Confucius and the Classical Confucian Tradition

Chinese Religions (Spring 09)
Lecture 3
Prof. M. Poceski
Spring and Autumn Era (春秋, 722–481 BCE)

- Political fragmentation during the Eastern Zhou 周 period (771–256 BC), following the decline of centralized power
- Creation of interstate alliances under the hegemony of the strongest states
- Social and technological advances, accompanied with economic expansion
The Life of Confucius (551–479 BCE?)

- Origin of the appellation “Confucius”: Latinization of Kong fuzi 孔夫子 (Master Kong), whose name was Kong Qiu 孔丘
- Birth and early life in the state of Lu 鲁, close to present-day Qufu 曲阜 (Shandong)
- Loss of his father at the age of three
- Traditional education in learning, deportment, and music
- Marriage and early service in minor governmental posts
The Life of Confucius (cont)

- Purported brief stints in high governmental office as a minister of public works and a minister of justice
- Ambition to play important role in public affairs by serving as an adviser to the ruler
- Unsuccessful search for a ruler who would heed his guidance during his middle years
- Career as a teacher
- Growth of a group of dedicated disciples
Temple of Confucius in Qufu
Confucius as Restorer of Traditional Wisdom and Values

The idealized image of enlightened governance under the Duke of Zhou 周公
Confucius’s positive view and enthusiastic embrace of Zhou culture and institutions
Confucius’s profound faith in the cumulative culture of the past
Recurrent Confucian emphasis on rediscovery, revitalization, and adaptation of the “living” traditions of the Zhou dynasty
Five (or Six) Classics

- **Book of Songs, Shijing** 詩經, an anthology of early Zhou verses
- **Book of Change, Yijing** 易經, a Zhou manual of divination
- **Book of Documents (History), Shujing** 書經, chronological collection of speeches, proclamations, and stories about ancient rulers (Zhou and pre-Zhou)
- **Spring and Autumn Annals, Chunqiu** 春秋, a chronicle of the state of Lu up to the time of Confucius
- **Three [Texts about] Rituals (Sanli 三禮)**, discussions of traditional rituals and governmental institutions, many from the Han period
- **Book of Music, Yuejing** 樂經 (lost before the Han period)
“Principles of Sacrifice”

.Record of Rites (Li Ji 禮記)

Of all the ways of governing human beings well, none is more compelling than ritual; of the five categories of rites, none is more important than sacrificial offerings. Sacrifice does not enter from without: it issues from within, in the mind. When the mind is in awe, it is expressed through ritual. Only worthies are able to plumb the meaning of sacrifice.

The sacrifices of worthy people may be described thus: the sacrificers perfect their sincerity and good faith with loyalty and reverence and then offer their votive gifts following the way of ritual, accompanying the rites with music and performing them at the appropriate time. They offer them openly, without seeking anything. This then is the attitude of the filial child.

By sacrificing, one continues to care for one's parents and act with filiality. Filiality means "to care for," and caring means according with the Way and not transgressing proper conventions of behavior. Filial people serve their parents in three ways: in life, they care for them; in death, they mourn them; when mourning is over, they sacrifice to them.

Sommer 35a
"The Great Learning" (Daxue 大学)
Record of Rites

- The **Way of the great learning** lies in clarifying bright virtue, loving the people, and abiding in the highest good.

- Only if one knows where to abide can one develop resolve, and only with resolve can one become tranquil. Only tranquility allows one to be restfully secure, and only with this security can one be reflective. Only by reflecting on things can one apprehend them.

- Things have their roots and their branches, and affairs have their beginnings and their ends. If one knows what should be first and what should be last, then one can draw near the Way.

  - Sommer 39
"The Great Learning" (cont)

In antiquity, those who wanted to clarify their bright virtue throughout the entire realm first had to govern their states well. Those who wanted to govern their states well first had to manage their own families, and those who wanted to manage their families first had to develop their own selves. Those who wanted to develop themselves first rectified their own minds, and those who wanted to rectify their minds first made their thoughts sincere. Those who wanted to make their thoughts sincere first extended their knowledge. Those who wanted to extend their knowledge first had to investigate things.

Sommer 39
Once things are investigated, knowledge can be extended. When knowledge is extended, thoughts can be made sincere; when thoughts are sincere, the mind can be rectified. When the mind is rectified, one can develop the self; once the self is developed, the family can be managed. When the family is managed, the state can be governed well; when the state is governed well, peace can prevail throughout the land.

