

Virtue and the Individual: Confucius' Conception of International Society

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Confucius, or K'ung Fu-tzu, had many ideas of what a proper society should be and how it should function. These ideas were a product of an ancient Chinese society that believed that oceans on all four sides of their land surrounded the inhabited world. This space included the Chinese people themselves as well as those people they recognized as culturally distinct.¹ This idea, as well as that of the non-existence of the contemporary definition of the nation must be considered when examining Confucius' views of international relations. The Chinese regarded many of these people who were culturally distinct as barbarians. In great part, Confucius' views on the nature of international relations stem from his conception of the virtuous individual. This essay will examine the conceptions of international society of this great ancient Chinese philosopher and teacher, through an analysis of his conceptions of the nature of man and state. Moreover, this paper will also examine the historical and contemporary significance of Confucius' teachings.

Confucius' Concept of the Nature of the Human Being

Confucius' concept of the nature of the human being centres mainly on his theories regarding virtues and human relations. Indeed, the philosopher believed that a virtuous person could transform anyone who did not practice Confucian ideals, simply by living amongst them for a period of time thereby exposing them to virtue. Confucius thus believed that it was simply a matter of time before all people would be absorbed into the Chinese world due to the power of Confucian virtue.² Within the parameters of such traits, Confucius places the ideas of "jen" (goodness and virtue), the "harmony chain", "tao" (the way), the importance of the family, "i" (righteousness or justice), "chung-shu" (loyalty and consideration), and "li" (propriety or justice). Confucius uses these concepts to identify the way he believes common people, public servants, and especially rulers should act. Virtues are of supreme importance to Confucius. He wants people to be virtuous in everyday action. He identifies the main virtues to be humaneness, dutifulness, wisdom, good faith, and observance of ritual.³ He believes humaneness to be the most important of these virtues, as he says it plays an integral role in social relationships. Confucius defines humaneness in two parts: The first is to have an attitude of reverence in human relationships and to behave respectfully at all times; the second is to show consideration of others by not carrying out actions one would not want done to oneself.⁴

Humaneness is most closely linked to the idea of "jen", a main component of Confucian philosophy. In its simplest form, "jen" signifies goodness or virtue. When expanded by Confucius and his followers, the concept is a whole universe and an attitude towards life. It is supreme in the teachings of Confucius. To explain this complex term, Confucius said that "jen" could best be demonstrated in how a man lives his life among his peers, specifically to be compassionate, understanding, and sympathetic towards the feelings and sufferings of others.⁵ He explains that "jen" is the highest perfection of goodness and that although people may strive to achieve it, few succeed.⁶ The Chinese pictograph character for the term is composed of two symbols, that of a man and the number two. Together, these symbols imply that man is unable to exist in the world alone and must live among his peers. Confucius extrapolates this basic idea and develops it into a way of life that specifies that man should live in the world aiding, respecting, and ultimately understanding others.⁷ The individual must possess the qualities the philosopher outlines and only then society may be virtuous. Confucius hopes that all individuals will achieve "jen" and thus lead a jen-like existence.

In fact, the concept of “jen” is an integral part of Confucius’ conception of international relations, as seen through the idea of the “harmony chain”. Specifically, if the individual can put the “jen” way of life into practice, then this concept will spread to one’s family, then state, then country, and eventually to the world.⁸ The idea of the “harmony chain” also applies, in Confucian theory, to virtues. Harmony, for Confucius, means having everything in its place, and functioning properly, with virtues. Confucius believes that if every person can put the virtues of courtesy, generosity, good faith, diligence, and kindness into practice, then everything under heaven will be humane, through the means of the “harmony chain”.⁹ Indeed, “if you behave with courtesy, then you will not be insulted; if you are generous, then you will win the multitude; if you are in good faith, then other men will put their trust in you; if you are diligent, then you will have success; and if you are kind, then you will be able to command others.”¹⁰ According to the philosopher, this concept is applicable at the international level: If all people exemplify the aforementioned virtues, relations between humans, whether in government or civilians, would be peaceful and harmonious.

