

## 四十

We continued our journey  
in a hard sleeper car  
to the land of Confucius  
a bright rising star  
now children can learn  
about filial piety  
will little emperors dance  
to odes of propriety?



## Chapter 40 – Confucius says

子曰：学而时习之，不亦说乎？ The Master said: “To learn, and from time to time, to practice what you learn, isn’t that joy indeed?” My first introduction to Confucius was in primary school, when we would share “Confucius says” pearls of wisdom that, I’m pretty sure, Confucius never said. Still, even as nine-year-olds, we all knew the name, Confucius. I can’t think of any other Chinese historical figure that had that kind of name recognition.

The writings and teachings of Confucius are one of the “3 pillars of Chinese Culture” (the other two being Daoism and Buddhism). The impact of Confucius on, not only China, but Japan, Korea, and much of south-east Asia, is immense. In much the same way as teachings from the Bible, the Quran, and the Torah continue to influence the way people in the West and the middle-east behave today, Confucianism continues to inform both behavior and relationships in much of Asia. Yet, Confucius claimed not to be a religious teacher. The man we call Confucius is known by most Chinese as 孔子 Kǒngzi, or 孔夫子 Kǒng Fūzǐ. Born in BCE 551, Confucius lived in the “Spring and Autumn Period” during the Eastern Zhou Dynasty about 500 years before the birth of Christ. He was born in the town of 曲阜 Qǔfù in the province of 山東 Shāndōng。

Confucius believed that the sages of old truly understood social harmony and had, through the Book of History (書經 Shū Jīng) and the Book of Odes (詩經 Shī Jīng), made that wisdom available to people living during the time of Confucius. By studying both Zhou and Shang societies, religion, and political institutions, the chaotic state of affairs which existed during the Spring and Autumn period could be rectified. In addition to the classics, there was also a rich oral history that surrounded Confucius. He loved hearing stories of the legendary Kings preceding the Zhou Dynasty. He recounted many of these stories and lessons of life in the Analects (論語 Lúnyǔ), a collection of his thoughts and dialogues with his disciples. The Confucian Analects is one of the Four Books and the Five Classics (四書五經 Sìshū Wǔjīng), which are the classical texts compiled after Confucius’ death, and which make up the core of Confucianism.

Confucius felt it was his mission to instruct rulers at high levels of government in order to revitalize learnings that had been around for centuries. He believed that the “rites, rituals, and ceremonies” (禮 lǐ) had been developed over generations of human wisdom and that they represented core social values and helped create social order.

Confucius also stressed virtues like 仁 rén, sometimes translated as “righteousness” or “humanity” or even “love” or “kindness.” Human beings live together in harmony only by continuing to nurture their own inner character through education and reflection. One of the ways that people could begin to live in harmony was to adhere to the three fundamental bonds (三綱 Sān Gāng,) which form the basis for the most important of human relationships. Although one cannot discount a hierarchy, there is equally a sense of reciprocity in the definition of roles in these three relationships: 1) The ruler not only mentors the ministers but takes care of them (君臣 jūn chén); 2) The father teaches, encourages, and protects the son (父子 fù zǐ); 3) The husband respects, supports and nurtures the wife (夫婦 fūfù.)

Confucius was the ultimate idealist. He believed that people could improve themselves and their interactions among their family members and their states through love, respect, understanding, and consideration of the needs of others. Core to those requirements was honesty (信 xìn) which meant being able to criticize unjust rulers and refuse to serve corrupt officials.

子曰：“水可載舟，亦能覆舟” shuǐ kě zài zhōu , yì néng fù zhōu - The Master said: “Water that floats a boat can also capsize it.

Good government demanded stellar officials who had mastered the five virtues:

1. Li (禮 lǐ), propriety, ritual etiquette, manners, duty, and respect. Confucius clearly identified roles between rulers and ministers, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, elder brothers and younger brothers and even friends.
2. Ren (仁 rén), benevolence, or kindness to one’s fellow man. Confucius believed that there should be no limit to benevolence, even if it means laying down one’s life for another.
3. Xin (信 xìn), honesty, truthfulness, faithfulness, and sincerity. One’s word is one’s bond.
4. Yi (義 yì), righteousness, honesty, integrity; strongly associated with justice
5. Zhi (智 zhì), wisdom, knowledge of right and wrong; a strong moral compass

子曰：“溫故而知新，可以為師矣。” zǐ yuē: “Wēn gù ér zhī xīn, kě yǐ wéi shī yǐ.”

The Master said: “One cannot be an outstanding teacher, without continuing to acquire new knowledge.”

Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, is about 200 miles west and a little bit south of Qingdao. It was not an exciting venue for middle school kids, but fortunately, Pan Laoshi knew interesting stories about the young Confucius. We visited the Confucius Temple, the Confucius family mansion, and the Confucius family cemetery. Confucius would have probably appreciated the temple complex that was built to honor him at his birthplace. The 460 rooms in the complex covers an area of over 16,000 square meters and reminded me of walking through the Forbidden City in Beijing. The walls are painted red, and the roof-tiles are yellow. The entire complex was surrounded by dark green pine trees. On Confucius' grave is written the name he was given after his death by Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty: “大成至聖文宣王 (Dàchéng zhì shèng wénxuān wáng) “ “The Lord Propagator of Culture Ultimate Sage and Great Accomplisher.”