From the Son of Heaven to the common people, everyone must consider developing the self to be the fundamental root of things. If the roots are confused, then the branches cannot be well governed. It should never happen that important things are trifled with, or that trifles are considered important.
Textual History of the Analects

- Compilation of the Confucian Analects (Lunyu 論語) after the death of Confucius, based on oral and written records compiled by his disciples, along with later additions.
- The text as an unorganized collection of statements and conversations of Confucius.
- Subsequent attainment of canonical status and its enduring popularity as the most revered text of the Confucian tradition.
Character of the Teachings of Confucius

- Lack of systematic doctrinal structure
- Concern with humanistic values and the organization of social life
  - Focus on the perfection of human conduct, cultivated in a social context through engaging and maintaining various sets of relationships with other people
  - Vision of *dao* 道 as a normative sociopolitical order consisting of networks of familial and sociopolitical roles and statuses, as well as prescriptions for proper behavior—ritual and ethical—that govern human relationships
- Disinterest in the supernatural realm
Confucius on the Supernatural

“The Master did not talk about marvels, feats of strength, irregularities, gods.” (LY 7/21)

(In response to a question about serving ghosts and gods) “Until you can serve men how can you serve the ghosts?” (Question about death) “Until you know about life how can you know about death?” (LY 11/12)

Ambiguous acknowledgement of the preternatural: “To work at doing right for the people, and to be reverent to the ghosts and gods but keep them at a distance, may be called wisdom.” (LY 6/22; cf. Sommer, p. 47)
Images of Human Perfection

- The *Sage* (*shengren 聖人*) as the highest ideal character; Confucius: “How can I dare to be a sage or a benevolent man?” (LY 7.34)
- The *True Gentlemen* (*junzi 君子*), a person of cultivated moral character
- Redefinition of nobility as something that must be acquired by development of virtue and wisdom, not as something that is obtained by birth
- Self-cultivation as a way to self-improvement and humanitarian service
- Cultivation of proper conduct and disposition within a social context
Realization of Dao & Critique of Recluses

The master said: “At fifteen I was intent on study, at thirty I had established myself, at forty I had no uncertainty, at fifty I knew the mandate of heaven, at sixty I was in constant accord with things, and at seventy I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping convention.” (Sommer 43)

The master said: “It is enough that someone who dies in the evening has heard of the Way only that morning.” (Sommer 44)

“One cannot flock together with birds and beasts. If I do not associate with human beings, then with whom should I associate? If the Way prevailed within the world, then I would not try to change it.” (LY 18/7, Sommer, p. 48)
Confucian Conception of Ren 仁

- Ren is always concerned with human relationships
- Translations of ren: “Benevolence,” “Humanity,” “Nobility”
- Key connotations of the basic concept
  - Attainment of human excellence that is a whole that embraces all separate virtues
  - Unselfish concern for the well-being of others
- Realization of Ren
  - Conquest of the self
  - “Return to ceremony/rites”—spontaneous adherence to fixed behavioral forms, based on genuine realization of their true meaning
Principle of Li 禮 (Ritual, Proper Conduct)

- Original meaning of li as “religious rite”
- Later expansion of its meaning to include formal patterned behavior of any kind, from court ceremonial to everyday polite manners
**Function and Understanding of Li**

- A standard of social conducts that encompasses adherence to all sacred rituals, ceremonies, and manners of proper conduct
- A set of principles that regulate the ways persons relate to each other in terms of their roles, ranks, and positions in a structured society
- Realization of social harmony when everybody performs his/her role with genuine sincerity; “The ruler rules, the minister ministers, fathers are fatherly, sons are sonly” (LY 12.11).
- Conception of rites not only as proper conduct, but also as proper state of mind
- Proper ritual practice requires right inner disposition
Basic Confucian Virtues

- Focus on virtues associated with the family, esp. filial piety
- Filial piety as the first step on the road towards moral perfection
- Family ethics as the basis for the realization of public good
- Patriarchal character of Confucian norms and values
- Patronizing attitudes towards the common people: because of their limited intellectual capacity, “the common people can be made to follow a path, but not to understand it.” (LY 8.9)
Interpersonal Relationships

The five relationships
- Father and son
- Ruler and minister
- Husband and wife
- Elder and younger brother
- Friend and friend

Codification of hierarchical social relationships

Mutual responsibilities and personal bonds imbedded in the relationships between senior and juniors, superiors and inferiors, etc.
Rivals of the Confucians 1: The Mohists

- Mozi 墨子 (479–381 BCE?) and his followers
  - Mozi’s commoner background and early study of Confucianism
  - Subsequent criticism of the Confucians
  - Compilation of the book of Mozi by his disciples