Another central component of Confucian theory is the concept of “tao” or “the way.” Like “jen”, “tao” is also an abstract concept, in the sense that it is not easily definable. In Chinese, “tao” simply means road or path. However, according to Confucius, the term means “the way”, and applies to the nature of man, the state, and international relations, as it represents the manner in which he thought that behaviour should be conducted between individuals and states worldwide. Confucius explains that “if all under heaven have the way” or a particular state “has the way,” moral principles prevail.¹¹ If an individual has “tao” or “the way”, he or she acts properly and is a person with an outstanding moral character. Confucius states: “my way is pervaded by a single principle,”¹² but he never specifies the principle. However, according to Herrlee Glessner Creel, if Confucius’ major work, *The Analects*, and its historical setting are studied closely, the principle of a cooperative world is apparent.¹³ Confucius is convinced that suspicion, strife, and suffering are largely unnecessary, while cooperation between people of the earth is possible, for war and injustice hurt everyone, even those who supposedly profit from them.

Confucius notes that each person’s way differs according to his or her interests and abilities. According to the author, this is important and indeed correct, because of the many different things to be accomplished in the world. He explains, “what is important is that each man pursue his own way with virtue and be honest to himself.”¹⁴ Since the “tao” of each man differs, Confucius believes that ultimately the final test for following the right path and doing the proper thing is left to the individual.¹⁵ This point further emphasizes the Confucian notion that the individual is at the centre of international relations. How one chooses to conduct his or her life and its inherent aspects reflects his or her relations with others. At the international level, if a country decides to be virtuous in its interactions, it will be more respectable and conducive to peace than a country choosing to be unscrupulous in its interactions.

Moreover, Creel specifies that such a cooperative world is based on the relationship between members of a family.¹⁶ The family is and has been a very important unit in China. A virtue that Confucius emphasizes is that of filial piety. The virtue consists of being respectful to one’s parents and always obeying them. Filial piety is an important factor for Confucius because ancient Chinese society, before his time, was based on the family unit. Indeed, in the early days of the Chou dynasty, plots of land were allotted to feudal lords in a system of planned colonisation. These lords were linked to one another and to the royal house by marital ties and together with their families, peasants, artisans, and soldiers formed self-sufficient agricultural economies. These large family groupings were only preserved as long as the relationships of parents to children, of brothers to brothers, and of masters to servants, were effectively managed. Filial piety was necessary for the health and survival of the family, and, in turn, ancient Chinese society. Confucius realized that if this virtue was not practised and respected, the family as a social unit would fall into ruin, as he had seen happen to many prominent families in his lifetime.¹⁷ Therefore, in order to respect filial piety, he maintains that one must not harm the physical body that one receives from his or her parents and that one should establish one’s character and practise “the way”, so

as to make one's reputation known. In turn, by doing so, this will bring glory upon one's parents.¹⁸ Critics challenge Confucius in this respect, maintaining that the family and the state, or, similarly, that "tao" and filial piety are in conflict. In *The Analects*, the Duke of Shê provides the example that if one's father steals a sheep and one is following "the way", he or she would testify against his or her father. This would therefore go against the virtue of filial piety and consequently against "the way". Confucius replies that the individual is to protect the father and thereby follow "the way" and protect filial piety. With this response, Confucius displays that he does not believe the state and the family to be fundamentally opposed. He explains that it is in the family that the individual learns attitudes of obedience and cooperation, and gains experience in socialized activity, which make it possible for he or she to be a useful citizen and/or official.¹⁹

Furthermore, "i", according to Confucius, signifies righteousness or justice. He defines it more concretely than the abstract concepts of "jen" and "tao". He defines this concept as something that is fitting, right, or seemly.²⁰ He believes that people must learn to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong, through concrete situations of life and only then may they achieve "i". Confucius feels that loyalty and consideration or "chung-shu" is of great importance for those individuals involved in public life. By loyalty, Howard D. Smith suggests that Confucius implies serving wholly with all one's heart, whereas, by consideration, the ancient Chinese philosopher refers to putting oneself in the place of others.²¹ Confucius believes this to be an important characteristic for man to possess in order to properly interact with other members of his community, especially in the public forum. Though Confucius stresses loyalty to one's leader, nonetheless he acknowledges that it is more important to remain constant to one's own principles.

