

# Confucianism: The New Wave of Ancient China

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## Abstract

Confucianism, a Chinese philosophy founded roughly 2,500 years ago, has traditionally been understood to be, by historians and philosophers alike, a strongly conservative philosophy. Yet after taking a look at the historical context of Confucianism, the atmosphere and political climate of China during Confucianism's formation, a new perspective can be taken on the ancient school of thought. After examining the central Confucian teachings of filial piety, ritual, self-cultivation, and the supremacy of achievement over hierarchal birthright, Confucianism is shown to have challenged the status quo of its day and presented a more open-minded and altruistic approach to human interaction than had been witnessed previously. This paper challenges Confucianism's traditional view as a conservative and partisan school of thought and explores its historical roots as a radically new and tolerant philosophy meant for the common person.

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## Introduction

Confucianism, an over-2,500-year-old philosophy, was formed not only as a response to its society, but as a moral guide for the future humanity. Chinese society 2,500 years ago marked the Spring and Autumn period of the later Zhou Dynasty, an era of failing political and social order.<sup>1</sup> The Zhou government had weakened almost instantly after the death of its third ruler, King Kang of Zhou, and as a result of or possibly as a cause, cared little for the well-being of the common people. However, even if the Zhou had developed concern for its inhabitants, it had become too weak to make any real changes outside the walls of its capital, having lost power to the rulers of the provincial states.<sup>2</sup> The in-fighting that ensued between the Zhou states caused not only a social breakdown, but caused violence to become the norm. Thus, though Confucianism is often perceived by contemporary Western thinkers to be deeply conservative or even repressively tradition-bound, in fact was a philosophy ahead of its time that strived to assist its deteriorating society. Confucianism was a very progressive philosophy that effectively utilized established tradition and well-known precedents to teach its enlightened philosophies of filial piety, ritual, self-cultivation, and the supremacy of achievement over hierarchal birthright to the people. The intellectual commitments of Confucianism are, at their core and in their most basic sense, progressive.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

## Filial Piety

“A young person who is filial and respectful of his elders rarely becomes the kind of person who is inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up rebellion.”<sup>3</sup> This quote from the *Analects*, or the core Confucian text that was composed of the sayings of Confucianism’s founder Confucius, hints at how during the Spring and Autumn period, and especially during the following Warring States period, China was in a disordered state. Isolated rebellions and coups had become commonplace due to the crumbling power of the Zhou Dynasty, and a declining respect for authority was suspected by Confucius and his followers to be the primary culprit.<sup>4</sup> Filial piety arose as a response, an idea that called for the paying of respect to one’s family and social superiors.<sup>5</sup> Filial piety required that reverence be given to one’s parents above all else, deferring to them in every scenario, and taking care of them no matter the circumstances.<sup>6</sup> Filial piety extended outside the family as well, calling for the people to revere their ruler as almost an extension, and as the pinnacle, of the family unit. In this way filial piety gave strength to the family, bringing a sense of unity and accord to the most basic level of society in a time period that severely lacked any sense of togetherness. Confucianism’s filiality also encouraged a giving relationship between family, friends, and state, not fulfillment of one’s own selfish endeavors as was much of the case in the Spring and Autumn period.<sup>7</sup> Confucius was, through filiality, attempting to counterbalance the weak and chaotic Zhou Dynasty that had brought with it societal discord and unnecessary strife. Thus, despite the fact that filial piety in the West today is often viewed as an outdated and impractical practice, for its time, it was a brand new and impressively liberal notion that hoped to return China to a brighter, more hopeful era.

Women during Confucius’ time, and for nearly all of Chinese history, were neither treated as equals to men, nor respected in their own right.<sup>8</sup> “Women and servants are particularly hard to manage: if you are too familiar with them, they grow insolent, but if you are too distant, they grow resentful.”<sup>9</sup> As this quote from the *Analects* shows, even Confucius viewed women in general as inferior to men, ranking them alongside servants. Yet, in spite of this, through filial piety, Confucianism gave women a measure of respect in an era where respect for women was almost non-existent. This was found most predominately in the role of mother. Through motherhood, especially mothers with sons, women were to be given near-equal reverence as their husband.<sup>10</sup> Children, if properly filial and following the teachings of Confucianism, were required to venerate their mother’s wishes and care for her just as they would their father. There was also no distinction in mourning for the separate parents. Truly filial children, in particular sons,

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., “The Analects,” *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed. trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2001), 1.2.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 48.

