
 Association for the 

Harmonious Development of Faculties.

CONFUCIUS

His Life and his Doctrine

BY

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

BY

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COMMON-SENSE ETHICS.

BY

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CONFUCIUS.

HIS LIFE.



CONFUCIUS was born in the year 550 or 551 B.C. at Shan-ping, in the province now known as Shan-tung, the ancient province of Lu, bathed on the east by the Yellow Sea, and on the north by the Gulf of Pechili.

Confucius counted among his ancestors the emperor Hoang-ti, whose reign is placed by historians of the Celestial Empire 2637 years before the Christian era.

The name of his clan was Kung, and missionaries, in calling him Confucius, have merely latinized his real name, "Kung-Fu-tze," which means "the philosopher Kung." Confucius was only three years old when he lost his father, who was Governor

of Tse-u. According to tradition, at the age of six he showed signs which gave promise of extraordinary wisdom. He despised games familiar to childhood, and preferred to offer sacrifices to the gods with his little comrades, on whom he already exercised a marked influence.

He would not eat without offering part of his food to heaven, according to the custom of the ancients. This custom he practised during the whole of his life, even though the repast might only consist of rice.

He was married at the age of nineteen, as was then usual.

At about this time, the fame of his intelligence and virtues having reached the Prime Minister of the kingdom of Lu, his native land, the latter entrusted him first with the superintendence of the granaries, and later with that of cattle and parks, or public markets. He accepted these offices on account of his poverty, but without any thought of becoming rich.

At the age of twenty-two he commenced to teach. He wished to revive ancient usages, which, in his opinion, contained all the moral, social, and political virtues. He made it his mission to re-establish the rites, customs, beliefs and institutions which time had made sacred.

To gain his end, it was not sufficient to teach only by example; he required disciples, who should receive from him careful instruction, should go forth to spread it throughout the empire, and should succeed him after his death.

The intelligent young men, who wished to learn to rule justly, soon crowded to him in numbers. He accepted the honorariums which his disciples offered him, being, however, always content with what was given to him, no matter how insignificant the amount might be. On the other hand, he sent away immediately those who did not show sufficient ardour for study, or such as were not sufficiently intelligent to understand him.

"When," said he, "I have shown a pupil one corner of the subject, and he is unable to discover the other three, I do not repeat my lesson."

At the age of twenty-four he lost his mother. To obey the ancient law, he withdrew from the public life of superintendent in order to mourn the customary period of twenty-seven months, then considered the equivalent of "three years."

We now come to a gap, for we hardly know anything of the life of Confucius for several years after this date. Let us consider here the political state of China at this time.

China was then but a sixth part of the present empire. The population was only ten to fifteen millions. The nobility was divided into six orders, which corresponded in many respects to those of feudal Europe.

The governors of provinces succeeded from father to son. They are often called by historians "kings," and their provinces "kingdoms," and in fact they were almost independent. In theory the governors received from each new emperor a new investiture. They were bound, in theory, to present themselves at court, at certain times, to show their submission. They also paid to the sovereign fixed tributes, and had to supply him with soldiers when they were required for the security of the empire.

When, in a feudal state, the sovereign is not sufficiently energetic or sufficiently powerful to make his rights respected, the nobles are not slow to show their independence and to make efforts to extend the frontiers of their states at the expense of others.

At the time of which we speak, the dynasty of Chow, which lasted from 1122 to 256 B.C., had passed its zenith. The independence of the sub-kingdoms was complete. From this it results that the history of China during the seventh, sixth, and fifth centuries B.C. is an unbroken account of great battles,

of hard-fought actions, of heroism, of tried friendships, and of atrocious crimes.

This reminds us of the state of England and of France in the Middle Ages, but China 600 years B.C. was far more civilized than was Europe during the time of the Plantagenets, that is to say during the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (A.D. 1154-1399). Numerous schools existed then in China. Each nobleman had collected around him historians, musicians and other men of learning. The savants expounded ancient history and commented on ancient poems and laws.

Instruction then was carried on brilliantly, but justice and probity, in a word morality in all its forms, was trampled under foot. Mencius, the grandson and continuer of the teaching of Confucius, tells us that decadence was complete. Justice had disappeared. One only heard discourse that was debasing and only saw acts of violence. Ministers murdered the princes who had called them to power, and children took the life of those who had given them birth. Confucius, terrified with what he saw, resolved to reform the world; a grand ideal to which he consecrated his whole life.

