

GREAT THINKERS  
OF THE  
EASTERN  
WORLD



*The major thinkers and the philosophical and religious classics  
of China, India, Japan, Korea, and the world of Islam*

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# CONFUCIUS (KONGFUZI/K'UNG FU-TZU)

**Born:** 551 B.C., in the State of Lu, now Shandong (Shantung) Province, China

**Died:** 479 B.C., in the State of Lu

**Major Works:** Many classics were attributed to the editorship of Confucius, yet most scholars agree that the only work that can represent the ideas of Confucius is the *Analects (Lunyu/Lun-yü)*, a collection of notes and quotations written down by his disciples and edited after his death.

## Major Ideas

Ren (jen) or human-heartedness is the highest virtue an individual can attain and this is the ultimate goal of education. LOVE OF MAN (sic HUMANS)

*The path to the attainment of ren is the practice of li, which represents social norms.*

*Li is not something fixed and forever, and is subject to change according to individual situations.*

*The principle governing the adoption of li is yi, which means proper character and is a principle of rationality.*

*The education of an individual is a preparation for a peacefully ordered society.*

*The supreme method for governing a nation is ruling people by ren, the ruler being the model of all his people.*

*To govern a society which is out of order, the method of "rectification of names" has to be used; this method can be called "the enforcement of li."*

Confucius (Kongfuzi or Kongzi/K'ung Fu-tzu), "Master K'ung," stands out as the most significant figure in Chinese history. His family name is Kong (K'ung), and his given name, Qiu (Ch'iu). His early years were rather uneventful and ordinary. His father died when he was only three. As a result, he was raised by his mother and had to experience poverty and hardship. However, when he was fifteen, he set his mind to becoming a scholar. When he got married he embarked on an official career with the hope of putting his ideas into practice. He was appointed the chief of police in the Department of Justice of Lu. After a short period of time he resigned from this position and devoted himself to teaching.

Accompanied by some of his students, Confucius spent a number of years traveling throughout China, hoping to share his ideas with the local rulers who might hire him and implement his political ideas. However, he was rejected by one after another. Eventually, he gave up hopes of getting a desirable political post and returned to the State of Lu and resigned himself to the position of an edu-

cator and teacher. He also spent the remaining years of his life editing what have come to be known as the "Confucian Classics," including such books as *The Book of Poetry*, *The Book of History*, and the *Yi jing (I ching) (The Book of Changes)*.

Although Confucius failed in his pursuit of a political career, his career as an educator and teacher was a tremendous success. People were impressed by his integrity, honesty, and particularly his pleasant personality and his enthusiasm as a teacher. Three thousand people came to study under him and over seventy became well-established scholars. His followers, one generation after another, spread his ideas throughout the country of China. Eventually his ideas won the approval as national ideology in the second century A.D. during the Han dynasty. He became honored as "The Ultimate Sage-Teacher." His philosophic ideas have been taught to not only all traditionally educated Chinese, but also to students in other Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and Singapore.

### *The Primacy of the Human Heart*

In spite of the apparently fragmentary and aphoristic nature of the *Analects*, Confucius clearly indicated that his philosophic ideas were held together by one single concept. This key concept in Confucius's philosophy is what is called *ren* (*jen*) in Chinese. The term appears in the *Analects* over 100 times. Its etymological meanings and English translations have been a topic of scholarly disputes, yet from the *Analects* we learn that the essence of this concept is love. When Fan Chi (Fan Ch'ih) asked about the meaning of *ren*, Confucius replied, "Love of man" (XII, 22). *Ren*, as love, is by no means the kind of impulsive, instinctive love glorified by the romantics. Nor is it the love of God or God's love for humanity. Nor did Confucius preach love for one's enemies. *Ren* is a strictly natural and humanistic love, based upon spontaneous feelings cultivated through education. Accordingly, *ren* may be defined as the cultivated feeling which marks the distinction between a human being and other forms of biological beings. If we follow this suggested definition, many other fundamental concepts in the philosophy of Confucius can adequately be understood. For example:

*Xiao* (*hsiao*) (filial piety) means the cultivated feeling toward one's parents.

*Di* (*ti*) (brotherly love or respect) means the cultivated feeling toward one's contemporaries.