<sup>5</sup> Dahua Cui and Huang Deyuan, “A Weakness in Confucianism: Private and Public Moralities,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 2, no. 4 (October 2007), 521.

<sup>6</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 2.7.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 49.

<sup>8</sup> Sin Yee Chan, “Gender and Relationship Roles in the Analects and the Mencius,” *Asian Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2000), 128.

<sup>9</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 17.25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

were to mourn both of their parents' death for three years each.<sup>11</sup> This was unique for the time since most women were, at best, only marginally respected if they fulfilled their roles as marriage fodder or son-producing machines.<sup>12</sup> If women were to fail at these given roles, whether they were at fault or not, they were often quickly cast aside and replaced.<sup>13</sup> Though it can be pointed out that it is only through motherhood that women were positively acknowledged in Confucianism, and it is the role of sons to fathers that is most often discussed in the *Analects*, it was through Confucianism in the Spring and Autumn period that women were first given any sense of acknowledgement and respect as people. Though it would not be for many more centuries that Chinese women would be allowed to voice their own thoughts, filial piety at least got the ball rolling, cracking open the door to women's suffrage in a period that viewing women as anything other than sexual toys, housekeepers, or childbearers for men was a radically unheard of concept.

### Ritual

Ritual had been rooted in Chinese tradition long before Confucianism, dating back to the beginning of China's written history, and was hence a perfect tool for Confucius to use in furthering his progressive philosophy. Rituals in Confucianism covered much more than simple ceremonies; they also covered how one interacted with other people. Rituals of ancient China often either involved sacrificial rituals before battle, the offering of food or goods to ancestors, or the joining of peoples, such as in the form of weddings.<sup>14</sup> However, these honored rituals were predominately reserved for nobility, existing outside of the aristocracy only rarely or in their most basic forms.<sup>15</sup> Confucius sought to change that, encouraging all that were able to engage in ritual, which he believed would assist in personal self-cultivation and a more ordered society: "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes Goodness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness."<sup>16</sup> The best way Confucius suggested for people to perform ritual was by emulating the sage kings, or the first three rulers of the Zhou Dynasty, who were supposedly the ideal performers of ritual and goodness. Though the sage kings were well-known in China in the Spring and Autumn period, it was a relatively new idea to suggest that common, non-noble people could attain, or should try to attain, their moral superiority.<sup>17</sup> To even make such a suggestion was to hint that kings were held under the same rules as commoners, at least as far as morality was concerned. Ritual in Confucianism was therefore to be used as a mark of one's goodness, or attempt at goodness, not one's place in the social hierarchy. Though it can be argued that performing many certain rituals still required time and resources that were not available to a large percentage of the peasant class, this taking of ritual from the noble class and

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<sup>11</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 17.21.

<sup>12</sup> Sin Yee Chan, "Gender and Relationship Roles in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*," 129.

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 12.1.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 29.

using it instead for establishing order was a profound notion that attempted to both give more power to the people and re-establish the fading order.

One area where Confucius stressed the importance of ritual was in speech, no doubt as a result of the declining social order of his time that brought with it many empty, albeit pretty, words. In the Spring and Autumn period, as discussed above, the provincial rulers were growing increasingly more powerful and as a result, more restless. Many began to claim titles that they either had not earned or were unworthy of, such as the title of the actual head of state, the Zhou king.<sup>18</sup> In addition, these provincial rulers and the central government were not, especially in Confucius' eyes, properly rectifying names, leading to actions not matching up with one's speech. In this way, Confucius also believed that the lack of proper speech and name rectification was a leading cause for the weakening government and its resulting social disorder, since names without rectification led to confusion and to people unsure of their roles.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Confucius called for doing away with elaborate speech without substance which, as shown by the numerous times it is mentioned throughout the *Analects*, must have been a common practice of the period. Confucius instead emphasized speech without arbitrariness.<sup>20</sup> This was an unusual request for the period since one's mastery of speech often was used as a way to display one's high intellect and broad knowledge, or was the original purpose in any case.<sup>21</sup> Thus Confucius again used already understood social precedents to encourage his message, using the idea of the king as the ultimate exemplar of the state as an example. "When the ruler is correct, his will is put into effect without the need for official orders. When the ruler's person is not correct, he will not be obeyed no matter how many orders he issues."<sup>22</sup> This suggests that when a ruler's speech is correct and matches his actions, his wishes will be understood by his ministers without his need to officially make an order. On the other hand, if his speech falls short of his actions and names are not rectified, no matter what his speech is like, his orders will not, or cannot, be carried out. Therefore, though it can be said that the idea of correcting one's speech to match their abilities was not an entirely new idea of Confucius, in a time where fanciful speech often got one farther than one's actual efforts, it was an enlightened idea that attempted to give more power to the actually intelligent and hard-working, instead of exclusively those manipulators with clever tongues.

