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Notes from the Archives

Confucius' Timeless Analects

By Federico Guevara

Employing thousands of performers, the elaborate opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic games in Beijing paid homage to the major events, people, and inventions that have played important roles throughout Chinese history. During a portion of this ceremony, one important figure was honored as hundreds of men performed a song and dance dressed as ancient Chinese officials. They represented Master Kong, known by his Latinized name as Confucius, an ancient philosopher who helped shape Asian culture. The performers carried with them a book called *The Lun Yu*, or *The Analects*, which is a compilation of the teachings of Confucius and is central to Confucianism. *The Analects* primarily discusses Confucius' thoughts on government, education, and ethics, and is based on the conversations and debates Confucius had during his lifetime, over 2,500 years ago. Though some of it may appear outdated, the most essential goals of *The Analects* as outlined by Confucius himself are as relevant as ever. This primary source interpretation will use two approaches to arrive at the heart of Confucius' comprehensive humanist philosophy.

There are two straightforward ways to read *The Analects* which facilitates their understanding. *The Analects* can be considered a political treatise, providing his ideas on improving government leadership, formed from Confucius' observations and personal experiences with officials. *The Analects* can also be considered a book of etiquette, concerned with describing what Confucius saw as proper conduct and the interactions he deemed necessary to create and maintain a harmonious society. The key concepts and lessons Confucius insisted his followers grasp are

universal as they concern matters beyond China, and are timeless as they deal with enduring social relations.

Because Confucius has had enormous impact in Asia, and especially in China, it made perfect sense to revere him in the Beijing ceremony as an icon of Chinese culture. Lyrics from one of the songs sung by the performers who depicted Confucius in the Olympic ceremony appropriately declared, “We are so delighted to see friends from faraway lands!” These same words are found in the first passage of the first chapter of *The Analects*, and proved fitting for a ceremony which welcomed the entire world.¹ The performers carried what appeared to be wooden accordions, representing the original form of Chinese books. These are assembled from flat sticks, often bamboo, on which people carved script, which were held together by leather strips. Constructed in various sizes, people could roll them up and carry them with ease. Indeed, they were eventually carried out of China when *The Analects* along with other Confucian writings were banned and ordered burned by Qin Shi Huang, the first emperor of China.² The ban proved the first emperor was well aware of what *The Analects* contained; it caused the ruthless Qin emperor to question whether he was the type of leader Confucius advocated for, particularly the Confucian ideal of a benevolent leader.

The philosopher illustrated his intense emphasis on correct leadership through a seemingly simple interaction with a disciple, which truly speaks volumes. When asked for his thoughts on government by Kung Tsze, a student, Confucius focused on who should manage it; beginning his answer by stating that the requisites of government are that there be sufficiency of food, sufficient military equipment, and confidence of the people in their ruler. When Kung Tsze asked which of the three should be relinquished first if it cannot be helped, Confucius answered that it was military equipment. When Kung Tsze asked again which of

¹ Confucius, “Confucian Analects,” in *The Art of War and Other Classics of Eastern Philosophy* (San Diego, CA: Canterbury Classics, 2016), 239.

² Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15.

the remaining two should be dispensed with if needed, Confucius concluded they should part with the food as death is inescapable to all who have lived, “but if the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the state.”³ Confidence and admiration for a leader by his subjects is the chief component in government, according to Confucius.

When Confucius described the type of leaders who should lead, he fixated on their personal character above all. Emphasizing that if a leader should lead by example, then they would be respected and cherished. He said, “when a prince’s personal conduct is correct, his 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.”⁴ Confucius’ disdain for the severe penalization of a country’s subjects along with his faith in the inherently upright nature of the populace, may be interpreted as naïve. However, he was realistic enough to know that positive changes in a society would not happen overnight. He said change in culture as a whole would come “if good men were to govern a country in succession for a hundred years, it would become possible to transform the violently cruel, and do away with capital punishments.”⁵ Even so, Confucius understood succeeding generations of exemplary leaders would be fruitless if their subjects are not educated.