*Zhong* (*chung*) (loyalty) means the cultivated feeling toward one's superiors, lords, emperors, employers, or one's own country.

*Li* (rituals, rites, proprieties) means the behavioral norms in terms of which one's cultivated feeling is expressed.

*Yi* (*i*) (righteousness or proper character) is the habitual practice of expressing one's cultivated feeling at the right times and in the right places.

*Junzi* (*chiün-tzu*) (superior or perfect person) means the kind of person in whom cultivated feeling has attained maximum due development.

There is in the *Analects* a puzzling dialogue which most readers find difficult to understand.

After hearing that a man was called a "man of integrity" for being a witness in the court against his father who stole a sheep, Confucius sighed:

Men of integrity in my community are different. The father conceals for his son and the son for his father, therein integrity is found.

(XIII, 18)

Readers may question why Confucius appears to approve law violation and to encourage dishonesty. In this passage where the language is suggestive rather than assertive, Confucius merely disapproves calling the young man a "man of integrity"; he is not encouraging the concealment of crime. If a reader shares Confucius's central doctrine of "the primacy of the human heart," no such question would even be raised.

Professor Liang Sou-ming, a distinguished philosopher in modern China, in his masterpiece *Eastern and Western Civilizations and Their Philosophies* (1922, not translated into English) defines *ren* as intuition. In spite of the obscure, and perhaps misleading nature of the term "intuition," his definition is significantly illuminating because it suggests the immediacy, directness, and spontaneity of *ren*. *Ren* as intuition is a kind of moral insight that results from an ethical education and a life experience that provides a reliable evaluation of the scene of life. It is not an inborn intuition but one cultivated through the practice of *li*, the attainment of knowledge, and the development of the sense of *yi*.

### *Socialization and Self-Realization*

A character disciplined by *ren* is the ideal in morality and the goal of education. How do we attain this goal? In the *Analects* Confucius provided a very clear answer: the transformational process leading to the realization of *ren* is the practice of *li* (XII, 11). The English translation of *li* has been "rites," "rituals," "proprieties," "ceremonies," "courtesy," "good manners," "politeness," and so on. In the broadest sense, the term includes all moral codes.

and social institutions. In its fundamental but narrow sense, it means socially acceptable forms of behavior. We are tempted to think that *li* is the product of social evolution or merely customs. However, in the philosophy of Confucius, *li* involves the deliberate devices used by the sages to educate people and maintain social order. This has been explained very clearly in the book of *Li ji* (*Li chi*), in which it becomes clear that *li* has a prescriptive and regulative function.

If the ultimate goal of *li* is to maintain a social and moral order, on what grounds can we say that the practice of *li* may lead to self-realization or the attainment of *ren*? Since *li* is a term for moral codes and social institutions, we are tempted to think that the practice of *li* is to enforce conformity with social norms at the cost of individuality. Here it has to be pointed out that, according to the philosophy of Confucius, an individual is not an isolated entity. Instead, an individual exists only in a set of relations with others. *Li* prescribes the norms of human relations. Apart from one's relations with other human beings, the concept of individuality has no meaning. Thus Confucius said, "In order to establish oneself, one has to establish others.—This is the way of a person of *ren*" (VI, 28). It would seem appropriate to say that, for Confucius, in order to be a fully developed individual, one has to go through the give-and-take process of socialization. Individualization and socialization are but two aspects of the same process. Therefore, the practice of *li* is the way to the realization of *ren*.

Perhaps a reference to Aristotle will help in clarifying Confucius's ideas. For Aristotle, a virtue is a habit or a disposition to act. So, the cultivation of virtues is the development of moral habits. Moral habits are in the forms of *li*, recognized, justified, or purposely devised by the sages. Since *ren* is the cardinal virtue, the development of moral habits through the practice of *li* is, no doubt, the means to the realization of *ren*. In other words, *li* and *ren* form a tight means-ends relation. If a personal character of *ren* is the ultimate goal in the ethical theory of Confucius, then the knowledge and practice of *li* is the path to human perfection. Finally, Confucius observed: "He who does not know *li*

cannot establish himself (attain self-realization)" (XX, 3).