At the age of thirty-three Confucius visited the capital of the empire, where he admired the treasures

of the imperial library. He also studied music, which was held in great honour at Court. He had also several interviews with Lao-tze, the father of Taoism. On his return the same year to Lu, the prince of that State was forced by his ministers to flee to the neighbouring province of Tse. Confucius accompanied him, not wishing to appear to support, by his presence, the rebels who had driven out their legitimate sovereign. But the king of Tse did not treat Confucius with the honour his wisdom, virtue and renown merited. The latter soon returned to his native land, where during fifteen years he continued his studies. During this period the number of his disciples increased considerably. It is said that there were as many as three thousand, and of these seventy or eighty were distinguished for their great intelligence. Several became statesmen of mark. The disciples were young men of all classes, but the majority were mandarins, public officials, or governors of towns. All these men of letters showed the greatest admiration and sincere respect for Confucius, a fact which goes to prove the moral and intellectual value of his philosophy.

At the age of fifty-two Confucius was appointed first magistrate of Chung-too. Immediately, so the historians assure us, a marvellous change appeared

in the behaviour of the inhabitants. He was appointed Minister of Justice, and crimes disappeared.

He showed his energy and his wisdom in awarding punishment without distinction of rank, and in starting negotiations with the neighbouring State of Tse.

He strengthened the authority of his prince, the king of Lu, while he weakened that of the nobles. In order to do this he dismantled the fortified towns where the chiefs of the principal clans could resist the king's authority, as did the barons of feudal Europe.

Finally he became the idol of the people, whose welfare was his chief interest. In them he saw the source of the wealth and prosperity of the State. He improved their well-being by all means in his power, especially by putting down the aristocracy, who were everywhere hostile to those institutions which he wished to found. He accomplished many excellent reforms during the two years he was in power.

The king of Tse, however, saw that if Confucius were permitted to continue his reforms, the influence of the king of Lu would soon make itself felt throughout the whole empire. He determined, therefore, to deprive this king of his minister. He

showed a profound knowledge of the human heart by sending to the king of Lu eighty dancing girls of great beauty, and one hundred and twenty-five magnificent horses. These gifts were joyfully accepted by the prince, who now not only neglected Confucius completely, but was greatly annoyed at his remonstrances. The philosopher felt that it was not compatible with his dignity to remain at this Court, where his counsel was no longer accepted. He withdrew with slow steps and with regret, hoping that his sovereign would repent and would send a messenger to pray him to return. Alas! no messenger appeared, so Confucius sadly continued his way. The philosopher was then fifty-six.

During thirteen years he went from province to province, and was everywhere received with great honour, but no prince would take counsel of him.

He saw that although men have always good maxims on their lips still they are slow to practise virtue.

“Alas,” he cried, “virtue is not cherished, and study is not pursued with care. Though one hears the principles of justice and equity professed, they are not followed. The wicked and wrong-doers do not wish to mend their ways. It is this which is

the cause of my sadness." He knew also what it was to suffer from ingratitude, but he said, "What matters to me the ingratitude of men. It will not prevent me doing them all the good that may be in my power. If my teaching remains fruitless, I shall at least have the consolation of having faithfully fulfilled my task."

Thirteen years later he returned for good to his native land. The king was dead and his son occupied the throne. The philosopher refused to accept of him honours and power. He had only a few years to live, and these he wished to consecrate to his literary work and to the teaching of his doctrine in the midst of his numerous disciples.

The year after his return, Confucius was then seventy, his only son died. This left only one offspring to perpetuate the race of the philosopher. But what he felt still more was the loss of his two favourite disciples, Yen-Hue, who died a year before this, and Tze-lu, who died some months later. The end of the philosopher was now approaching rapidly, hastened no doubt by sorrows.

Early one morning, not being able to sleep, he got up, and with his hands behind his back he dragged his stick along as he walked towards the door,

saying, "The great mountain must crumble away, the strong pillar must break, the sage must wither and disappear like a blade of grass." He then went back to his bed, and eight days later he died at the age of seventy-two or seventy-three, in the year 478 B.C.