Understanding that an arrogant, uncaring, and ignorant leader would drag a nation down from greatness may seem like common sense to modern knowledgeable citizens, but during Confucius’ time, it needed to be said. Confucius was born at a time when the land known today as China was splintered. The once prolific and strong Zhou Dynasty had split apart, and new

³ Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Random House, 1989), 164.

⁴ Ezra Pound, *Confucius: Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, The Analects* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 250.

⁵ Confucius, “Confucian Analects,” 303.

kingdoms were constantly at war.⁶ As young Confucius grew, he observed that whoever had the greatest military strength dictated the rules, be they qualified and legitimate or not. Confucius became convinced that order would come, in part, when benevolent as well as educated people learned from the past and rose to the top.⁷ While education alone does not guarantee integrity in a person, Confucius' beliefs can be proven true today, as a highly educated and cultured leader can be more effective and diplomatic in a more sophisticated and globalized world. It may be self-evident that it is beneficial to society when a leader is someone to emulate because they are virtuous, but it is also a choice which today may be taken for granted.

Confucius also emphasized the importance of learning, which he believed was the key to improving oneself and society. Leaders, according to Confucius, were supposed to be the brightest and most educated people in society; they were to be kind and considerate, and above all they had to be exemplary so that everyone would seek to emulate them. When referring to the masses, Confucius was pragmatic and hopeful that through an educated public, society as a whole would benefit. He was a revolutionary for his time, saying, "in education there should be no class distinction."⁸ The core of his message is concerned with everyone being properly educated, whether ruler or subject, and becoming a considerate and respectable person who leads by example and learns from the past.

There is a strong humanist thread that binds together the majority of what Confucius discusses with his disciples. The philosophy in *The Analects* is not overly complex; he does not spend too much time on metaphysics or theoretical questions about the meaning of life. In what sounds like pure secular humanism, Confucius upset the Daoists of his time by telling his disciples, "It is man who can make The Way great, and not The Way that can

⁶ Louise Slavicek, *Religions of the World: Confucianism* (San Diego, CA: Lucent Books, 2002), 19.

⁷ Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism*, 44.

⁸ Pound, *Confucius*, 269.

make man great.”⁹ Nevertheless, his practical political and social philosophy is slightly integrated with traditional Chinese cosmology, his ideal society was said to be inspired by a perfect order found only in an ethereal paradise. Disregarding supernatural concepts of his time even further, Confucius added, “I spent a whole day without food and a whole night without sleep in order to meditate. It was no use. The better plan is to learn.”¹⁰ Confucius simply had no interest in what he thought to be unknowable.

This practical approach is what differentiates Confucius from most others who are considered founders of world religions. When one of his disciples, Chi Lu, asked of Confucius, “how should we serve the spirits of the dead?” Confucius answered, “while we are not yet able to serve men, how can we serve spiritual beings?”¹¹ Throughout *The Analects*, Confucius is clearly interested in talking about the tangible and functional. Though much of what he espouses is rooted in Chinese traditions, especially a deep and ritualistic reverence for ancestors, it is clear that government, education, and etiquette generally have precedence over the mystical in his conversations, and admittedly in his mind. As Chi Lu pressed Confucius about the afterlife, he sought clarification stating, “I venture to ask about death,” and Confucius again sought to shift the focus of his disciple to matters of the world, saying, “if we do not yet know about life, how can we know about death?”¹² Confucius was able to speak on ethics and advocated people be considerate of one another without invoking any supernatural rewards or threats. This is why Confucianism can still resonate with anyone in any part of the world today.

To be sure, Confucius never rejected the claim that there was a supernatural creator being, and he is not known to have been an agnostic atheist. Yet his approach to society's ills is predominantly secular and therefore far more applicable and

⁹ Waley, *Analects*, 199.

¹⁰ Confucius, “Confucian Analects,” 321.

¹¹ Pound, *Confucius*, 239.

