

CHAPTER 13

The Teachings of Confucianism

Customs and traditions are the glue that keeps a society together. Through generations of trial and error, certain ways of behaving are found to be beneficial. These customs are transmitted from generation to generation primarily through the family. In family life people learn the values and expectations of their society and how to behave appropriately. If a custom becomes outdated, it is naturally modified or gradually dropped. In such a society explicit laws are not needed, since people internalize these values and naturally do what is right.

Early China was neither more nor less turbulent than other lands. However, between the eighth and third centuries BC, the long-lasting Chou dynasty collapsed. The loss of its ordering power and authority was accompanied by social breakdown. Rival regional warlords and robber barons replaced central government. The noble code that had traditionally guided soldiers was also forgotten, and entire populations were sometimes put to the sword. People became more individualistic and self-centered. They no longer followed the traditional way of life or accepted the former sources of authority.

Out of this confusion emerged groups and individuals with conflicting and sometimes equally plausible solutions to the problems facing the country. Two of the most notable groups were the Realists and the Mohists:

The Realists

This group, led by Han Fei, claimed to have an answer for the anarchy that was erupting everywhere. They believed that:

- ✗ People are selfish, greedy, lustful, and lazy
- ✗ Force is the only thing people understand
- ✗ Clear, detailed laws are necessary
- ✗ Laws must be vigorously and harshly enforced
- ✗ Order is to be imposed and maintained by the rulers, who alone know what is best for the long-term good of the nation.

The Mohists

Offering a very different kind of solution were the followers of Mo Tzu. They thought that the conflict between people and states occurred because of a lack of

Universal love is to regard the state of others as one's own, the houses of others as one's own, the persons of others as one's own. When all the people in the world love one another, then the strong will not overpower the weak, the many will not oppress the few, the wealthy will not mock the poor, the honored will not disdain the humble, and the cunning will not deceive the simple.

— Mo Tzu

mutual love. So instead of force they advocated universal love.

Confucius could see that the policies being advocated by the Realists and Mohists would not work in the long term. He rejected the Realists' program because it was clumsy and externally oriented. Laws are appropriate for dealing with criminals but are too crude to regulate family and social relationships. Laws can stipulate the conditions of marriage and divorce but do not in themselves create a climate that generates love and companionship. He was also more optimistic about human nature.

In acting as a judge at lawsuits, I am as good as anyone. But the thing is to aim so that there should not be any lawsuits at all.

Confucius also vigorously opposed the Mohists. When someone asked Confucius, "Should one love one's enemy, those who do us harm?" he replied, "By no means. Answer hatred with justice, and love with benevolence. Otherwise you would waste your benevolence." Furthermore, Confucius regarded such indiscriminating love as corrupting the very basis of society, since it denied there were gradations in love.

If one treats a stranger as one's father, one will end up treating one's father as a stranger.

It is only natural and indeed right to love one's parents more than other members of the family, other members of the family more than members of the same village, and so on until one reaches humanity at large. Benevolence is a natural extension of the natural love for one's parents to humanity as a whole. Therefore, for Confucius, to love without discrimination would be to deny one's parents.

Confucius' solution

Confucius recognized that the problem in society was the loss of values that accompanied the breakdown of tradition. This was why people had no sense of decency and no longer behaved properly. Confucius proposed to inculcate moral values through education so that individuals could cultivate their natural and normal state of goodness. Only if people would be good spontaneously and naturally would it be possible for the restoration of social peace and order.

Although he always appealed to the past for authority, Confucius was in fact an innovator. He did not aim to restore the old tradition, which he realized was neither possible nor desirable. Instead he proposed a modified, renewed and modernized tradition.

These are the main elements of Confucius' teaching that formed the basis for a renewed and enduring Asian civilization.

1. Jen

For Confucius benevolence (*Jen*) is the most important moral quality that a person may possess. It is the virtue of respecting others as one respects oneself. Confucius described this reciprocal ethical dynamic as the model for



A disciple asked, "Is there one single word that can be a guide to conduct throughout one's life?" Confucius replied, "Perhaps the word 'reciprocity' will do. Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you."