A mistaken concept about *li* is that for Confucius, *li* is something permanent and fixed that cannot be changed at all. In the *Analects*, the textual evidence indicates that Confucius regarded *li* as changing through time and from situation to situation (II, 23; III, 14). It is also a mistake to interpret Confucius as valuing only the ancient *li*. Confucius said:

Zhou [Chou] could observe the two preceding dynasties. How exuberant its culture is! I prefer following Zhou [rather than its predecessors].

(III, 14)

This quotation provides a ground for challenging the interpretation that Confucius simply advocated returning to antiquity. Change, for him, is something inevitable and necessary, and is taken as a basic fact. But the desirable form of change is gradual reform rather than violent disruption or unpredictable discontinuity. Abrupt change with unpredictable discontinuity seems beyond the historical process as conceived by Confucius.

Since there is not a single *li* for all relations and occasions, there must be a higher principle governing the adoption of *li*. This higher principle is called *yi*, which has been translated as "righteousness" or "proper character." Confucius never gave a definition to this concept, but he used this term for several times:

A superior person's attitude toward the society is neither one of a conformist nor one of a rebel but one in accordance with *yi*.

(IV, 10)

The attainment of wealth and honor through the violation of *yi* is as remote from me as clouds floating in the sky.

(VII, 15)

A superior person is conscious of, and receptive to *yi*, but a petty person is conscious of, and receptive to gains.

(IV, 16)

These examples may well suggest that *yi* is the principle of rationality or the principle of moral reason. The first quotation is clear and self-explanatory. The second and the third seem to suggest an opposition between the morally right and the practically profitable. But a careful reading of the *Analècts* will reveal that Confucius did not mean to suggest such an opposition. Rather, he has suggested a principle of priority. *Yi* is morally prior to gains or profit. This means that any profit which is incompatible with *yi* has to be given up. In general, *yi* is a regulative principle governing the adoption of any pattern of behavior according to one's rationality and sense of values. As to whether *yi* is innate or acquired through education, Confucius never gives us a clear answer.

### *The Kingly Way and the Social Order*

The first significant topic in the political philosophy of Confucius is concerned with the methodology of governing. Confucius seemed to have known very little about representative government involving a complex legislative body and effective law enforcement. From his viewpoint, to keep the society in order by legislation and law enforcement is but the very last resort. Even if it is technically possible to establish a comprehensive network of legality, to force people to follow legal procedures, for Confucius, is not the way of the sage-king. The sage-king governs the country without unnecessary complicated binding procedures. Instead, he "governs with morality, as if he were the Northern Star, staying in his position, surrounded by all other planets" (II, 1). This metaphorical statement suggests two points. First, a sage governs with morality instead of law or power. Secondly, a good ruler governs by setting up himself as a model, staying in his own position, being imitated by his subjects and people. Now, our important questions are: (1) What

does it mean by governing with morality? and (2) How is governing by model possible?

We should be reminded that the cardinal virtue of Confucian morality is *ren*, which essentially means love of people. Hence the politics of *ren* occupies the center of Confucius's theory of government. What is implied in the government of *ren* is the principle of nonviolence. In a government of nonviolence, capital punishment has very little place. When a ruler asked Confucius if it would be right to execute those who are evil, Confucius replied,

Why is there a need of capital punishment in your government? If you set your mind toward morality, your people will become moral. The character of the ruler is like the wind, and that of the people, grass. The grass bends when the wind blows upon it.

(XII, 19)

This short passage suggests two main points. First, the government of *ren* de-emphasizes severe punishment imposed upon the wrongdoer or the lawless. Secondly, the wind-grass metaphor suggests that the ruler who serves as a moral model for people will be more effective than one who rules by strict law enforcement. According to Confucius, the right method of governing is not by legislation and law enforcement, but by supervising the moral education of the people.

Moral education should start with the family. The cultivation of *ren* is first accomplished through the development of *xiao* (*hsiao*) (filial piety) and *di* (*ti*) (brotherly love and respect). Yuzi (Yu Tzu) once explained to Confucius that *xiao* and *di* constitute the foundation of *ren* (I, 2). As has been indicated, the cultivation of moral virtues is the process of socialization through the practice of *li*. *Li* occupies the foremost place in moral education which is, in turn, a step toward a good social order. In addition to emphasizing the importance of *li*, Confucius maintained that music and literature are also helpful in the development of one's moral education.