### Self-Cultivation

Self-cultivation, especially in regards to the idea of the gentleman, or *junzi*, is likely the most discussed and esteemed teaching of Confucianism. During the Spring and Autumn period the term of "*junzi*" referred only to the noble and aristocratic class, carrying the connotation that only the elite and wealthy could be true "gentlemen."<sup>23</sup> In part, this was true. However, it was only true for the elite who could afford tutors for their children, as well as the time to devote to learning. Confucius sought to change this by

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 102

<sup>19</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 13.3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 74.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.6.

<sup>23</sup> Erica Brindley, "Why Use an Ox-Cleaver to Carve a Chicken?," *The Sociology of the Junzi Ideal in the Lunyu*, *Philosophy East and West* 59, no. 1 (January 2009), 48.

taking and redefining the term junzi: “The gentleman takes rightness as his substance, puts it into practice by means of ritual, gives it expression through modesty, and perfects it by being trustworthy. Now that is a gentleman!”<sup>24</sup> As this statement displays, Confucius defined junzi to mean those who aspired to be both morally correct and upright people, not simply those born into money and high status. Through this new definition Confucius suggested that any who practiced self-cultivation could become a gentleman, citing ritual, learning, and filial piety as the key vehicles to achieving the junzi status and true goodness.<sup>25</sup> This proposal was a revolutionary and dangerous idea, particularly in the Spring and Autumn period when making such a claim could easily get one silenced for good.<sup>26</sup> It was also likely one of the first times in ancient Chinese history that the social hierarchy was even brought into question, for civilized society as a whole was still in its infant years, having just come out of the tribal, hunter-gatherer stage.<sup>27</sup> Yet Confucius defied all this, attempting to claim the term junzi for lovers of learning and moral self-cultivation, in this way also trying to embolden those in the upper ranks of society to embrace his new definition as well. Though it can be disputed that Confucius’ new definition of junzi did not include women or a large part of the lower class, predominately because neither could leave their social obligations to devote themselves to self-cultivation, Confucius was still wildly progressive for his time and challenged society much more than any who had come before him.<sup>28</sup> It would have been quite outrageous if Confucius had defied every single unjust facet of the Spring and Autumn society and proclaimed all equal under heaven, since hierarchy privilege, prejudice, and sexism were deeply embedded and a part of everyday life in ancient China, not to mention the rest of the ancient world. Confucianism’s ideal of the junzi not only commandeered the term to apply outside nobility, but also paved the way for learning to be something other than a practice of the privileged class, establishing it as a right to any and all who desire to learn.

Self-cultivation, in particular moral superiority through learning, was also taught by Confucius, and yet was an unusual idea at the time. The Spring and Autumn period was a time where one earned praise and admiration for their feats in battle or hunting, not learning.<sup>29</sup> In addition, social mobility was lauded, especially if one could increase their income through either marriage or a job promotion.<sup>30</sup> Learning, much like today, was simply used as a means to increase one’s job prospects, if not merely to flaunt to others their social status. “In ancient times scholars learned for their own sake; these days they learn for the sake of others.”<sup>31</sup> Confucius, as this quote shows, once again utilized the past in his attempt to further his ideals, proposing that learning was once used to increase one’s own self-cultivation, not merely to impress others. In this fashion, Confucianism attempted to give strength to learning and the mind over brute strength and skill in battle, the latter requiring more talent than actual achievement in thought. Confucius even went so far as to suggest that, without a love of learning, one cannot truly be upright,

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 15.18.

<sup>25</sup> Brindley, “Why Use an Ox-Cleaver to Carve a Chicken?,” *The Sociology of the Junzi Ideal in the Lunyu*,” 52.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Brindley, “Why Use an Ox-Cleaver to Carve a Chicken?,” *The Sociology of the Junzi Ideal in the Lunyu*,” 53.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 26.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin A. Elman, “Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (February 1991): 21.