The final main component of Confucius' philosophy of the nature of man is that of "li". Translated, the term means propriety or the rules of good behaviour. It is simply the interactions of polite society and the proper way to conduct oneself. Confucius specified that two elements are necessary to achieve "li" within a society. The first is to bring about an inner peace of mind to people, so that they have a proper outlet for each emotion that arises, and that emotions are not expressed in an unbridled manner. The second element is to have an external restraint upon one's conduct, so that one does not exceed what is deemed to be right and proper.²² The term has much to do with the performance of rituals in certain situations, such as proceedings in a court, for example, or the proper and respectful way to conduct a funeral. Confucius is careful to emphasize that if the actions are not carried out with sincerity, then "li" is not being observed.²³

Fundamentally, Confucius is very optimistic about the ability of the individual. In his view of a cooperative world, the individual is of utmost importance. He believes simplistically that the world can be no better than all of the individuals who are part of it. Confucius notes that if many of these individuals lack most moral values, the world is in danger. This is why the philosopher emphasizes the aforementioned virtues and ethical processes. This is further exemplified by the notion offered by Confucius, largely regarded as a revolutionary one, that men of all classes possess worth in themselves, not just those of noble birth. Consequently, people must not be treated as means by which the state accomplishes its purposes, but as the ends for which the state exists.²⁴ This indicates the interconnectedness of individual and state within the teachings of the ancient Chinese philosopher.

Confucius' Conceptions of the State

Confucius' conceptions of the state are rooted mainly in what he disliked about his home state of Lu. He was against a feudal state and wanted a society based on order, harmony, respect, ethics, and fraternity. These values are parallel to those that Confucius expected of individuals, because he felt that the state should reflect the individuals that compose it. Ultimately, Confucius' thoughts on the nature of

the state may be examined by discussing his views of the individual in government, the importance of ritual, virtue, litigation, education, and the role of a good leader.²⁵

Confucius believed that the government should benefit all people, not just the representatives involved therein. Keeping in line with the themes of individuality and virtue, Confucius wanted a social order that was based on personal ethics where the political is the result of the personal. This is to say that, if people are virtuous and kind, then the state can be so as well. Furthermore, if harmony is to be present in the state, it must begin with the people.²⁶ Confucius was often asked how one could contribute to government. To this question, he offered the idea of personal contribution through actions. He is quoted in *The Analects* as having said, "only be dutiful towards your parents and friendly towards your brothers, and you will be contributing to government."²⁷ Confucius implies that the practice of social virtues, within the family, by those without political power, makes a significant contribution to government, by contributing to social harmony, which he believed to be the purpose of government.²⁸

Even though Confucius believed that the purpose of government was to strive for social harmony, he failed to see how the government of Lu, his home state, tried to provide this. He used subtle language in his work, entitled *Spring and Autumn*, to criticize the political situation in Lu, describing it as decadent. Confucius was irritated with the Duke of Lu, because the Duke was reluctant to give Confucius a position in government, in which the philosopher would have implemented his ideas. Although, Confucius was later given a position with a prestigious title, he was given little real advising power. Angered, Confucius went on a mission, spreading his word of ethics, virtuosity, and morality in neighbouring states, hoping to enlighten them.²⁹ Moreover, Confucius was convinced that since Lu was not a properly run state, it could not be effective in relations with other states.

In terms of how a state should be run, Confucius felt that ritual and tradition were very important aspects. He thought the correct performance of ritual to be essential to the welfare of the state. These beliefs stem from the influence that the decline of the culture of the Chou dynasty in China, partially due to the abandonment of rituals, such as sacrifices and judicial processes, had on Confucius. Indeed, what most appalled Confucius was the decline in morality of the Duke of Lu. Controlled by three families, the Duke was occupied with food, drink and debauchery.³⁰ For Confucius, rituals were necessary in many facets of life such as etiquette, relations with people, and matters of government. He stressed the significance of rituals by stating: "if the ruler loves ritual, the people will be easy to employ."³¹