The funeral rites were performed with great ceremony by his disciples. A great number of them built huts close to his tomb and stayed there twenty-seven months, wearing such mourning as they would for a father.

His third favourite disciple, Tze-Kung, remained five years close to the tomb mourning the sage.

The news of the death of the philosopher spread throughout the empire with marvellous rapidity. He who, during his lifetime, had been neglected, became immediately after his death the object of unbounded admiration; and this admiration has lasted nearly 2400 years.

The tomb of Confucius is situated on a vast rectangle outside the town of Kih-fow. On passing through a magnificent gateway, one finds before one a long avenue of cypress trees which leads to the enormous tumulus which has been raised over the tomb. A little in front to the right

and left are two smaller hillocks which mark the tombs of the son and grandson of the philosopher. Finally to the right of the last one sees a small house which is said to stand on the ground once occupied by the hut of Tze-Kung, in which he passed his five years of mourning. On all sides are to be seen tablets on which the emperors have had engraved enthusiastic eulogies of the defunct.

The neighbouring town is still the home of the Kung family, and it is asserted that from forty to fifty thousand descendants of the sage inhabit it at the present time. The chief of the family is the head of the seventy-fifth generation. He possesses vast domains, given by the emperor, as well as a title which corresponds to that of duke.

The dynasty of Chow disappeared 225 years after the death of the philosopher, and was replaced by that of Ts'in. The first emperor of the new dynasty wished to lay the foundations of that despotic government which still exists. The numerous men of learning who acknowledged Confucius as their teacher opposed this innovation. The emperor was therefore anxious to destroy the posthumous influence of the sage, and burned all the ancient books to which Confucius had referred and from which he had drawn his rules and examples.

Finally he buried alive hundreds of men of learning who regarded Confucius as their master.

But no persecution could destroy or even diminish the influence exercised by the philosopher after his death. All the sovereigns who reigned after the Ts'in dynasty lost no opportunity of honouring his memory. At the present time there are tablets bearing his name in every school and in all examination halls, and before them the pupils and candidates bow as they enter.

No prayers are said to Confucius, but great honour is rendered to him.



HIS DOCTRINE.

Let us pass now to the study of the philosopher's teaching.

His moral and political doctrines are intimately connected, but, to make our task more simple, we shall examine them separately.

Confucius collected and placed in order all the religious, philosophic, moral and political documents which existed at his time. Of these he and his disciples formed a set of doctrines under the following titles :

Yi-King (the sacred book of changes).

Shu-King (the book of historical documents).

Shi-King (the book of verses).

Li-Ki (the book of rites).

Tze-Shu (the four classic books).

Space will not permit of a complete study of all of these. It will be sufficient for our purpose to

examine briefly the first three of "the four classic books."

The quotations are taken from the excellent French translation by Pauthier.*

The sixth phrase of the first classic book gives the key of the whole philosophy of Confucius. The sage wrote these words: "From the man of highest rank down to the most humble and obscure of men, each has the same duty to perform: to correct and better himself. *The perfecting of oneself* is the fundamental base of all progress and of all moral development."

Confucius returns continually to this great duty of perfecting oneself. He says, that "he (the sage) develops to the highest degree the lofty and pure faculties of his intelligence and makes it a rule to follow always the principles of right judgment."

Later on we find, "Make yourselves complete masters of that which you have learnt, and always continue to learn. You then may become a teacher of men."

"The superior man should apply his whole energy to educate himself, to acquire knowledge." Lastly:

* Confucius et Mencius: Les quatre livres, &c. Traduit du chinois par M. G. Pauthier. (Charpentier, Paris.)

“He who endeavours constantly to perfect himself is the sage, who knows how to distinguish good from bad, who chooses the good and holds firmly to it, never letting it go.”

“He should strive hard to learn all that is good. He should question others with discernment, seeking to enlighten himself in all that is good. He should guard carefully all that is good lest he should lose it, and should meditate on it in his heart. He should always try to discern what is good, taking care to distinguish it from what is bad. He should then steadfastly and constantly practise that which is good.” But the perfecting of oneself is not sufficient, one must also think of the perfecting of others.

