

CHAPTER 15

Marriage and Family in Confucianism

CONFUCIUS

Confucius, or Master Kung as he is known in China, was born around 551 BC in the Chinese principality of Lu. As a young man he immersed himself in learning and held several government posts. But after a while he left the government to establish himself as a tutor, attracting brilliant and devoted disciples. He conversed with them on many diverse subjects and problems. He taught them literature, personal conduct, how to be true to oneself and the importance of practicing honesty in social relationships. Through his tutoring services he sought to influence society.

Although he claimed that the mandate for what he did came from Heaven, Confucius did not speculate or talk about God or the gods. Nor did he think of himself as an innovator but merely as one trying to restore the true way of life that had existed in the Golden Age (the time of the early Chou dynasty, around the 11th century BC). He compiled and edited many books on Chinese traditions, music and philosophy. He said his ambition was that "the old people should be able to live in peace, all friends should be loyal and all young people should love their elders." For the remainder of his life he wandered from state to state offering advice to rulers.

Confucius' political career was a complete failure, but within a few generations he was regarded as the mentor of Chinese civilization. He founded a class of scholars who were to become China's ruling elite. He himself became the most important figure in Chinese history. In 130 BC the study of Confucian texts became the basic discipline for the training of government officials, a pattern that continued until the Chinese Empire collapsed in 1905. Confucianism did not merely affect government: Confucian values were embraced by the Chinese people.

For more than 2,000 years his teachings have profoundly affected one quarter of the world's population. Japan, Korea and much of Southeastern Asia deliberately imported Confucianism. Still shaped by the Confucian ethic, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and now China have become one of the dynamic centers of world economic growth.

Human nature

Confucius taught that the ultimate purpose of life is realized in the cultivation of authentic human nature and a good society. The ultimate source of this ideal "human nature" is Heaven. Persons harm themselves when they pursue activities contrary to the realization of this profound human nature. Self-cultivation demands living in accordance with moral principles. The moral path of cultivation should be natural, since it is the principle of human nature, yet it takes constant effort to be realized.

"The moral principle begins in the relationship between man and woman, but ends in the vast reaches of the Universe."

— Confucius

Confucius saw that human relationships were the crucible for the formation of character. Thus human fulfillment is impossible to fulfill through solitary effort alone. Only through opening ourselves to others and forming relationships with different kinds of people can we achieve a rounded personality. We have immense potential and many hidden faculties that can be realized only in relationships.

Familial relations are paramount, since Confucius explained that what distinguishes human beings from animals is having parents. Human beings have to *learn* what it means to be human. This is achieved by learning from others who are on the same road to discovering the meaning of humanity. Our parents are our primary role models for being human and have the greatest influence in shaping our character and personality. In families there are grandparents, parents, elder and younger brothers and sisters and other family relations. Confucius taught that the happiest person is someone who has experienced a good relationship with his parents and/or his children.

The parent-child relationship

Some people live a virtuous life, do great deeds or leave behind insightful teachings and in this way achieve immortality. They leave behind a great legacy and historical imprint. For most people, fame seldom extends beyond that of their immediate family. This is why ancestor worship was so important in Asian society. Children could maintain the worship of the ancestors and keep the family name alive.

Confucius realized that the excessive cult of ancestor worship had some unhealthy consequences. Sometimes elaborate rituals took the place of genuine human feeling and concern. Therefore he tried to shift the emphasis of Chinese religion from ancestor worship to filial piety, saying, "You are not even able to serve people. How can you serve spirits?"

Filial piety is expressed physically in caring for one's parents, protecting and valuing one's own body and, most importantly, having children. Apart from bringing dishonor to one's family name, not having children is seen as the greatest tragedy.

"When a man is born, his parents wish that he may one day find a wife, and when a woman is born, they wish that she may find a husband. Every parent feels like this."

— Mencius
a Chinese Confucian philosopher

Confucius was able to recognize the deep aspiration of people as they grow older—namely, to have children and grandchildren. He could see that nothing makes parents happier than having loyal children and grandchildren. Without children and grandchildren people's spirit grows old. Children keep people young and give them



“He whom the superior man pronounces filial is he whom the people of the state praise saying with admiration, ‘Happy are the parents who have such a son as this.’ ”

— Confucius

hope for the future. The freshness and innocence of a young child can refresh even the most tired mind and body. At the same time nothing brings a person more heartache and sorrow than deceitful children and bad grandchildren.

According to Confucius, children’s financial support of parents is the most basic expression of filial piety. More important than physical care is the ability to regard parents’ wishes highly and nourish their dreams. After the parents die, children should offer sacrifices and keep their memory alive after their death. For three years after his father’s death, a filial son follows

his father’s will and completes any matters left unfinished. When a filial son achieves something new, his name as well as his father’s becomes known and honored.

“True filial piety consists in successfully carrying out the unfinished work of our forefathers and transmitting their achievements to posterity.”