¹² *Ibid.*

approachable in today's pluralistic democracies. Because we live in an increasingly interconnected and secular world, people from all ideologies and walks of life are able to communicate and work together towards similar interests like never before, connecting despite their varied sacred worldviews.¹³ The last American president, a Christian family man, had his own personal morals, yet accepted and understood our diverse world could benefit from a humanist perspective and ethics, just as Confucius espoused. President Barack Obama exemplified this understanding in his profound 2006 speech addressing faith and politics:

Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or evoke God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.¹⁴

If Confucius were alive today, he would have delighted in the opportunity to witness the rise to leadership a people who understood his humanist approach to improving society.

The most democratically developed countries in the world where people enjoy the most freedoms and rights, have almost fully non-religious government practices and laws meant to apply to everyone equally, while those that base their civic institutions on

¹³ Gabe Bullard, "The World's Newest Major Religion: No Religion," *National Geographic*, April 22, 2016, news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/

¹⁴ Barack Obama, "Faith and Politics Speech. Building a Covenant for a New America Conference," *New York Times*, June 28, 2006, nytimes.com/2006/06/28/us/politics/2006obamaspeech.html.

local supernatural beliefs and dogmatism tend to stagnate human rights and are generally isolationist. A student living in the most diverse part of one of the most diverse states of the most diverse country, will not have an easy time trying to explain why others should live a certain way by offering their own religion as the reason. Confucius understood this over 2,500 years ago, seeing that it is better to find common ground in what can be known, than to let the unknowable divide the people.

Confucius came to his conclusions by observing the world around him, understanding how men had shaped it, and in turn understanding that people could also change it. He taught this without claiming to be divine or the descendant of a deity, and despite being considered the founder of a religion, his teachings can certainly resonate with a nonreligious society. In countries enjoying the most freedoms, the majority of laws are based on what is better for the greatest number of people regardless of a certain group's opinion on the supernatural. This world view is applicable today more than ever, and reading Confucius should not intimidate or cause discomfort to even the most pious westerner.

Approaching *The Analects* from an angle that sees Confucius concerned with morals, interactions between people, and proper conduct as opposed to managing governments, Confucius' philosophy becomes more intimate. The essence of Confucius' teachings on ethics, that is to say, his social philosophy, is illuminated by analyzing the more personal conversations he had with his disciples, while serving as their moral guide. There are instances when the humanist teacher encourages his followers to see and treat any and all people as they would their own family. He comforts a worried Szema Niu, who has lost friends and feels alone, by telling him that if any man has been "respectful to others and observant of propriety, then all within the four seas will be his brothers. What has the superior man to do with being distressed because he has no brothers?"¹⁵

¹⁵ Confucius, "Confucian Analects," 296.

Stemming from this concept of kindness towards others, numerous passages in *The Analects* allude to the Golden Rule; which simply states one should treat others as they themselves would like to be treated. Nearly every major religion, culture, government, and even secular groups have held this as a fundamental factor of their ethical code throughout the history of the globe, and Confucianism is no exception. When discussing with his disciple, Tzu Kung, that taking good care of others is what makes a man complete, Confucius urges Tzu Kung improve himself in order to then be able to also improve others, because, “in fact, the ability to take one’s own feelings as a guide -that is the sort of thing that lies in the direction of Goodness.”¹⁶ This is where we can find the root of the Golden Rule, in use 2,500 years ago.

While various other passages indicate how much importance Confucius placed on the Golden Rule, in other speeches and debates he noted that there is a more important, though similar, philosophy to live by. Tzu Kung asked his master a question hardly anyone would be able to answer in their lifetime, which was whether there was a single saying that could serve as the guiding principle for conduct throughout life. Confucius answered, “sympathy, what you do not want done to yourself, do not inflict on others.”¹⁷ This negative form of the Golden Rule has greater significance for Confucius himself, as this was his answer to his student’s poignant question, and is often repeated by Confucius in other variations throughout *The Analects*.