In line with ritual, Confucius also felt that virtue was an integral part of a state. As previously mentioned, a main theme in Confucian philosophy is virtue: It is important not only in an individual but in the state as well. He believed that a true king would be able to run a state politically and virtuously. By doing so, the king would be able to convert the populace of the state, so that all behave virtuously and harmoniously. Therefore, in order to have proper states, it is necessary to have virtuous leaders. For this to happen, Confucius wanted a bloodless revolution where those with wisdom and virtue replaced the power of rulers who inherited their thrones. He felt that wise and virtuous leaders were better equipped to run a state than someone who was simply born into power. Confucius felt that if such a bloodless revolution were to occur, the virtue of loyalty would be possible between the people and their ruler, thus helping to create the ideal virtuous society.³²

Confucius and his followers believe so strongly in the power of virtue and ritual that they take a negative view of litigation, feeling that if all people observe the moral code, there would be no need for lawyers and litigation within the state. This view, however, contrasted sharply with that of the Legalists who felt that it was necessary to control people through fear and stringent punishment. Ironically, the former view did not promote good inter-state and intra-state relations. Confucius gives two main reasons not to control people by penal law. The first is that laws cannot take into account all possible circumstances of a situation, so it is better to leave matters of judgment to morally qualified individuals,

rather than applying a mechanical legal code. The second reason is that law controls merely through fear of punishment and does not build moral character within a person. Indeed, “if you lead the people by means of regulations and keep order among them by means of punishment, they will be without conscience in trying to avoid them. If you lead them by virtue, and keep order among them by ritual, they will have a conscience and will reform themselves.”³³ Law does not educate, rectify past deeds, or make any contribution towards the Confucian aims of transforming people, where the emulation of virtuous role models would.³⁴ In turn, if a state is corrupt because it contains corrupt individuals, it will be unsuccessful in building positive and mutually beneficial relations with other states.

Despite Confucius’ distaste for the operations of the governments of his time, he wanted to reform them and in teaching his pupils, he had the ultimate goal of educating the right kind of people for positions in government. Thus his education policy was linked to political ideas, and one of the foremost aims of Confucianism was to produce a constant supply of the right kind of people for government and administrative service.³⁵ Confucius felt that since he was unable to completely impact the decisions of his government, he would educate the young who, should they become leaders, would influence governments using his teachings as a base. Through education, Confucius fundamentally felt that he could change all of China. As previously mentioned, he briefly held a position in the government of Lu and hoped that by setting an example, a form of education, he could affect the relations between states and the relations of China with outside territories. He thought that the influence of a virtuous Lu would spread throughout China.³⁶ Nevertheless, as previously stated, Confucius’ position did not offer him this power.

Confucius also placed great importance upon the role of a good and strong leader. He felt that a ruler had a significant impact upon how a people acted. In a discussion with the Duke of Lu, Confucius said, “if you act in a proper manner as a ruler, the people will act as proper subjects and you will have to kill none of them. If you act improperly, if you are not good yourself, the people will act badly no matter how many you kill. The actions of the people are like the grass. The grass bends in the direction that the wind blows.”³⁷ Confucius suggested that a proper ruler had to learn how to govern himself properly before he could hope to properly govern his people. He must follow “tao” and be a virtuous person to do this. Simply put, Confucius believed a ruler should possess the qualities of the ideal Confucian, those of “jen”, filial piety, and loyalty. The people under the ruler also play an important role. Confucius felt that they should be loyal to their leader, if he is just and good to them. Conversely, if he is tyrannical, then Confucius advocated rebellion. To understand the importance Confucius placed on the ideal ruler, the historical context must be examined. Many of the rulers of the time were lacking in self-control, and were unable to properly govern a state, as most of the time; states were embroiled in conflict and unrest. Confucius places so much emphasis on the importance of having a competent and able representative, because a good and proper ruler was the individual who was the most directly involved in all aspects of inter-state and international relations.

