something radically different from the West, but because he is extremely similar to various western schools of thought, far more so than many in the western or eastern intelligentsia care to admit.



Confucius's view on government can be boiled down to a desire to promote strong moral people, a strong conservative regard for past culture and traditions, as well as an emphasis on hierarchical relationships that would create a "harmonious" society. It is a very idealistic outlook and one I greatly sympathize with. In Book 2 of *The Analects* Confucius speaks about leading through moral character instead of brute force and how this will motivate the people to be good. I myself am a classically liberal conservative and I agree with Confucius that a nation that emphasizes strong moral character will stand above those that allow their ethics, values, and morals to decay as can currently be seen in the United States. His belief in the "benevolent" ruler is virtually identical to the Aristotelian idea of the benevolent dictator. As an American with a strong belief in both republicanism and the founding principles of the United States, I am averse to any government that attempts to concentrate power in as few hands as possible. However, I must admit that in a perfect world, a dictatorship (or rather, any form of government that is ruled by one individual) would be the best system if (and only if) the dictator is supremely competent, moral, and most of all, benevolent. The dictator would essentially have to be the perfect man, but there can never be such a person. History has shown that a nation controlled by a great ruler can prosper supremely, as demonstrated by the likes of Napoleon, Frederick the Great, Suleiman the Magnificent, and many others. But none of these men were perfect. Thus, rule by one can never be realistically applied with any sort of consistent results. I don't begrudge Confucius for his stance, considering he comes from an era in which democracy was not in existence, as well as his emphasis on tradition and the sage king's role in that tradition.

In the classical left-right dichotomy the split is predicated on the role of people in society. Classical leftists believe that all people are equal in totality and any difference in station or wealth is due to circumstances out of the control of the person in question. Classical rightists believe that all people have varying skills and abilities. Some people are smart, others are dumb, some are competent, others are lazy. These traits create the hierarchies we witness in society. If I had to place Confucius on this scale, I believe he would lean right. Confucius believed that all people in society had a role to play and that for the good of the society, they must all accept their roles and fulfill them to the best of their abilities. I generally concur with this sentiment, although I believe that while acceptance of your place in life can be good, one should still seek to better themselves and rise above their station.

Where I disagree with Confucius largely has to do with his view of the role government plays in the lives of the people. Confucius believes that the government should be a shining star for the people, an institution that can improve the lives of the people and inspire them to be moral. He also holds that the best and brightest should seek employment in the government to better serve society. I completely disagree with this view. In my opinion, the government has one role: to protect the rights of the people. The government should never be a place to seek guidance on how to behave nor should it ever be so all-encompassing as to demand ever growing numbers of scholars to efficiently run. I am not an anarchist but I do believe in small government. While Confucius can perhaps be said to lean right in regards to hierarchy in society, he is firmly left when it comes to government. I say this because, in modern leftism (not classical), the government is the most important entity in society.

From *The Analects*, it is fascinating to see Confucius espousing ideas that are still very much relatable to the modern world. Even more intriguing is how difficult it is to place him on either the modern or classical left-right dichotomy. This shows the importance of diversity of opinion. It is better to have many different ideas in conflict than it is to have the same idea shared by an insular group. Confucius still has much to teach us and can easily be counted among the greatest thinkers, East or West.

#### About the author

Katherine E. Brigman is a Chemistry major at Armstrong and has earned the distinction of Dean's List numerous times. She is a member of the National Society of Leadership and Success. During her studies, Katie found that she enjoyed learning about other cultures and various aspects of history, so she decided to obtain a minor in History, which she finds to be an exciting compliment to the scientific world. Brian Lee is a junior History major at Armstrong. He enjoys studying Mediterranean empires of Antiquity and mid-20th Century America. He has plans to enter the graduate program after completing his undergraduate degree. Juan Rojelio is a history major and will graduate in 2019.

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