“The perfect man does not limit himself to his own perfection, then to rest. He strives to perfect others also. The perfecting of oneself is undoubtedly a virtue, but to improve others is a high science.”

Confucius does not forget that the perfect state must include purity, and so we find this maxim, “Be watchful of yourself, even in your own home. Take care, even in the most secret place, to do nothing which could make you blush.” Elsewhere he says : “The meaning of the three hundred odes

of the book of verses is contained in one of its phrases :—Do not let your thoughts be wicked.”

His altruism shows itself continually.

The philosopher having said one day, “My doctrine is simple and easy to comprehend,” one of his disciples, Tsen-Tze, replied “that is certain.” The philosopher having gone out, the other disciples asked what the master meant. Tsen-Tze replied, “The doctrine of our master consists solely in having uprightness of heart and in loving one’s neighbour as oneself.”

Elsewhere Confucius says : “I would procure for the aged, quiet rest, for friends and those among whom one is thrown, constant fidelity, for children and the weak, motherly care.”

“The superior man in his dealings with men is deferential as becomes him. He is polite and kindly mannered, regarding as brothers all men who live within the boundaries of the four seas.” By which he meant the whole universe. “Reflect carefully and do not ever tire of doing good nor of being just in all your actions.”

One day a disciple asked a question in these

words: "Can one express in a single word all that one should practise steadfastly throughout one's life?" The philosopher said: "There is one word, 'Shu,' the meaning of which is 'Do not do unto others what you would not like them to do unto you.'"

We may perhaps translate this by the single word reciprocity or altruism.

Confucius returns continually to the importance of this doctrine of reciprocity, which we wrongly call "charity," for it is not so much charity as justice.

He persistently repeats this doctrine, in order that all who hear him may become impregnated with it.

The philosopher often spoke of the "virtue of humanity." One of his disciples having asked what he meant by this, he replied: "He who is able to accomplish five things on earth, is endowed with the virtue of humanity: respect for himself and for others, generosity, fidelity or sincerity, diligence in doing good, and love of all men." Later on, he adds: "Have sufficient self-control, even to judge of others in comparison with yourself, and to act towards them as you would wish them to act to you. This

is what one may call "the doctrine of humanity, and there is nothing beyond this."

After the perfecting of oneself and of others, after the love of humanity, that which should be cultivated is justice.

Here are two maxims on this subject.

"The superior man, in all the circumstances of life, is exempt from prejudice and stubbornness. Justice alone is his guide. He employs all his power to do that which is just and proper and for the good of mankind."

His justice extended even to animals. He used to fish with hooks, but not with nets, he shot birds with bow and arrow, but would not use a snare.

Practical moral counsels abound in his works, but it is only necessary to quote some of them.

"That which you condemn in those who are above you, do not practise towards those below you. That which you condemn in your inferiors do not practise towards your superiors."

"If there are people who do not study, or, if they do study, do not profit by it, let them not be

discouraged, and let them not desist. If there are people who do not distinguish good from bad, or, if they do distinguish it, have not a clear and distinct perception of it, let them not be discouraged! If there are people who do not practise what is right, or who, if they practise it, cannot devote all their powers to it, let them not be discouraged! That which others may do at the first attempt, they may do at the tenth. That which others may do at the hundredth, they may do at the thousandth. He who will truly follow this rule of perseverance, however ignorant he may be, he will certainly become enlightened; however weak he may be, he will certainly become strong."

"When you see a wise man, think whether you have the same virtues as he. When you see a wicked man, look to yourself and examine attentively your own conduct."

"If we are three who travel together, I shall certainly find two teachers (in my companions). I shall choose the good man to imitate, and use the wicked man to correct myself."

"In your dealings with men, be true and faithful to your engagements! Let your words be sincere and true! Let your acts be always honourable and

worthy ! Even if you were in the land of barbarians of the south, or of the north, your conduct should be faultless."

"Be true to yourself and indulgent to others and so prevent feelings of resentment."

He did not forget to give children his counsel.

"Children should have filial piety in their father's house and brotherly love outside it. They should be careful in their actions, sincere and truthful in their speech to all men, whom they should love with all their heart, attaching themselves particularly to the virtuous. If after having accomplished their duties they still have energy left, they should try to improve their minds by study and by acquiring knowledge and wisdom."

