

Three Confucian Values

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Confucian teaching rests on three essential values: Filial piety, humaneness, and ritual. The Confucian value system may be likened in some ways to a tripod, which is one of the great vessels of the Shang and Zhou Period and a motif that reoccurs in later Chinese arts. You could say of the three legs of the tripod, one is filial devotion, or filial piety. A second is humaneness. A third is ritual or ritual consciousness.

Filial Piety

Respect for one's parents, filial piety, is considered the most fundamental of the Confucian values, the root of all others.

Almost everyone is familiar with the idea that filial piety is a prime virtue in Confucianism. It's a prime virtue in the sense that, from the Confucian point of view, it's the starting point of virtue. Humaneness is the ultimate goal, is the larger vision, but it starts with filial piety.

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

Few of those who are filial sons and respectful brothers will show disrespect to superiors, and there has never been a man who is respectful to superiors and yet creates disorder. A superior man is devoted to the fundamental. When the root is firmly established, the moral law will grow.

Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity.¹

1. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Wing-tsit Chan, ed., (Princeton University Press, 1963) *Analects* I:2

Filial piety derives from that most fundamental human bond: parent and child. The parent-child relationship is appropriately the first of the five Confucian relationships. Although the child is the junior member in the relationship, the notion of reciprocity is still key to understanding filial piety. The Chinese word for this is *xiao*



The top portion of the character for *xiao*, shows an old man and underneath, a young man supporting the old man. There is this sense of the support by the young of the older generation and the respect of the young for the older generation, but it's also reciprocal. Just as parents have looked after children in their infancy and nurtured them, so the young are supposed to look after parents when they have reached old age and to revere them and to sacrifice to them after their death as well.

Ancestor Worship

Filial piety and ancestor worship are interconnected as parts of a single concept. This becomes clear when one considers that the word for filial piety is the same as the word for mourning, the child who acts with piety towards its parent is equated with the child who mourns its parents through the proper rituals.

A key manifestation of filial piety was ancestor worship. Ancestor worship in China was obviously related to the basic Confucian idea that children are obligated to respect their parents in life and to remember them after they have died.

There were two major loci of ancestor worship, as far as most people were concerned. One locus was in the home where people worshiped ancestral tablets. And the tablet behind me is an example of an ancestral tablet that would be kept in the home.

So this is the tablet of people named Liu whose remote ancestors came from this place called Peng Cheng, which is in Northern China. Below this the column says that this is the tablet or spirit tablet of the generations of ancestors of the Liu.

And this tablet in fact starts with the ninth generation and goes all the way down and you have the generations on either side going from top to bottom.

As I said, the large number of individuals in this tablet implies quite accurately that there are an awful lot of living descendants who relate to this particular tablet and who worship the ancestors in it.

Another important focus of ancestor worship was the graves. So that once or twice a year, minimally, people throughout China would go to the graves of their ancestors, both especially recent ancestors, but also sometimes more distant ancestors, to tidy up the graves and worship them.

Humaneness

Another key value in Confucian thinking--the second leg of the tripod--is humaneness, the care and concern for other human beings.

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

Confucius said: "...The humane man, desiring to be established himself, seeks to establish others; desiring himself to succeed, he helps others to succeed. To judge others by what one knows of oneself is the method of achieving humanity..." 1

1. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), *Analects* VI:28



A second, very important concept in the *Analects* of Confucius and again, in later Confucian thought is that of ren. Sometimes that term ren is translated as goodness, benevolence.

I prefer to translate it as humaneness or humanity because the character is made up of two parts. On the left is the element that means a person or a human being. On the right the element that represents a number two. So, ren has a sense of a person together with others. A human being together with other human beings, a human being in society.

Ritual Consciousness

The last of the three central Confucian values is respect for ritual--the proper way of doing things in the deepest sense.

The third leg in this tripod is that of li, ritual consciousness or propriety. Li represents the forms in which human action are supposed to go on.

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

Confucius said: "In rites at large, it is always better to be too simple rather than too lavish. In funeral rites, it is more important to have the real sentiment of sorrow than minute attention to observances." 1

1. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), *Analects* III:4

So, while in the course of evolution of the Confucian tradition, li rights are considered to have become more, what in the West might be called more secular in character, not to be concerned so much with the idea of trying to appease deceased ancestors as had been true in the period prior to the time of Confucius. Still the notion of the ritual retains a very strong religious association throughout time.

So as that evolves in a more secular, humanistic context, it still retains the sense that individuals have to defer to one another, have to show respect to one another. They have to be prepared to make some sacrifice for one another.

Confucius himself emphasized again and again that ritual itself was important. That rituals, that through ritual, people could learn proper relationships.

So if we look at ancestor worship through the lenses of ritual, what can we see? We can see, first of all, that through ancestor worship filial piety is eternal. People can continue to be loyal and obedient to their parents even after their parents have passed away.

At the same time, and in line, indeed, with the ancient Confucian theory, through ancestor worship, parents continue to teach their own children filial piety.

In the character li, the strong religious associations are very, very clear here.

