

An Introduction to the **Analects**

Li Defa



NEW WORLD PRESS

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First Edition 2014

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Translated by Paul White

Edited by Qiao Tianbi and Yan Chuanhai

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ISBN 978-7-5104-3575-1

Published by

NEW WORLD PRESS

24 Baiwanzhuang Street, Beijing 100037, China

Distributed by

NEW WORLD PRESS

24 Baiwanzhuang Street, Beijing 100037, China

Tel: 86-10-68995968

Fax: 86-10-68998705

Website: www.newworld-press.com

E-mail: frank@nwp.com.cn

Printed in the People's Republic of China

Foreword

Confucius was ancient China's leading thinker, educator and philosopher, and the founder of Confucianism. He had an extremely far-reaching influence on China's culture. The ancestors of Confucius stemmed from the nobility of the State of Song, who moved to the State of Lu to escape upheavals at the court. Confucius' father was a military man whose social status, despite his aristocratic background, was a low one. When Confucius was three years old, his father died, and the child was brought up by his mother in straitened circumstances. His early career was spent as a minor official administering the state granaries and livestock herds. In the time of Duke Ding of Lu (509-495 BC) he was promoted to minister of justice, the pinnacle of his political career. At the age of 55 Confucius stepped down from the political stage, and left the State of Lu to tour many of the other states in China, promoting his own political theories. In his later years he returned to the State of Lu to devote himself to teaching and redacting ancient records, among which was an official history of the State of Lu called the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

How did a young man brought up in a one-parent household manage to attain the rank of a senior official of the State of Lu by his own efforts step

by step? How did he fulfill his own life value in such an unequal society?

Confucius had a complete life plan: “At the age of 15, I embarked on study At the age of 70, I could follow my heart’s desire.” Confucius defined the Mandate of Heaven as “waxing of the moon won’t last long.” At the age of 55 he left official life, intending to propagate his political doctrine and put the world to rights based on “righteousness and virtue.”

Even while he was engaged in official life Confucius never neglected his educational vocation, which he regarded as the material guarantee of his sustenance. Confucius used the deductive method in his teaching, “revealing one corner to get the students to deduce the other three corners.” This is of great reference value even today.

Zigong, one of Confucius’ disciples, used this method to play a game with the leading lords of the kingdom concerning the growth and decline of power. He thereby changed the situation in which the leaders of the five major states struggled for hegemony, leading the overlordship to fall to the king of the State of Yue and himself to becoming a very rich merchant. To show his gratitude for the instruction he had received from Confucius, Zigong kept a vigil at the latter’s grave for six years.

In the sphere of politics, Confucius divided people into “gentlemen” and “petty men.” This was a departure from the traditional strictly hierarchical outlook of the aristocracy. A “gentleman” did not need to be a noble or high office-holder, nor did a “petty man” have to be a poor and powerless commoner. At that time, this could be called a bold innovation, which laid the theoretical foundation for his disciples to enter the highest ranks of society.

The object of Confucius' inquiries was the relationship which could lead to the harmonious development of the individual and society. He taught how individuals should relate to each other, the proper relationship between the individual and society and how a man could achieve harmony with himself, and eventually realize the realm of morality in human life. Confucius' ideology aimed at "morality" and "piety." This not only had a far-reaching influence on individuals, it had an even more far-reaching influence on the Chinese nation as a whole.

While leaving us a wealth of valuable experience, Confucius also taught us how to behave as human beings and as members of society.

Li Defa

July, 28, 2012

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Chapter 1

The Life of Confucius

1. Reaching the Summit of His Career

Confucius' name was Qiu, and his style, or adopted name, was Zhongni. He was born in Changping Village, Zou Township in the State of Lu (southeast of present-day Qufu City in Shandong Province) in 551 BC. According to the *Commentary of Zuo Qiuming*, or *Zuozhuan*, a commentary to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the ancestors of Confucius were members of the aristocracy of the State of Song. His ancestor Fufu He should have inherited the throne of Song, but instead yielded it to King Li. Zheng Kaofu, a forebear seven generations prior to Confucius had been a senior minister serving three Song rulers—dukes Dai, Wu and Xuan. The higher he rose in rank the more cautious were his actions. Zheng Kaofu's son Kong Fujia fell afoul of court intrigue, and his son Mu Jinfu fled to the State of Lu. Confucius' father Shuliang He died when Confucius was three years old, leaving the boy's mother Yan Zhengzai a widow at the age of 20. Shuliang He had had a senior