Because no one person can know what is best for all others due to their own individual experiences, or fathom what all others desire based on their own personal taste, this restrained, and more altruistic form of the Golden Rule as Confucius emphasizes it is far more applicable to many more situations than the original. The original form of the Golden Rule does not take into account diversity; it projects onto others our own individual preferences. A simple example is when meeting someone for the first time, a

¹⁶ Waley, *Analects*, 122.

¹⁷ Pound, *Confucius*, 266.

person may want to shake hands, while the other may be accustomed to kissing, or one may want to bow while another might prefer a hug. In that moment, any of these actions may appear disrespectful towards the other person if intentions are misinterpreted. Though this is a basic example, assuming that everyone likes the same things consistently, could lead to aggravation or hostile confrontation in greater and more crucial situations.

Confucius was a keen observer and deep thinker who regularly reached the same conclusions as deified figures of world religions, but his conclusions could nevertheless be archaic by today's standards. As perceptive and sharp as Confucius' viewpoints on ethics and government appear to be, other social values and moralistic teachings by him seem sexist and outdated at first glance. Confucius' belief that every person must have ethical duties to fulfil developed into the idea that everyone has a specific role to follow in relation to others' roles. From the whole of Confucian literature emerged the Five Constant Relationships, which are believed to bring order to society. Subjects are to be loyal to rulers, children are to be obedient to parents, wives are to be understanding of their husbands, younger siblings are to be respectful of their older ones, and younger friends must be reverential to their older friends. While these relationships seem unfair, sexist, and outdated in contemporary society, Confucius should not shoulder the blame; the Five Constant Relationships were compiled centuries after his death by Mencius, Confucius' own version of Plato, and other neo-Confucian leaders.¹⁸

Furthermore, these are not relationships where only a single side benefits; one must earn their place of superiority by being a worthy mentor in the life of another. In order for the inferior to be respectful at all, the superior must love, care for, guide, and set a good example for them; Confucius is clear about this throughout

¹⁸ Thomas Hoobler, *Confucianism* (New York: Facts On File, 1993), 77.

many of his lessons.¹⁹ A position of leadership in any relationship must be acquired through merit, and comes with its own set of duties as well. Rulers should be benevolent, parents are to be loving, husbands must do good and be fair, the elder sibling is to be kind, and older friends are to be considerate. The position of superiority in each of these five relationships is held based on worth and ability and carries its own obligations, otherwise the entire relationship ceases to exist.²⁰

Another criticism can be directed against Confucius' concept of the superior man, which he repeatedly mentions. His ideal exemplary gentleman, or *Chuntzu*, which literally translates to the son of a lord or nobleman, a term fundamentally sexist, may imply women cannot lead or be exemplary. However, while the term *Chuntzu* is technically a political status for gentlemen, Confucius continually uses the term to indicate a cultivated person in whom all virtues are developed, and who can be a guide and an example of integrity to others. Confucius, perhaps unintentionally, transforms the narrow term. He repeatedly uses the term, not to denote a specific political status of men, but instead to designate a moral reputation to be desired, removing gender from the word. Therefore, women, too, can be exemplary and superior leaders—by following the teachings of Confucius, of course.

Throughout *The Analects*, Confucius may be old fashioned at times, a man of his time and a true conservative. However, Confucius himself tells his trusted disciples what is of most importance to him: people of integrity should lead, and lead with kindness, and everyone should value education and practice empathy toward each other. That is the essence and goal of his life's work and message found in *The Analects*, which is universal and timeless still. Waiting for powerful people to adopt this mindset may lead someone to grow old and quite frustrated in a

¹⁹ Tim Murphy and Ralph Weber, "Confucianizing Socrates and Socratizing Confucius: on Comparing Analects 13:18 and the Authyphro," *Philosophy East & West* 60, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 193.

²⁰ Will Buckingham, *The Philosophy Book: Big Ideas Simply Explained* (London: DK Publishing, 2011), 38.

corrupt society just as Confucius did. Nevertheless, they are honorable objectives which should never be abandoned if we value civilization.

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