The advice which Confucius gives to sovereigns is admirable. "A prince should select his ministers according to the promptings of his conscience, having always the public good in view.

"He must conform to the great law of duty, and this great law of duty must be sought for in the 'virtue of humanity,' which is the source of love for all men. This is why even a prince cannot

dispense with the duty of correcting and perfecting himself."

"All who govern empires or kingdoms have nine invariable rules to know and to follow: to control or perfect themselves, to revere the wise, to love their parents, to honour the leading officials or ministers of the State, to be in perfect harmony with all other officials and magistrates, to treat and protect the people as their children, to collect about them the wise and skilful, to receive kindly those who come from distant lands, and to treat as friends all rulers under them."

Confucius realized the power of doing good which riches give. He says, however, "Riches and honour are the desires of men. If one cannot obtain them by honest and fair means, they must be renounced. Poverty and humble positions are what men hate and despise. If one cannot escape these by honest and fair means, one must submit to them."

The expressions "the superior man" and "the common man" occur repeatedly in the four classic books. The definitions of them which Confucius gives are clear.

"The superior man is he who has equal goodwill

towards all, and who is without egotism and prejudice.

“The common man is he who has only feelings of egotism and is without a disposition kindly to all men.

“The superior man has equanimity and tranquility of soul. The common man experiences continually trouble and anxiety.

“The superior man raises himself continually in intelligence and in power of judgment, the man without merit descends continually into further ignorance and vice.

“The superior man is influenced by a sense of justice ; the common man by the love of gain.

“The superior man places equity and justice above all else.”

As to the opinion which Confucius had of himself, this is what he said on the subject. “If I think of a man who unites saintliness to the virtue of humanity, how can I dare to compare myself with him ! I only know that I strive to practise these virtues without being disheartened

and to teach them to others without being discouraged or despondent."

And elsewhere: "The straight ways or principal virtues of the superior man are three in number, and these I have not yet been able to attain completely; the virtue of humanity which drives away sadness, science which clears all doubts from the mind, and manly courage which drives away fear."

His disciples affirm that Confucius was completely exempt from four things. He was without self-conceit, without prejudice, without obstinacy, and without egotism.

Confucius, in spite of his profound love of humanity, did not show towards the wicked that excessive kindness which was taught by Lao-Tze, his contemporary. The latter recommended the doing of kindness to the good and to the wicked without distinction. The good man, he said, should be always the good man, no matter what the circumstances may be.

Apropos of this, someone, remembering the doctrine of Lao-Tze, said to Confucius, "What should one think of a man who returns kindness for injuries?" The philosopher replied, "If one acts

thus, how can one repay kindness itself? One must repay hatred and injuries by equity; and kindness by kindness." This reply appeals certainly to our sense of justice.

Confucius, as a thoroughly practical man, only occupied himself with what human intelligence is capable of understanding, and always refused to discuss metaphysics.

Still, he approved of rendering homage to Heaven, but, perhaps, only because this was an ancient custom.

One of his disciples asked one day how one should serve the spirits and genii.

The philosopher replied, "When one is not yet in a fit state to serve men, how should one be able to serve the spirits and genii?"

"Let me ask you," continued the disciple, "what is death?"

Confucius replied, "When one does not yet know what life is, how should one know what death is?"

Let us now make a rapid examination of the political doctrines of Confucius, of which there is a

form of *resumé* in the Hiao-King (the sacred book of filial piety), as translated by Léon de Rosny.

In the Hiao-King the predominant idea is the omnipotence of the father. It requires the emperor to give to his people an example of submission to his mother, before whom he kneels publicly on certain dates fixed by sacred rites.

However low and obscure may be the condition of the father of a family, the son, even if promoted to the highest office in the empire, is required to show to him the respect due to a superior. A simple peasant should be able without fear of the slightest reprimand to box the ears of his son, even if the latter should occupy the highest legal position, if he should neglect to prostrate himself on meeting him.

A great mandarin so punished should also suffer the penalty of being degraded.

At the present time it happens every day that the son of a peasant fills important offices, for State employment is to be obtained by examinations in which everyone may compete.

A son who has deserved well of his country may obtain honorary titles for his ancestors.