Tzu Chang asked Confucius the meaning of Jen, whereupon Confucius replied: "To be able wherever one goes to carry five things into practice constitutes Jen." On begging to know what they were, he was told: "They are respect, magnanimity, sincerity, earnestness and kindness. With respect you will avoid insult; with magnanimity you will win over everyone; with sincerity men will trust you; with earnestness you will have achievement; and with kindness you will be well fitted to command others."

human relationships.

A person of Jen has such a large heart that he does not discriminate between people on the basis of their nationality, since for him "within the four seas all are brothers and sisters."

2. *Chun tzu*

Chun tzu reflects the ideal moral character to which everyone should aspire. It is usually translated as "gentleman" or "superior man" or perhaps just "mature person." Confucius uttered many sayings about what such a person should be like, often contrasting the superior man with the inferior man:

The mature person blames himself; the immature person blames others.

The gentleman understands what is right. The small man understands what will sell.

The gentleman helps others to realize what is good in them; he does not help them to realize what is bad in them. The small man does the opposite.

The gentleman is ashamed of his word outstripping his deed.

The mature person is friendly but not familiar; the immature person is familiar but not friendly.

The mature person dislikes those who like to criticize people or reveal their weaknesses. He dislikes those who, in the position of inferiors, like to malign or spread rumors about those in authority. He dislikes those who are headstrong but are not restrained by propriety. He dislikes those whose resoluteness is not tempered by understanding.

True manhood consists in realizing your true self and restoring moral order and discipline. If a man can just for one day realize his true self, and restore completely moral discipline, the world will follow him. To be a true man depends on you. What has it got to do with others?

3. *Li*



Confucius thought that an ideal social order could only be established through *Li*, the principle of mutual respect and courtesy, including the ideas of propriety, good manners, ceremony, ritual and the ideal social order in which everyone has his place. The social order should be a reflection of the good order and harmony that exist in the universe. An ideal society is one in which there is freedom, but this freedom does not lead to conflict and injustice because everyone is moral and behaves appropriately in relationships with other people. Parents would be good parents,

children would be good children, governments would govern well and people would be good citizens. In a society composed of Li everyone would live in moral harmony with each other. In such a society government itself would be unnecessary. This is why in answer to the Realists Confucius said:

Guide the people by governmental measures and keep them in line with punishments, and the people will try to keep out of jail, but will have no sense of honor or shame. Guide them by virtue and regulate them by Li, and they will, besides having a sense of honor and respect, reform themselves.

Confucius knew that people were not fulfilling their responsibilities. Governments instead of serving the people were exploiting them, fathers were not behaving as fathers ought to and sons were not being good sons. If people learned how to be good sons, fathers and rulers, then a harmonious and moral social order would naturally arise.

Confucius identified five relationships he thought made up the fabric of society. It is vital for a healthy society that these relationships be properly constituted. In each relationship there are appropriate ways of communicating and behaving. When we know how to behave in any situation, we feel comfortable and “at home” wherever we are. However, when we find ourselves in a situation in which we do not know how to behave appropriately, we are very uncomfortable. We feel “like a fish out of water.” Apart from being uncomfortable, it is easy to unwittingly offend others. This is why Confucius was so concerned about ceremony.

Confucius wanted to re-establish the life of ritual, ceremony and courtesy. He realized that ritual brings about in a wor-

shiper a respectful or God-fearing state of mind. There is a right way to worship and particular rituals to be observed at the temples. There are proper ways for people to behave in public. There are proper protocols and formalities to be followed by governments. There are ceremonies for all the rites of passage: birth, adolescence, marriage and death. These rituals help to define the relationships between people. He said:

What are the human duties? Kindness in the father, filial piety in the son, gentility in the elder brother, humility and respect in the younger brother, good behavior in the husband, obedience in the wife, benevolence in the elders, and obedience in the juniors, benevolence in the ruler and loyalty in the subjects.

Confucius warned that when these ceremonies are disregarded, social chaos follows. If marriage ceremonies are taken lightly or even disregarded, marital relationships become difficult and promiscuity will become rampant. If the ceremonies of communal celebrations are ignored, the sense of order and discipline between elders and juniors is lost, and disputes and fighting will be common. If funeral rites are disregarded, the sense of gratitude of children toward their parents and deceased ancestors will decay, and people will indulge themselves. If diplomatic protocol is not observed, the relations between governments become strained and wars may follow.