wife besides Yan Zhengzai, and he had also had a concubine. While Shuliang He was alive the latter two had enjoyed a certain amount of protection and care, but after his death the senior wife ruled the roost, and persecuted the concubine to death. The concubine's son Meng Pi had been crippled by a childhood disease, and as a result was ill-treated. Under these circumstances, Yan Zhengzai had no choice but to move away. She took Confucius and Meng Pi to Qufu, capital of the State of Lu, where she eked out a meager living as best she could.

His mother gave Confucius a strict upbringing. When he was not studying he helped his mother with the household chores to the best of his ability, including planting vegetables and weeding their plot of ground. The boy was very receptive to knowledge, "regarding everyone as his teacher." He mastered the various kinds of social etiquette, and was punctilious in his manners whenever he ventured out of doors on some errand or other. In fact, he was much more mature than the other children his age. Once he attended a sacrificial rite in the ducal ancestral temple. Because it was his first experience of such a thing, everything was new to him, and he was continually asking questions about the ceremony of the other people present. Even when the ceremony was over and the people were returning home, he clung onto their sleeves, insisting that they explain the various aspects of the rite. They gave him the nickname of "Ask All."

When Confucius was 17 years old, in 535 BC, his mother died of overwork, and it was left to Confucius to arrange her funeral all by himself. He was determined that his father and mother should lie in the same grave. However, in her lifetime, his mother had never mentioned where her husband Shuliang He was buried. So he placed his mother's coffin in a place called

Five Fathers Lane, and inquired of the passers-by the location of his father's grave. It happened that a kind-hearted woman resident of Zou Township was acquainted with the Kong family's affairs, and she told Confucius the exact spot where his father was buried. Confucius was then able to lay his mother side by side with his father.

In the ninth month of the same year Duke Zhao of Lu paid a visit to the Kingdom of Chu accompanied by his minister of works Meng Xizi. Due to his lack of knowledge of diplomatic protocol, the latter cut a sorry figure at the Chu court. In fact, he was so mortified that he fell dangerously ill. Feeling that he was not much longer for this world, Meng Xizi called his subordinates to him, and said, "The Rites are the roots of a man. Without the Rites he cannot maintain himself. I have heard of a young man who is well versed in the Rites. His name is Kong Qiu, and he is a descendant of a sage who lost his official position in the State of Song. A forebear by the name of Fufu He should by rights have succeeded to the throne of Song, but deferred to King Li. His descendant Zheng Kaofu served three rulers of Song—dukes Dai, Wu and Xuan—and rose to a very high rank. The higher he rose the more respectful he became, and so on a tripod vessel in his ancestral shrine there is the following inscription: 'I thanked for my first appointment with a slight bow; for my second, with a bow from the waist; and for my third a full kowtow. I make way for others on the road, scuttling along the walls. Behaving in this way, I won't be despised or humiliated by others. No one dares to bully me. Both the thick porridge and thin gruel cooked in this vessel are enough for my satisfaction.' That was the measure of his humility. Zangsun He said, 'The descendants of a man of lofty virtue, if he does not become a ruler of men, will be persons of distinction. One of the latter in the

present day is Kong Qiu.’ If I should make a good end, I would send my sons Yue and Heji to serve Confucius as their teacher.” When Confucius heard of this, he said, “A man who can correct his mistake is a true gentleman. It says in the *Book of Odes*, ‘A gentleman is one who can follow a good example.’ Meng Xizi is such a person.”

Meng Xizi’s sending his two sons to Confucius to be instructed laid a fine foundation for Confucius’ lifelong devotion to teaching. And it was from this time that he developed an even keener interest in the Rites. More and more people came to seek his instruction.