The fulfilment of the duties of filial piety is so indispensable that in a family where all the sons have been condemned to death, the youngest is allowed to live in order that someone may be left to tend the parents of the criminals.

Confucius said, "Filial piety is the foundation of virtue, from which springs all knowledge." And elsewhere, "Do not fail to think of your ancestors, and strive to copy their virtues."

The legislation of China has always had as its foundation the Confucian doctrine of filial piety. One may add that the whole Chinese social life since the time of the great moralist has had but this one pervading sentiment.

To recapitulate, then, according to the political doctrine of Confucius, the State is one great family, of which the emperor is the head. The sovereign claims the same rights from, and performs the same duties towards the people as a father in regard to his children.

This conception has given to China a political stability, the equal of which one would search for in vain elsewhere. That China has sometimes forgotten the words of its great teacher has been the cause of the greatest part of its troubles.

It happens in China, as elsewhere, that people do not always conform strictly in practice to the philosophic teaching or religion they accept. There, as indeed everywhere, beautiful maxims are more often on the lips than in the heart. It must be remembered also that Buddhism and Taoism, both much degenerated and full of superstitious practices, unfortunately exercise great influence. This is especially the case with the ignorant, and they are numerous. The pure philosophy of Confucius does not satisfy them because they are incapable of understanding all its beauty.

The extent to which the Chinese venerate their ancestors is generally considered absurd by other nations. But this sentiment is to be found more or less developed in all nations, and it is well that this should be so.

The comforts we enjoy, as well as our most pure and keen intellectual pleasures, we owe, almost entirely, to those who have preceded us. It is not we who have thought of building houses, of making clothes, of extracting from the hidden depths of the earth coals and minerals. All, even to the fruits which we eat, to the flowers which we admire, has been invented, discovered, or perfected by our ancestors more or less distant. Without the persistent work

of generations who have preceded us, we should still live in a savage state, for our entire covering we should have but hideous tattooing. If famine should make itself felt we should offer to fiendish gods disgusting human sacrifices, if, indeed, we did not devour open-mouthed the still palpitating flesh of vanquished enemies.

As regards things purely intellectual, for example, the eternal principles of truth, of beauty, of goodness, it is still to the philosophers of antiquity that we owe the knowledge of them. It is then but right that we should experience for these bygone generations respect and gratitude.

Lastly, let us observe the complete difference which exists between the doctrines of Confucius and those of Buddha.

The degenerate Buddhism invites us to repose in an eternal state of unconsciousness.

Confucius tells us to think above all of the present life, and to minimize its sorrows and misery by family respect and affection.

The following quotation is from Pauthier:—

“If one may judge of the quality of a man and of

the power of his doctrines by the influence they have exercised on humanity, then one may, with the Chinese, call Confucius the greatest teacher of men which time has ever produced. In fact, never has human reason been more worthily represented. One is truly astonished to find in the writings of Confucius the expression of such a high and virtuous intelligence, and at the same time that of a civilization so advanced."

We have seen that the political system of Confucius is very simple. It rests entirely on filial piety, and the State is but a great family whose head is the sovereign.

We know also that his moral doctrine consisted solely in perfecting oneself, in perfecting others, in uprightness, in treating one's enemies with justice, and in loving all men as oneself.

This doctrine he did not expound as new, but as the traditional opinion of the sages of antiquity, which he had made it his mission to transmit to posterity. This mission he accomplished with resolution, dignity, and perseverance, but not without experiencing profound discouragement and sadness beyond endurance.

"This mission of teacher of the human race the

Chinese philosopher accomplished, we say, to its full extent, and in a manner very different from that of any other philosopher of classic antiquity. His philosophy did not consist in speculations more or less vain, but was a philosophy above all things practical, which extended to all conditions of life, to all phases of social existence.

“There is no doubt that one of the most noble and gentle impressions of the soul is to be got from the contemplation of this teaching, so distant in time and yet so pure, of which humanity, whatever may be its boasted civilization, may justly be proud.

“One cannot read the works of the two first Chinese philosophers (Confucius and Mencius) without feeling oneself better, or at least strengthened in the principles of truth and the practice of good, without having a higher idea of the dignity of our nature.”



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