On the left side of the character, li is the element indicating prognostication or pre-saging. On the right, you have a ritual vessel.



li

Rituals

There are all kinds of rituals governing all aspects of life, the great moments of life: Birth, capping (which is a coming of age ceremony for boys), marriage, death. So, there are rituals also which apply to many other aspects of life as well, not just the great moments of human life but many of the smaller and more ordinary interactions of human life.

At the pinnacle of the social order in imperial China was the emperor, the Son of Heaven, who performed rituals designed to preserve the cosmic order.

There was in fact a board of ritual, as part of the imperial government. And the emperor himself was deeply involved in ritual throughout the year.

The emperor, for example, there would be the annual worship of heaven, which was the most important day of the imperial ritual calendar.

Now it was not only heaven that was worshiped. It was also the emperors of previous dynasties that were worshiped, and it was also the ancestors of the emperor that were worshiped.

Insofar as the emperor was worshiping his own ancestors, he was being a good Chinese Confucian. He was doing what everyone else in China was doing.

Insofar as the emperor worshiped the earlier emperors of earlier dynasties, he was proclaiming the continuity of the imperial institution, above and beyond the rise and collapse of particular dynasties. He was giving legitimacy to the imperial institution itself.

Insofar as the emperor worshiped heaven, he was expressing his privileged position as the son of heaven.

Reciprocity / The Five Relationships

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

Zi Gong asked: "Is there any one word that can serve as a principle for the conduct of life?" Confucius said: "Perhaps the word 'reciprocity': Do not do to others what you would not want others to do to you."¹

1. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), *Analects* XV:23

The importance of reciprocity, and the mutual responsibility of one person for another, is essential to understanding the five basic human relations suggested by Confucius.

Very prominent in the Confucian tradition is the idea of the five relationships between, if you take it according to Mencius, **parent and child, minister and ruler, husband and wife, older and younger brother, friend and friend.**

The order of the five relationships is taken from that given by Confucius' most famous follower, the philosopher Mencius (active 372-289 B.C.E.) whose conversations were recorded in the book Mencius (see The Classics).

Those five relationships and the fact of human relatedness are of crucial importance in the Confucian tradition.

In the first four cases, you're talking about differentiated statuses.

Now, the point is not to necessarily confirm or reinforce the status difference but to understand what it is that establishes a responsibility between those two pairs in the relationship.

Man as Social Being

Confucius builds his theory of society and government on the assumption that man is a social being always interacting with other human beings.

Moral obligations to other people, and the imperative of public service, follow from this assumption.

Confucius had been traveling with his friends and his students, and visiting one state after another and trying to persuade one ruler after another, and being unsuccessful at it. And at one point, they lost their way in their travels, and one of Confucius' disciples went to ask directions from somebody who was cultivating in a nearby field.

And when this farmer learned who the disciple was and who Confucius was, he said, "Instead of following someone who flees from this man and that, you should flee from this whole generation of men." Now, that sets up the peasant, the farmer as somebody who's cultivating his own garden and isn't worrying about the rest of mankind.

The disciple goes back to Confucius and reports this. And Confucius says, "One cannot herd with the beasts or flock with the birds. If I am not to be a man among men," or literally, to go in the company of other men, "then what am I to be? If the Way prevailed in the world, I wouldn't be trying to change things."

He is not content with what he finds. His conscience impels him to try to rectify what is wrong in the world. And it is a sense of the moral conscience that he's got to be in the company of other men, whatever he is going to make of himself. It has to be in relation to human society.

In the Confucian tradition, human relatedness is the primary given. Human beings exist in a social context. They learn from one another, they interact with one another.

And so practically speaking, the way that one comes to understand what it means to be human, or to be humane, is through one's interactions with other people, and through the allied virtue of reciprocity or empathy, so that you understand yourself by what you understand of others, and you understand others and treat them by what you understand of yourself.

Education

Implicit in the Confucian emphasis on ritual and self-cultivation through ritual is the notion that life is a continuous process of learning and self-improvement.

Confucius stressed the importance of education for achieving personal and social order.

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

When Confucius was traveling to Wei, Ran Yu drove him.

Confucius observed, "What a dense population!" Ran Yu said, "The people having grown so numerous, what next should be done for them?"

"Enrich them," was the reply. "And when one has enriched them, what next should be done?" Confucius said, "Educate them." 1

1. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960) *Analects*, XIII:9

Government

Confucius' overriding concern was with government. He believed that when virtuous men lead by moral example, good government would follow naturally.

Then if we recognize that the issue at the start is what is the true vocation of the noble man or the noble person, it's a question of how do you govern. What is the proper way of governing?

Excerpt from the *Analects*:

Confucius said: "If a ruler himself is upright, all will go well without orders. But if he himself is not upright, even though he gives orders they will not be obeyed." 1

1. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960). XIII:6

He says, "To try to order the people through laws and regulations and implicit punishments, if you do that, people will find a way to avoid, evade the law, and they will have no sense of shame. If you lead them by virtue and the rites, then they will govern themselves, discipline themselves, and they will have a sense of shame."

That's a rather basic statement of the Confucian appeal to a basic personal morality in all persons, all men, rather than a reliance upon coercion, on force, on power.