— Confucius

Since we owe our existence to our parents, our life is inextricably linked to them. So for Confucius, the father-son relationship is absolute. Hence his saying, “There are no erroneous parents under Heaven.” We should never sever our ties to our parents. A son should protect his father, no matter what the situation might be. Children should obey and honor their parents and avoid doing anything that would disgrace them.

Confucius, though, was not unaware of the reality of family relations. He knew that many

difficult issues and emotions exist between parents and children. What should children do when their parents have failed to live up to the duties of parenthood? Should they disobey, ignore or reject them? In these particular cases Confucius thought it was the child’s duty to reprove his parents and lead them back to what is right. He even said that a filial son would disobey his parents if obeying would bring dishonor to the family. For example, Confucius instructed a filial son to endure only a light beating from his father. He should run away from a severe beating so as to protect the body entrusted to him by his parents and also out of respect for the fatherliness that may have been temporarily obscured by rage. A filial son would go against his parents’ wishes for the sake of bringing them great honor.

The superior person devotes effort to the root, for when the root is established the Way will grow. Aren’t filial piety and brotherly respect the root of human-heartedness?

The education of children

Children’s education is central to Confucianism, since it is through their own children that parents are to achieve immortality. The most important factor in a child’s education is the parents’ own example. If a father expects his son to be loving and respectful, he himself must be an example of a loving and respectful person.

“If you do not practice the Way yourself, you cannot expect it to be practiced even by your own wife and children. If you do not impose work on others in accordance with the Way, you cannot expect obedience even from your own wife and children.”

— Mencius

The proverb on the left of Confucius’ foremost successor applies not just within the family but also in all social relations, and the key is “serving my father as I would have my son serve me; serving my elder brother as I would have my younger brother serve me.” In Korea whenever a household makes some special food, they take some of it to the older person who lives next door. The following story illustrates this point.

Once there was an old grandmother, daughter-in-law and grandson who lived together in a small house. The neighbors would often bring good food to this home. The young mother would take the food and feed her son, although the food was meant for the grandmother. Time passed and the grandmother died. The son married and had children, so the young mother became a grandmother herself. The son, now a father, followed his mother’s tradition. When food came for the grandmother, he would take it and feed his children. The grandmother complained, “Son, when you were a boy and nice food came, I didn’t eat it, I served it to you. Now it’s your turn to serve me. Why are you serving only your babies?” He replied, “I’m just following your example. When grandmother was here, you never served her, you just served me. Now I will serve my son, not you, because this is what you taught me.” The grandmother could not find a response.

Although it is easy, and automatic, to blame someone else for difficulties one might encounter, Mencius encouraged people to reflect on their own character when problems arose.

“If others do not respond to your love with love, look into your own benevolence; if others fail to respond to your attempts to govern them with order, look into your own wisdom; if others do not return your courtesy, look into your own respect. In other words, look inside yourself whenever you fail to achieve your purpose.”

— Mencius





In the Orient children are not strongly disciplined until they go to school, usually at the age of 7. However, when they arrive at school, they are fiercely disciplined and there is immense pressure to study hard and achieve good educational results. It is thought that to discipline a child too young may damage his character and inhibit growth. At a young age a child just needs to be guided in the right direction.

“Why does a gentleman not take on the teaching of his own sons? Because in the nature of things, it will not work. A teacher neces-

sarily resorts to correction, and if correction produces no effect, he will end by losing his temper. When this happens, father and son will hurt each other instead. ‘You teach me by correcting me, but you yourself are not correct.’ If father and son hurt each other, it is not a good thing. In ancient times people taught one another’s sons. Father and son should not demand goodness from each other. To do so will estrange them, and there is nothing more inauspicious than estrangement between father and son.”

— Mencius

Asian education traditionally emphasized the true view of how the world is organized. In the past, children would begin their first studies with the *Great Learning*. Although its content was complex for 7- or 8-year-olds, it was studied and committed to memory so that its wisdom might be recalled later in life. *The*

Great Learning essay was regarded as the gateway through which beginners entered the path of virtue.

Excerpt from *The Great Learning*

If there is righteousness in the heart,
there will be beauty in the character.

If there is beauty in the character,
there will be harmony in the home.

If there is harmony in the home,
there will be order in the nation.

If there is order in the nation, there
will be peace in the world.

For Your Journal



Reflecting on the way you treat your parents, how do you expect your children to treat you in the future? How can your descendants become better than your ancestors?

What does it mean to be a member of a family? Make a list of the personal characteristics that you inherited from your mother and the personal characteristics that you inherited from your father (include physical characteristics, attitudes, values, etc.). What personal characteristics do you have that are unique (that neither your mother nor your father have)? Imagine that you were born in a different culture. How do you think it would influence the development of your personality?

On Children

by Khalil Gibran

And a woman who held a babe against
her bosom said, Speak to us of Children.
And he said:
Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And though they are with you yet, they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts.
For they have their own thoughts.
You may house their bodies but not their souls.
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them,
but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