Still more important than ritual is the heart behind it. As Confucius said:

When a man is not virtuous (Jen), of what account are his ceremonial manners (Li)? When a man is not virtuous, of what account is his music?

The Five Relationships

- Father and son
- Husband and wife
- Elder brother and younger brother
- Elder friend and younger friend
- Ruler and subject



4. Te

Governments alone rule by power. However, Confucius recognized the universal rule that government based on physical force never lasts. It is oppressive and eventually crumbles because it lacks the support of the people. Showing no respect for the individual, it denies people freedom and responsibility. It has power but is without moral authority. Therefore, winning and keeping the confidence of the people are more important. This should be achieved through rulers' personal moral behavior and loving the people. *Te* is the moral power of example that enables good rulers to achieve their desires without force. According to Confucius:

When the ruler does what is right, he will have influence over the people without giving commands, and when the ruler himself does not do what is right, all his commands will be of no avail. If a ruler rectifies his own conduct, government is an easy matter, and if he does not rectify his own conduct, how can he rectify others?

To change his society and restore true values, Confucius put great emphasis on education, not merely of the intellect but of the whole character. When people can learn from the wisdom of scholars, they will not make unnecessary mistakes.

5. Wen

Finally, Confucius put great value on the arts. He recognized the power of the arts — music, dance and painting — to transform and influence people in the direction of goodness. When we hear great music, see great art, or watch a skilled dance performance, our spirits are lifted up and our souls are transfigured. The whole purpose of music and ritual is but to “set the human heart right” so that a harmonious social community can come about.

The ultimate victory, Confucius thought, goes not to the nation with the biggest army, but to the nation with the highest culture — the finest art, the noblest philosophy and the grandest poetry. It is these things that are spontaneously admired by people the world over. This is why again and again barbarian invaders have succumbed to a superior culture. Although China was invaded countless times, its conquerors almost immediately adopted Chinese customs and learning and were soon assimilated. The same happened to the barbarian tribes who invaded the Roman empire. They were awed by a superior culture and aspired to become Romans.

Did it work?

There are different ways to make a sizable impact on human history. Recently, scientific and technological changes have made great improvements in standards of living. However, if we look back, we will see that 2,000 years ago the Romans had central heating and built superb roads. All this was lost during the Dark Ages that followed the decline of Rome, and it is only recently that we have achieved a comparable standard of living. Although from the media one gets the impression that political activity is of the greatest significance, in the long run political change is seldom lasting and is often reversed. In any case, the ideals and values on which politicians base their policies have a source outside the realm of politics. It is the founders of religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism who have had the



greatest individual impact on human history. They were the ones who shaped the worldview and provided the values that have formed the background for science, politics, economics, art and literature.

The impact of Confucius' teaching supports this contention. Although his own career was undistinguished, he founded a class of scholars who were to become China's ruling elite. He himself became the most important figure in Chinese history. In 130 BC, the study of Confucian texts became the basic discipline for the training of government officials, a pattern that continued until the Chinese Empire collapsed in 1905. Confucianism did not merely affect government. Confucian values were so absorbed by the Chinese people that it is not possible to separate them.

For more than 2,000 years his teachings have profoundly affected a quarter of the world's population. The countries of East Asia, Japan, Korea and much of Southeast Asia deliberately imported the Confucian ethic. Confucianism was associated with and supported the feudal system. However, in the late 20th Century Confucianism has adapted to modern situations such as the free market.

Shaped by the Confucian ethic, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and now China itself have become the dynamic center of world economic growth. Many scholars now talk about the new century being the Pacific Era.

Something to think about



- What is the role of tradition in the preservation and transmission of knowledge and good behavior from one generation to the next?
- How do customs and traditions contribute to social peace?
- How would you have dealt with the social problems China faced?
- Why did Confucius reject the Realists' solution?
- How practical do you think the Mohists' proposal was?
- What do you think of Confucius' observation that if "one treats a stranger as one's father, one will end up treating one's father as a stranger"?
- Can you think of any people who have had *Te*, the moral power and authority to influence people?
- Does the most superior culture ultimately triumph?
- Why did Confucius put such great value upon education?
- Discuss the view that excessive reverence for tradition leads to the ossification of society.

Debate



"This side believes that force is the only way to re-establish social order"

"This side believes that one should love one's enemies"