- Basic Mohist ideas
  - Belief in Heaven (God) and spirits
  - Criticism of the cult of human ancestors, esp. elaborate burial practices
  - Advocacy of universal love, based on the notion that Heaven loves all equally
  - Stringent pacifism and activist opposition to war

- Recent praises of Mohist teachings by Christian missionaries and Marxist ideologues alike
Rivals of the Confucians 2: The Legalists (fajia 法家)

- Han Feizi’s (d. 233 BC) teaching that human beings are inherently selfish and antisocial
- Focus on maintaining and strengthening the state’s power
- Advocacy of practical statecraft, with rationalized administration and strict enforcement of punitive laws
- Use of penal law to maintain power and deter political opposition, with the assumption that the end justifies the means
Mengzi 孟子

- Mencius’ (371–289 BCE?) difficult and fatherless childhood
- Influence of his virtuous and wise mother on his moral and intellectual development
- Travel to various feudal states in a largely unsuccessful search for a ruler who will heed his advice and implement his teachings
- Collection of his teachings in a book titled *Mengzi*
Mengzi’s Teachings

- Focus on human nature (xing 性) and inner predispositions
- Belief that all men are basically good and naturally endowed with all the qualities necessary to actualize human perfection, including an ability to distinguish right from wrong
- Everybody can become a sage by recovering his/her lost mind
The Sayings of Mengzi

“All people have a mind of commiseration; all have a mind of shame and dislike; all have a mind of respect and reverence; all have a mind that distinguishes right and wrong.... Humanity, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom are not instilled in us from outside.” (Sommer 57)

“All things are complete within ourselves. There is no greater happiness than daily to reflect within ourselves and be sincere. Nothing comes close to seeking humanity than to be genuinely considerate in one’s conduct.” (Sommer 58)

“Humanity is the very mind of human beings, and righteousness is the road they must take. To neglect this road and not follow it is to lose one’s mind and not know where to find it. Alas! When people lose a chicken or a dog, they know how to find it, but when they lose this mind, they do not. The way of study and inquiry is nothing more than seeking this lost mind.” (Sommer 58-59)
The Four Ethical Principles or Inborn Virtues

- **Humanity** (*ren* 仁), benevolence concern for others
- **Righteousness** (*yi* 義), conformity of thought and actions to moral principles
- **Ritual** (*li* 礼), propriety or knowledge of proper behavior
- **Wisdom** (*zhi* 智), ability to understand and distinguish right from wrong
Xunzi 荀子 (fl. 298–238 BCE)

- Association with the Legalist tradition, including study with Li Si, the prime minister of Qin, and Han Fei
- View of human beings as fundamentally antisocial, based on the premise that human nature is inherently evil
- People can be trained to act morally, which is the main role of education in its Confucian form
“Human nature is evil...if people follow their natures and accommodate their emotions, struggling and fighting will invariably ensue, and they will transgress their stations in life, upset principles, and turn to violence. Only with the transformations of standards and teachers and the ways of ritual and righteousness can courtesy and civility appear, and under those circumstances people can develop refined culture and principles and turn to good governance. If one looks at it in this way, then it is clear that human nature is evil, and that goodness is conscious effort.”

Sommer 69
Mengzi & Xunzi: Similarity & Contrast

- Different views of human nature
- Common belief in human perfectibility
- Greater influence of Xunzi in early Confucianism
- Subsequent emergence of Mengzi’s teaching as Confucian orthodoxy, esp. from the Song period onward
Unification of China

Intellectual ferment amidst political discord and violence during the Warring States period (403–221 BCE)

Qin’s (221–206 BCE) conquests and the first political unification of China under imperial rule

Establishment of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and consolidation of the imperial state
Burning of Confucian Books under the first emperor of the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE)
Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor
Han 漢 Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE)
Confucianism Under the Han

- Interactions between Confucianism, Daoism, Legalism, and other theories and traditions
- Joining of Confucian moral and political values with cosmological theories
- Bestowal of imperial endorsement on Confucianism during the reign of Emperor Wu (r. 140–86 BCE), under the influence of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (c. 179–104 BCE)
Confucianism as Imperial Ideology

- E. Wu’s proclamations regarding the role of Confucianism
  - Confucianism becomes the ideological basis of imperial rule
  - Only Confucians serve as government officials
  - The national university will use the Confucian classics as its curriculum

- Uses of Confucianism as official ideology of the imperial state under subsequent dynasties

- Mixing of Confucian moralism with Legalist pragmatism in Chinese statecraft and exercise of political power