When Confucius was 18 years old he was barred from attending a banquet given by the Ji clan, an influential family in the State of Lu. But as Confucius’ reputation grew steadily the Ji clan’s steward Yang Huo desired to acquire Confucius’ services. The Jis were the dominant power in Lu, and this power was in the hands of Yang Huo to wield. Yang Huo tried to visit Confucius, but the latter refused to see him. Yang Huo then sent Confucius a roasted suckling pig, with the aim of getting Confucius to pay a visit to him to express his gratitude. Confucius deliberately chose a time when he knew that Yang Huo was not at home to pay the visit. However, he accidentally bumped into Yang Huo on the road, who said, “To hide one’s talents and do as one pleases when the state is in turmoil, can this be called benevolence?” To which Confucius replied, “No.” Yang Huo went on, “To wish to participate in government affairs, and yet constantly miss one’s opportunity to do so, can this be called wisdom?” To which Confucius replied, “No.” Yang Huo further said, “Time passes day by day, and the years wait for no man.” To which Confucius retorted, “Very well, I will seek office.” And so Confucius, as a “shabby genteel” nobody and through his own unstinting

hard work, progressed step by step from being a lowest-ranking official (in charge of granaries and later of the state's livestock farms) to positions at the ducal court, including that of acting prime minister.

During his time as an official Confucius displayed a high level of political ability. In the summer of the year 500 BC the rulers of the states of Qi and Lu agreed to hold talks at Jiagu on their common border. Senior minister Li Mi said to his master Duke Jing of Qi: "Kong Qiu is conversant with the Rites, but lacks courage. If we get our barbarian prisoners of war to abduct Duke Ding of Lu we will be able to attain our objective with regard to Lu." Duke Jing approved this plan. Seeing the evil intention of the Qi side at the meeting, Confucius yelled at his men: "Soldiers, take up your arms!" And then said to Duke Jing of Qi: "Two monarchs have come together for friendship. To use barbarian prisoners of war from the eastern borders to take up arms and disturb such friendship is not the way the ruler of Qi should treat a fellow feudal lord. The outlying districts must not have designs upon the Central Plains. The eastern barbarians have no right to disturb the people of the Central Plains. Prisoners of war have no business undermining a treaty, and the force of arms must not be used to suppress friendship. Such deeds betray a most inauspicious state of mind; they betray a lack of morality in conduct; and they betray abandonment of propriety among men. Your Majesty must on no account do such things." Thereupon, Duke Jing of Qi ordered the barbarians to disperse.

As the treaty oath was about to be sworn, the Qi side insisted on inserting the following clause into the treaty document: "This treaty oath is witness to Lu's obligation to provide Qi with 300 war chariots in case Qi forces advance beyond the boundaries of their state." Confucius opposed this, saying, "Let

this treaty oath be witness to the fact that you insist on us meeting your demand without your return to us of our territory of Wenyang.”

Duke Jing of Qi was preparing a ceremonial banquet to celebrate the completion of the pact, and invited Duke Ding of Lu to be present. But Confucius said to Duke Jing: “The states of Qi and Lu had their own ancient form of ceremony. I wonder why Your Majesty has not heard of it. To give a ceremonial banquet upon the completion of a task is no more than to cause trouble for the office holders. Moreover, the sacrificing of animals may not be done outside the gates of the capital, nor may the stone chimes be sounded in the fields. A ceremonial banquet without these things would not be in accordance with the Rites and propriety; in which case it would be a worthless parody of a solemn undertaking and an insult to Your Majesty. To participate in something that is not in accordance with the Rites and propriety would sully your reputation, sire. I beg you to ponder this deeply. The purpose of a ceremonial banquet is to propagate virtuous conduct. If it does not do so, then it is better to do without it.” In the end, the ceremonial banquet was not held.

At this treaty conference Confucius fully displayed his diplomatic ability in getting the State of Qi to return territory to the State of Lu. But what was called politics in those days was no more than a game of rivalry for territory played by the rulers of the various states. What Confucius wanted to see was a united and peaceful world, one in which people would doff their thick winter clothes when spring came and take their children to the Yi River to swim, then return and dry off on a sunny terrace, in short, enjoying a happy life.

In 498 BC disorder broke out in Lu, when Gongshan Buniu and Shusun

Zhe, leading a force of men from the town of Bi, attacked the capital of the state. Many were killed on both sides. For the first time, Confucius personally commanded troops on the scene of this large-scale slaughter. He succeeded in putting down the rebels, but was not happy, as many innocent soldiers had perished under his command. It was this incident that started him thinking about stepping down from official life.