<sup>31</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 14.24.

trustworthy, virtuous, or even courageous.<sup>32</sup> In a period of ever-increasing warfare, with glory to be found in the mastery of killing and weaponry, it was a rebellious notion to suggest a truly cultivated and morally upright person was to be found in a school hard at work with his studies. Though it can be said that strength during the Spring and Autumn period had its merits, since a majority of the Chinese population were still farmers and war was ever on the horizon, the emphasis on learning over physical prowess marked the beginning of Chinese society's true "golden age", or the Tang Dynasty, where study and mastery of the histories was the mark of a superior person.<sup>33</sup> The idea of the mind as superior to marital skill would even permeate into the military sphere, as later famous Chinese military texts would show, establishing China's unique art of war. Regardless, learning as a means of self-cultivation and superior moral goodness was not only a progressive idea, but a transformative one in Chinese history.

### Achievement over Hierarchal Birthright

Probably the most broadminded teaching of Confucianism upon its creation was the idea that those who were knowledgeable, capable, and held intellectual achievements should be the ones to lead and help run the state, not those with mere hierarchal birthright. During a period where elites dominated most aspects of Chinese life, power was passed down from father to son, and was rarely extended outside a select sect of families, suggesting that privilege did not mark one's right to power was a risky insinuation.<sup>34</sup> Yet Confucius, as shown by his redefinition of the junzi, felt that one's intellectual and moral achievements should earn one a place of power and prestige, believing one's birth not to be sufficient enough to maintain order.<sup>35</sup> This extended even to rulers, where Confucius believed they too needed to emulate the virtuous sage kings and thus act an example for the people, not rely on being born a prince for their right to rule.<sup>36</sup>

Mencius, probably the most famous Confucian after Confucius himself, also promoted this. He wholeheartedly believed that an unvirtuous and evil ruler could be disposed.<sup>37</sup> "The petty person does not understand the Mandate of Heaven, and thus does not regard it with awe; he shows disrespect to great men, and ridicules the teachings of the sages."<sup>38</sup> This quote, attributed to Confucius, hints at how those who do not understand the Mandate of Heaven, or the will of heaven, were petty, with birthright offering no protection against this. Since it was understood that those who ruled did so with the Mandate of Heaven, it was likely a perilous claim for Confucius to make that the Mandate could be lost if one did not adhere to the teachings of the sages.<sup>39</sup> Though it is true that privilege continued to dominate Chinese society, with merit coming in second at best, and with merit itself being circumstantially tied to privilege, it was possibly by stressing the importance of achievements over hierarchal birthright that led to the civil service exams in later China. The government admitted men who passed the exams into civil service, which were graded based on their mastery of texts, instead of purely

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.8.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 162.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Dahua Cui and Huang Deyuan, "A Weakness in Confucianism: Private and Public Moralities," 634.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 521.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>38</sup> Ivanhoe and Van Norden, ed., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 16.8.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, 237.

through inheritance.<sup>40</sup> Confucianism’s stressing of achievement over hierarchal birthright was not only an incredibly progressive idea of the period, but for much of history, unarguably the highest teaching of the Confucian philosophy.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Confucianism was a highly progressive philosophy that, through its teachings of filial piety, ritual, self-cultivation, and the supremacy of achievement over hierarchal birthright, attempted to transform the tumultuous society of the Spring and Autumn period for the better. Through filial piety, Confucius strived to bring about a sense of peace and order to the most basic unit of society, in addition giving a measure of recognition to the often snubbed female class. Ritual was utilized in a similar fashion, its use meant to re-establish an order that supposedly existed in a “golden age” of Chinese history, or the founding of the Zhou Dynasty, which had been lost in Confucius’ time. In addition, speech, which is included under ritual, was to aid in civilizing interactions between peoples, who at the time were consistently feuding among themselves. Self-cultivation would take this idea a step further, meant to be taken up by any who wished to aspire to moral superiority, and thus civilize people on the individual level. By self-cultivation, Confucius intended to esteem the value of learning, urging it to be adopted by any and all who wished to study, taking it from the aristocrats and giving it to his junzi. Then, lastly, Confucianism’s most substantial teaching was that of achievement over hierarchal birthright, suggesting that the right to lead was earned, not handed down through birth. Thus Confucianism, though often viewed as an outdated thing of the past, was a philosophy that challenged the accepted norms of its society and encouraged others to do the same, quite easily making it a philosophy deserving of any open-minded person’s respect today.

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<sup>40</sup> Elman, “Political, Social, and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examinations in Late Imperial China,” 8.

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