Conclusion

Confucius would finally have an immense impact on his society as well as contemporary society. In his time, the simple idea of schooling was almost deemed radical. Some primitive forms of education for youth existed in Confucius’ time, but he wanted to teach adults. In essence, Confucius created the first college.³⁸ It was much more informal than the complex systems in contemporary society, but it was still the foundation upon which future establishments could be built. In reality, Confucius did not have a huge impact in his lifetime. Soon thereafter, however, through the messages of his disciples, his theories were studied, popularized, and accredited. His ideas spread beyond the borders of ancient China to foreign lands. This can be seen in a more contemporary light, with Jesuit missionaries who entered China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to become scholars and even court officials. They brushed aside the facades that had been built around Confucius’ teachings over the millennia and worked to find the real Confucius through study of ancient literature. In several letters back to Europe, these individuals praised

this “new” philosopher they had discovered. It was through these missionaries that Confucius’ teachings were brought to Europe. At the time he became known to the West, it was the beginning of the great philosophical movement known as the Enlightenment. Many philosophers, such as Voltaire, Leibniz, and Wolff used Confucius’ name to further their arguments, and they were themselves influenced in the process.³⁹

Other instances of Confucius’ influence in the West occurred during the time of the Enlightenment, when European scholars discovered that the Chinese had virtually abolished hereditary aristocracy. In France and in Great Britain, anti-monarchists used this in their quest for abolition of hereditary privilege. Thus Confucius and Confucianism helped to promote the rebirth of democracy in Europe.⁴⁰ Creel also notes that the development of democracy in the United States of America was partially influenced by French and Chinese thought.⁴² Thomas Jefferson proposed an educational system that shows similarities to the Chinese examination system, describing it as the “key-stone of the arch of our government.”⁴¹

In addition, along the lines of democratic changes, Confucius exerted ancestral influence upon the Chinese revolution. Sun Yat-sen declared that “both Confucius and Mencius, a prominent disciple of Confucius, were exponents of democracy”⁴² and thus gave the Republic of China a constitution that bears many resemblances to Confucian principles, such as that of leadership through ability, rather than hereditary rights and privileges.⁴³ Indeed, through the Confucian views that a ruler must be loyal and sincere, while subjects must be true to their principles rather than exhibit blind loyalty to a leader, one of the conditions essential to democracy was emphasized. Without allegiance to principles, the state is constantly at the whim of any political figure that is able to gather a following of people. This concept that Confucius emphasizes has made possible the existence of the Censorate; a body in the Chinese government that, for the past two thousand years, has been in charge of criticizing neglect of duty by any official, even the emperor.

In conclusion, Confucius’ philosophy of international relations is largely based upon his views of the individual and the state. His concepts of these entities centre on the ideas of virtues and propriety, and good relations, whether it is between individuals, leaders, states, or countries. Despite the fact that Confucius lived over two thousand five hundred years ago, his theories and teachings were relevant then and remain relevant to our present day social and international relations. Ultimately, his emphasis on virtue and fraternal values, among other values, are timeless qualities that he felt everyone should possess in order to achieve a better world for all.

Notes

¹ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 70.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951) 45.

⁴ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 10.

⁵ Bennett B. Sims, *Confucius* (London: Franklin Watts, 1968) 83.

⁶ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973) 74.

⁷ Bennett B. Sims, *Confucius* (London: Franklin Watts, 1968) 84.

⁸ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹ Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951) 152.

¹² *Ibid.*, 123.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴ Bennett B. Sims, *Confucius* (London: Franklin Watts, 1968) 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶ Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951) 142.

¹⁷ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1973) 57.

¹⁸ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 83.

- ¹⁹ Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951) 147.
- ²⁰ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973) 73.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, 74.
- ²² *Ibid*, 76.
- ²³ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 103.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 130.
- ²⁵ Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 1981) 103.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 46.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 45.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 45.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 50.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 13.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 54.
- ³² *Ibid*, 60.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 56.
- ³⁴ *Ibid*, 84.
- ³⁵ D. Howard Smith, *Confucius* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973) 94.
- ³⁶ Bennett B. Sims, *Confucius* (London: Franklin Watts, 1968) 68.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 64.
- ³⁸ Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius: The Man and the Myth* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1951) 151.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*, 156.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 98.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 5.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 6.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, 6.

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