Confucius fully displayed his political talent by giving the political arena in the State of Lu a completely new look. This was a source of worry to some other states, which were alarmed at the growth of Lu's power, and thought that it was aiming to become the hegemon of the states. To avert this, the State of Qi sent a number of singing girls to Lu. The prime minister of Lu, Ji Huanzi, accepted the gift, and for the next three days Duke Ding did not hold court. When this happened, Confucius decided to leave Lu. In 497 BC, at the age of 55, Confucius set off on his 14-year journey, together with his disciples Zhong You, Yan Hui, Ran You and others, and leaving behind Ran Yong as the steward of the Ji clan and Gao Chai as the magistrate of the fief of Bi.

In terms of the *Book of Changes*, Confucius by that time had reached the pinnacle of his administrative career and realized his life's worth. But he knew that if he pursued his career further he would go downhill. So he took the opportunity of leaving Lu with some of his disciples to spread his teachings, especially his own notions of righteousness and virtue, to the other states of China.

A great thinker, educator and philosopher, Confucius can be said to have led a successful life. What Confucius pursued was morality for the whole of mankind; his whole life was devoted to promoting "righteousness and virtue." He wanted the whole of mankind to enter the realm of virtue. And

that was precisely why he decided to abandon his career as an official, which restricted him to advocating good government in one state alone. By spreading his teaching as he traveled through the various states, he could promote his idea of morality throughout the world.

2. Journeying Through the States

Confucius first took his disciples to the State of Wei. At first, Duke Ling of Wei treated Confucius with courtesy. He paid Confucius the same amount of grain he had received as his salary in Lu. However, he gave his guest no official position and kept him away from political affairs. Confucius remained in Wei about 10 months. Slanderers at court made the duke suspicious of Confucius, and he set people to spy on the visitor. Eventually, Confucius took his disciples with him away from the State of Wei, and headed for the State of Chen. Passing through the city of Kuang on the way he was trapped by a hostile band, which mistook him for an enemy. Escaping from Kuang, he reached the city of Pu, where the Wei aristocratic clan of the Gongshu was in revolt. Again the travelers were surrounded, and when they finally broke free they were forced to return to the capital of Wei. This happened several times. So Confucius ended up spending more time in Wei than in any other state. There are some people who say that this was because “Wei had a great number of gentlemen.” It is true that Wei had capable officials, but it also had plenty of scoundrels too. Confucius himself said, “The political affairs of the two states of Lu and Wei can be compared to the

political affairs of elder and younger brothers.” He was referring to the fact that the State of Lu had originally been the fief of Dan, the first Duke of Zhou, while the State of Wei had originated as the fief of Kang Shu. Dan and Kang Shu had been respectively elder and younger brothers—and their politics reflected this.

Losing the trust of the Wei ruler, Confucius and his followers left the state in 497 BC. This was their first departure from it. Arriving at Pu, the travelers were again harassed by the rebellious forces of the Gongshu clan of the State of Wei, and Duke Ling of Wei, who had restored his confidence in Confucius due to the latter’s stand in Pu, sent an escort to bring them safely back to Wei. When he heard that they were on the way back, the duke was delighted and paid Confucius and his disciples the singular honor of proceeding outside the walls of the capital to greet them.

At that time the State of Wei was bedeviled by a power struggle between Duke Ling and his son Kuaikui. The dissension centered on the duke’s wife Nanzi, whom Kuaikui suspected of turning the duke against him and depriving him of succession to the throne. In 496 BC, Kuaikui arranged to assassinate her, using his steward Xiyang Su. But the latter lost his nerve at the crucial moment, and Nanzi became aware of the plot. Kuaikui fled to the State of Song, and later sought refuge with the Zhao clan of the State of Jin.

In the following spring, when the whole earth was brimming with renewed life, that Confucius—then in his 56th year—was summoned for an audience with Nanzi. The disciple Zilu was very much against his going, but Confucius made every preparation for the occasion. The *Analects* devotes few words to this audience, and Sima Qian in his *Records of the Historian* makes only a fleeting remark. Nanzi sat behind a screen of hempen cloth.